

Today we come to the end of the first cycle of our Trinity season, the season of spiritual growth. We have sequentially discussed the sins of the head, of the heart or chest, now we are ending this cycle discussing sins of the bodily desires. Last week we discussed covetousness or greed. Today we discuss lust and gluttony, the most embodied physical temptations we face.

At the outset, let us note that these two temptations are not simply behaviors that must be avoided. This is partly why they are so difficult. We must eat or we cease to be. We must procreate or else our species would be gone in a generation. Such things are even a godly duty when done in accordance with God's ordinances. In Genesis 1, God said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and have dominion over the birds of the air, over the fish of the sea, and over all the beasts of the earth." Be fruitful and multiply is an imperative. It is not optional. Yet in the Western world, more and more, we are disobeying this command. People do not want to multiply. Children cramp our style. They make us grow up, and we would rather not. One of my students back in the day was noted for observing, "In America, we have the oldest adolescents in the world."

As far as eating is concerned, our first parents were given all the fruit from all of the trees in the Garden of Eden from which to eat except from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We need to eat. We were made to physically take in to our bodies the gifts of God from the earth in order to sustain our beings. Yet from the beginning, there were stipulations regarding food. We were to demonstrate our fealty to God, our love of God, by obeying even in the mundane task of eating. We take God's gifts, we work on and with them in our growing, cooking, consuming, and sharing of food. These gifts of sustenance also were to be used to glorify God. But in this exact activity, beautifully and lovingly provided for us by our Creator, we chose to exalt ourselves over God. It was through eating that we committed our first sin.

Eating cannot be roundly condemned as sin, and neither can sexual activity. In fact these are even today commanded to us in order to become godly. Fruitfulness through marriage is called by Pope John Paul II "the primordial sacrament." In the union of man and wife we have a foretaste of our ultimate union with God. St. Paul says in Ephesians 5, that the mystery of a man with his wife is a picture of the mystery of Christ and the Church. And out of that union, the Church being the Bride of Christ, new fruitfulness obtains. The grace of God poured out on the Church of God brings an increase. Faith throughout the Earth is increased by our growth in godliness, which is the growth in the joy that Christ brings to us even in the midst of trials. And new faith, welling up in those who were once far off from Jesus, brings others to the marriage feast.

As far as eating goes, not only is there the practical aspect of our vital need to take in nutrition to fuel and maintain our bodies, but Christ, on the night in which He was betrayed, took the bread, blessed it and break it, and gave to His disciples saying, "Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me." Likewise, he took the cup, and after He gave thanks He said, "Take, drink this, all of you, this is my blood of the New Covenant, do this in remembrance of me." The Eucharist is one of the two Dominical sacraments, sacraments explicitly commanded by Jesus Christ, and as such, we believe that they are generally necessary for salvation. It is normative for the Christian to take the Holy Communion. We put ourselves in peril when we avoid what Jesus has commanded. Jesus sustains us spiritually by food, by eating.

So these things that we are warned against today are not the activities themselves, but in the abuse of the activities. Eating in a disordered way, also called gluttony, and sexual relations outside of the covenant of marriage, used lustfully, whether in the mind or acted upon in fornication, are all are sins of the body, and rightly included in these seven deadly sins. They will surely lead us to destruction.

Both of the proper readings for today provide for us a stark admonition against these sins of the body, sins of the appetite. In the epistle lesson, we are reminded of the people of Israel who were encamped around the base of Mt. Sinai. If you recall, Moses had ascended the mountain to commune with God and to receive the covenant which included the Ten Commandments, the seventh of which is, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." In the Offices of Instruction, this commandment is briefly expanded for us by the compilers of the prayer book. In this commandment, we are enjoined to bodily temperance which we should understand to be applicable not only to sexual activity, but to all desires of the body. On page 288 and 289 in the Offices of Instruction, we read, "What is your duty towards your neighbor?" The answer: "To keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity."

It is so interesting that such a command is focused upon what we do with our own bodies, but is considered, not as some private sin, but as a duty toward our neighbor. This is perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of the Law for modern Americans. Our concept of freedom used to be, "I can do whatever I wish as long as it does not hurt another." (With the introduction of critical social theory, this seems now to be, "I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn't hurt someone more oppressed than me. It is ok to sin against those in power." But that's another conversation.) Yet the commands of God should be understood as, "You, as followers of God, have been gracefully shown what God expects. These moral expectations reflect the very character of God Himself. There are no private sins. All of our sins have an impact upon the broader Church."

Now, when we read in the epistle that “the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play,” we should read this as raucous feasting leading to sexual immorality, to fornication, as is explicitly noted in the next verse. Disordered passions are also connected with idolatry in this passage. The demonic message to humanity has always been, “Indulge yourself, abuse yourself and others, you should have no limits.”

Then in the Gospel, we read about the prodigal son who demanded his share of the inheritance and then squandered his wealth with riotous living. We should naturally read this as the same kind of excessive feasting and careless relations. The prodigal satisfied every impulse, every passion, without care as to the long-term ramifications. Such behavior appears in every culture throughout the entire history of humanity. It is universal – mankind has not changed at all throughout his existence. We long for the continuous pleasures of table and bed.

Of course this leads us to the next question, why are these sins so difficult to resist and so habit forming and so destructive? I remember Bishop Sutton once saying, “In the ancient world, there were understood two ways to be united with something. Eat it or have sex with it.” Now, no doubt there is a simple physical aspect that we shouldn’t ignore. But the deeper aspect is that we desire to be joined to something beyond ourselves. We seek the transcendent by integrating what is other into ourselves through eating it or by joining with it sexually. The joy of marriage points us to our ultimate union with God, but to join with another person and then to separate and join again to still another and to repeat the pattern multiple times, scars our souls, and because of the diminishing sensations of pleasure, leads us into desperation, perversity, and idolatry. Once a man and woman are joined in matrimony, that bond is intended to be permanent, and in that permanence, there is great joy to be found.

Likewise, all human religions include sacrifices for forgiveness and for union. As Christians, we are forgiven and made new in the sacrifice that Christ made for us. And around the table of the Lord, we take His sacrifice spiritually into us as we partake of the bread and wine, which elements mysteriously united to His sacrifice so that they become His Body and Blood. These we take into ourselves so that we are both fed by Christ and united to Him. “... that He may dwell in us, and we in Him.” We are talking here about great mysteries that cannot be comprehended by mere mental concepts. They must be experienced. They must be lived. The reality transcends mere intellectual propositions.

Given all of this, where does this then leave us? First, these habits are indeed deadly, and the epistle warns us explicitly that God's Old Covenant people suffered greatly for their incontinence. What we do with our bodies matters for our souls and bodies are connected. Therefore take heed. Exercise care that you not put yourselves into compromising positions, rather than just "Do whatever feels good." When Eve saw that the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes and good to make one wise, she ate and gave to her husband and he ate also with her. Doing whatever feels good is our undoing. Let us rather do what is good, that which increases our love for God and leads to eternal joy. Will we sacrifice what is lasting for that which is only momentary?

When we do something bodily, over and over, we become what we do. Our bodies develop an expectation that we will continue to do what they are used to doing. To deny our bodies what they expect is extremely hard and requires much support from outside of ourselves. It is extremely difficult to disentangle ourselves from that with which we have become habituated, united. But it is God's grace to us if we get to a point where we can see the destructive path that we follow. We do have a chance to turn around, hard though it may be.

In a similar vein, we should realize that other modern "conveniences" are also just as habit forming and destructive. One must be careful with alcohol which will draw us deeply into dependency. Drugs, including marijuana, are like partaking the sacrament from a demonic table. Pornography is rampant and leads to huge problems in marriage. And let us not neglect to add social media including youtube and those addictive short reels to the list. That little like button does something to our brains. We want all the likes! It is the same impulse that drives gambling addicts as well. All of these things are designed to addict us through our passions, our biology. Yet we somehow think that we are special – that just a little youtube is fine. And then two hours disappear from our consciousness.

One verse in the epistle, 1 Corinthians 10:11, that is striking. St. Paul just finishes listing all the gluttonous and immoral acts in which the Israelites were entangled and for which they suffered. Then he continues, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." In other words, the destruction that others suffer as a result of their disobedience, their untamed passions, and their persistent discontentment and striving after easy pleasure, serves as a warning to everyone else. Don't follow their example. Take heed of the warning they provide.

St. Paul continues, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the

temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." This means that if we have a great affinity for ice cream, but are dealing with late onset diabetes, we should not go down to the local ice cream shop just to look at all those wonderful tubs of ice cream, and imagine how good a big sundae would taste, and then think that we will walk away without consuming a huge sundae. The way of escape is to stay far away from those things that will trigger our habitual and overwhelming desires. Similarly, we men should be extremely careful about the images to which we expose ourselves. We all need to be aware of our bodily temptations. Let us take heed lest we fall!

The way of escape that God promises begins in bringing our sins and struggles into the light, rather than hiding them. This can be in the form of confession – see me if this would be helpful. It can also be from addiction groups – finding support from others who are fighting the same battle. Those who attempt to make these journeys alone will suffer from setback after setback, and will perpetually need to be on guard against their besetting sin. The saddest thing is to see individuals give up on the fight.

Finally though, let us end with a little hope. This series is a difficult one because, so far, we have focused upon sins that afflict us all. We've somewhat beat ourselves up over our sins, but this should be balanced by the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. In the parable of the prodigal son, we read that the son ran out of money, his "friends" abandoned him, and the swine he fed had more to eat than he did. He had become lower than a pig. One day he realized just how far he had descended and decided to make a change. He had to humble himself to go and confess to his father. And when we humble ourselves and confess to our Heavenly Father, let us remember that his property is always to have mercy. He desires to make us right with Him. When we repent and come to Him, He rushes to meet us, He throws His coat upon us, He eagerly restores us into the family that we had betrayed, and He prepares a joyous feast for us.

Finally, let me say again that there is no end to the Mercy of God. Every day is new for those who love God. We may fail on a Monday, but Tuesday is a new day. We get to try it again. I say to you with all conviction: You cannot wear out God's mercy. Everyday is new. Every day is a fresh start. Confess your sin, find help, and try again, and again, and again.

Today, we are warned, but we are also welcomed. May we dread to sin against Our Loving Lord, may we flee from all of those things by which we are so easily tempted, and may we be quick to confess sins so that we would always be close by our Savior's side.

2024-07-21

8th Sunday after Trinity

K. Bartel, 6

Let us pray.

GRANT to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*