The Trouble with Us: Gluttony
John 6:24-35

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
March 13, 2016

I'll have to admit to a little bit of irony that in this sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins, the sermon on Gluttony falls on the same day when we serve a full hot breakfast in the Fellowship Hall...

As I've said all along during this sermon series, our purpose in focusing on the Seven Deadly Sins is to use them as the spark to ignite an honest and serious discussion of our sinfulness and our need for a savior. When the Peanuts character Lucy shouted that the trouble with Charlie Brown was that he didn't want to talk about the trouble with him, she hit the nail on the head in regard to our own reluctance, as well. For the truth is, the trouble with us is that we don't want to talk about the trouble with us; for the trouble with us is sin. As we approach the celebration that defines the Christian faith – the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ – we really do need to acknowledge and take seriously that there is, indeed, something from which we need to be saved, healed, restored.

And that is our sin. The trouble with us is our sin.
And so today, Gluttony.

This past week, I was surprised at how much difficulty I had in pulling together this sermon on Gluttony. There are several things that made it especially challenging for me. For one thing, in today's world, gluttony is immediately associated with obesity and weight issues. And while gluttony certainly does have an impact on weight and health, that's not the focus that the early church considered when it put gluttony on this list of mortal vices. The shame associated with gluttony in today's world has nothing to do with the damage gluttony does to one's relationship with God; no, the problem that today's world has with gluttony is more related to the fact that gluttony violates some fabricated image of the perfect body.

Another challenge I faced is that when I looked up the words “gluttony” or “gluttonous” in the most comprehensive concordance that I have, the word only appears seven times in the whole Bible. And two of those times refer to the same incident in Jesus' life (one recorded by Matthew; the other, by Luke), in which Jesus'
detractors have labeled him as a glutton and a drunkard because he eats with “tax collectors and sinners”. And so I was led to wonder, “If the Bible addresses this sin so infrequently, then why would it end up on the early church's 'Top Seven' list?"

And third, when there is so much emphasis on feasts and celebrations in the Bible, and when the image of a feast is always a sign of God's blessing, and when heaven itself is depicted as a banquet, then it makes me wonder why we should be so concerned about gluttony?

I was surprised at how difficult it would be to wrap my mind around the gluttony as a deadly sin. But here we are: gluttony.

There is a lot of common ground between the last three of the Seven Deadly Sins: Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. All are sins of excess. All are sins motivated by selfishness. All are sins of unrestrained desires.

Gluttony, at its most basic meaning, is overindulgence and overconsumption. Almost universally, the first behavior that comes to mind when thinking of gluttony is eating and drinking in excess. And that was the focus of the early Christian church as well, gluttonous eating and drinking. But gluttony is more than simply eating and drinking to excess, because it is also possible to overindulge and over-consume in a lot of ways. We can indulge in excess when shopping for clothes. We can indulge in excess in purchasing and collecting gadgets. We can indulge in excess in the time and energy we put into our work. We can indulge in excess in the ways we watch TV or surf the internet or listen to the radio. Gluttony is about more than food and drink. The name of the game with gluttony is consumption. Whereas greed is noted by accumulation, gluttony is about consumption—uncontrolled, voracious taking into ourselves.

One of the things I wrestled with this past week is, how is it that gluttony, as compared to any other sins, made the list of the Seven Deadlies? And so I went back to the introductory material of the books I have used for this sermon series, and I found that the criteria for making the list of the Seven Deadly Sins were two-fold: 1) They are considered mortal or capital because when you peel away the layers of all other sins, you will eventually come down to some version of these seven; 2) these sins destroy the life of grace and love within a person and a community. With these criteria in mind, I began to examine what it is about gluttony that makes it such a dangerous sin.

When you think about it, gluttony is about an instinct to feed a basic need. Certainly one of the most basic needs for survival of the human race is the need for food and water. I think it is true that when you peel away the layers of many-a sin,
you find at the center some failure to control a basic instinct like hunger. But as human beings created in the image of God, we are driven by more than mere instinct; indeed, we are given the capacity to balance and control our instincts with an innate sense of good and evil, right and wrong. A failure to exercise that capacity means that instincts overtake us.

So, as uncontrolled instinct, gluttony is one of those vices at the root of many other sins.

But does gluttony destroy the life of grace and love in the individual? Certainly, gluttony has self-destructive characteristics. But does it really impact our relationship with God and others? Insofar as gluttony totally focuses on the self, it does destroy the life of grace and charity. One of the dangers that the early Church pointed out for gluttony is that it results in a failure to share or consider the needs of others. Gluttony, taken to an extreme, will make a person so focused on feeding themselves that they ignore the fact that others may go without.

While the term “gluttony” is not specifically mentioned in the parable that Jesus tells about the rich man and Lazarus in the 16th chapter of Luke, surely the self-absorbed focus of gluttony is part of the reason that the rich man is condemned in the parable. For as Jesus tells the story, this rich man is feasting at his table, completely disregarding the plight of the sick, poor, starving Lazarus. The rich man's indifference toward the need of another, while greedily filling his own stomach, is surely reason for the condemnation of the rich man.

Gluttony does destroy the life of grace and love in a person.

The destructive nature of gluttony can be seen as it contrasts with the way the Bible describes legitimate and appropriate feasting. Feasting, in the Bible, is good. It involves community. It acknowledges God as the source of blessing and life. On the other hand, gluttony isn't feasting. “Gluttony connects us neither with others or God. Gluttony is a solitary act that defeats rather than enhances community. Excessive eating is solitary, even if others are present. Feasting needs and builds community. Gluttony cares little for community. Gluttony has no perspective; it is excessive and preoccupied with satisfying self. Feasting keeps perspective; it celebrates God's bounty, and encourages eating with a grateful heart and sharing with others.”

I think that gluttony is at its root a spiritual problem. Most social sciences will make some sort of claim that addictive or overindulging behaviors are symptoms of deeper issues. A person is trying to compensate for something they feel they lack.

---

They're trying to find meaning and value in whatever it is they are consuming. There is some desire or need that they are trying to feed, but they are in actuality misguided in the way they are trying to meet that need.

That is at the core of our Scripture lessons this morning. Especially in the Gospel According to John, where we find Jesus speaking to the crowds who are following him around the countryside. At the beginning of the sixth chapter, Jesus had fed the multitudes – some 5,000 people. And now they are looking for him, because they are hungry again.

They had eaten bread, but they were still left unsatisfied. So, perhaps they thought that if they had a little bit more, they would be satisfied. But Jesus tells them, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

And that's wherein lies the deeper issue of gluttony (and a host of other sins, as well): that it is an attempt to fill a need that falls off the mark. The ways we try to find ultimate meaning, the ways that we try to affirm our value and self-esteem, the ways we try to cover our pain, the ways we try to find satisfaction in life—we tend to fill our longing with things that perish, and not things that endure.

After our vesper service the other night, Bill and I were talking about gluttony (because we didn't have anything better to do than talk about gluttony, I suppose). And he said that a light came on in his mind and helped him appreciate the way gluttony fails to fill our deepest desires and needs. He said, “It's like when I see a piece of pie, and I tell myself that I want a piece of that pie. So I eat a piece of pie, but then what—the pie is gone, and at best I just want another piece of the pie.”

That's what gluttony does to us. It drives us to seek things that are empty, things that fail to fill our inmost needs. We want immediate gratification, and we get it. But the gratification is as short-lived as it is immediate in its arrival.

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

It's about where we seek that which we really need. Do you seek to find your meaning and purpose in consuming things, or do you seek to cover your pain by feeding your stomach, or are you going to search to the end of the internet until you find meaning for your life? Or do you base your meaning and purpose and value and self-esteem on your relationship with God?

As Jesus continues to interact with the crowd in John's gospel, the people really have a hard time taking their minds off of their empty stomachs. But Jesus
steers the people toward what he wants them to know. At one point, Jesus tells the people of a bread from heaven which gives life to the world. The people respond by saying, “Lord, give us this bread always.”

In so doing, the people recognize that Jesus does have something to give that is more fulfilling than a mixture of flour, yeast, and water. And Jesus answers them with the first of his “I am” statements in the gospel of John: “I am the bread of life”, says Jesus. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Don't labor for the food that perishes, says Jesus. Come to me, and find something that won't perish. Come to me, and find something that endures to eternal life. Jesus doesn't offer us a guarantee of health and wealth and happiness, but he does offer himself. Jesus doesn't guarantee that we will get everything we want, but he does promise to provide what we need.

We pray, “Give us this day our daily bread...,” and Jesus gives it to us, even as God provided the manna in the wilderness. “Come to me,” says Jesus, “and I will provide what you need. I will reconcile you to God. I will meet you with compassion and mercy, I will endow you with dignity and meaning. I will give you my peace that passes understanding. I will surround you with love and acceptance. This is the bread that endures to eternal life. Eat of this bread, and you will be satisfied. Come to me, and you will never hunger; believe in me, and you will never thirst.”

I am convinced that at the root of virtually every search for meaning, at the origin of the deepest longings of our hearts, is a longing for God in our lives. That's why St. Augustine so famously said to Jesus, “My heart was restless until it found its rest in thee.”

Of course, our bodies will always need food and drink.
Of course, we will need clothing, and basic necessities in life.
Of course, we will find some pleasure in good things, and even want more from time to time.
But none of these things will last. All these other things will perish, eventually.
Don't count on these things for ultimate meaning and purpose.
Instead, pursue that which will endure for eternal life.
Join with the psalmist in declaring, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you... Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you... I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as

---

3  John 6:34
4  John 6:35
with a rich feast when I think of you... and meditate on you in the watches of the night... My soul clings to you...“⁵

Friends, in Christ, appreciate the good things that God gives to us to nourish us, to sustain us, and to give us pleasure. Use them in moderation.

But set your hearts on that which endures to eternal life: the One who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

Set your hearts on Jesus, and be fed.
Amen.

⁵ Psalm 63:1-8