

*The Seven Deadly Sins 6: Gluttony*

Proverbs 23:1-8

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

5 October 2008

You might think that gluttony would be an easy sermon topic in a city that has won the dubious distinction of being the fattest city in America. We all know the health hazards of overeating. In fact, out of the seven “deadlies,” it’s gluttony that we today view as the most sinful. Although we base our disapproval of it on science, it’s interesting how we still use moral language when it comes to food. We’re “good” when we eat salads and “bad” when we eat a Twinkie. Our most luscious desserts are called “temptations” and “sinful.” The sermon not only writes itself, we hear it every day on the news, in the paper, on blogs. Every day we encounter reminders that gluttony is literally a deadly sin. We hear it in snide and insensitive comments made to us, in looks, in the mirror, and in our own heads.

Of the seven deadly sins, gluttony is the only one that physically manifests itself in our bodies. Saints are thin and sinners...are not. Because this sin is so visible, people feel entitled to comment on it publicly, with all their self-righteous, moralistic power – because after all, they’re only concerned about our health. Maybe because we’re backing up that concern with science rather than the Bible, we feel it’s okay to ignore Jesus’ warning against passing judgment on others. And after making our way through five of the deadlies, perhaps it is no surprise that the judgment occurs at both ends of the scales. For those of you who missed your weekly dose of *schadenfreude* in last Sunday’s gossip magazine, let me inform you that the headline was about Keira Knightly, the pencil-thin actress, and how she’s getting too thin. The magazine stirred up the gleeful *schadenfreude* even while going through the motions of wringing their hands in concern for her health. So even if you’re the opposite of gluttonous, you still risk judgment. One week it’s an actress who’s too thin, next week it will be one who’s too fat. I suppose that’s what they call balanced reporting.

As I said, the sermon writes itself. Except that’s not the sermon I want to write! I don’t want to write yet another harangue about obesity, and indeed all the modern moralizing about overeating makes me suspicious. Does God really care if we’re a size two or a size twenty? And is San Antonio’s weight problem really about sin? Judge not lest ye be judged. I haven’t wanted any of these sinful sermons to make anyone feel guilty or under judgment. Rather, my purpose has been to get us to think about these sins in terms of Christian discipleship. Our waist measurements have nothing to do with that.

When these sins have occasionally stumped me, I’ve turned to their virtuous counterparts for inspiration, but this one is not helpful. Traditionally the antidote to gluttony is abstinence, but that puts us right back into dieting, and I just can’t believe that’s the message we’re supposed to get here. Indeed there’s a very serious problem with abstinence. Now, abstinence is supposed to cure lust, too, but clever little boys and girls will realize that it is possible for human beings to live without sex. Hard to believe, but true! However, if we abstain completely from food, the cure may be heavenly but it is definitely fatal.

Now, there have been some saints who supposedly could get by on very little food. Desert fathers who ate five peas a week. St. Catherine of Siena who supposedly subsisted on nothing but the communion wafers she received at mass. Granted, she probably went to mass three times a day, but still! That would scarcely feed a sparrow. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have thrown a handful of ashes on his food so as to destroy any taste. These examples of extreme food abstinence inspired a contemporary writer to deem these saints “holy anorexics.” But anorexia is not a good thing! This cannot possibly be what God wants for us.

Indeed, if we look at the Bible itself, despite all those infamous dietary laws in Leviticus, we find that the Bible abounds with wine and feasting. When the Hebrew elders commune with God on Mt. Sinai, they eat a banquet so that they can “taste and see that the Lord is good.” The Promised Land is described as flowing with milk and honey. The prophet Isaiah says that God gives food that satisfies, and that we will eat the fat of the land. It seems there’s no dieting in heaven! As for Jesus himself, while he did fast in the desert for forty days and nights, his life on the whole was characterized far more by eating and drinking. We will misunderstand this sin of gluttony if we focus too much on how much people are eating. As Jesus himself notes, they condemned John the Baptist for fasting even as they accused Jesus of being a drunkard and a glutton. No, I think Jesus would have agreed with the writer of Ecclesiastes on this one, that food and drink come from God, for apart from God, who can eat or drink or have enjoyment?

And here we begin to get a clue about what’s really at stake here, or so it seems to me. It’s not what you eat; it’s how you eat it. Look at our passage from Proverbs, which is not the most spiritual of books in the Bible. There are two warnings, one about dining with a ruler who may tempt you with easy wealth and power, for that’s what his lavish spread represents. Someone who prepares a banquet for you who wants something from you. And you might recall here my sermon from a couple of months ago about Daniel being tempted by the banquet of the Persian king. The second warning is about sharing the table of a stingy man, who offers you food but keeps an inventory of how much you consume. You’ll be forced to vomit it up, though whether that’s because your stingy host only offered you the dregs past the expiration date, or because he wants his food back is not at all clear. Both of these warnings concern false hospitality. What’s at stake here is not your waistline, but your soul: beware the company you keep, of who you count as your companions, a word that literally means “who you share bread with.”

In contrast to these dubious hosts, the Bible abounds with stories of generous hosts who extended welcome to strangers and outcasts, and in doing so they entertained angels unaware. And the greatest of these is Jesus himself. I deliberately chose to talk about gluttony on world-wide communion Sunday, because to me this meal *is* the antidote to the deadly sin of gluttony. Gluttony at this table means to hoard God’s blessings for yourself and keep others away. Gluttony at this table means to share with some but not with others. Gluttony at this table means to forget God, without whom we have no enjoyment, to forget Jesus, who chose to be remembered in a meal. On world-wide communion Sunday we remember that there are no barriers to this table, none of any kind, that Jesus is the host, and he extends his invitation to anyone who will break bread with him. At this table we don’t count calories. At this table – symbolically at least – we may eat our fill, for this is the food that satisfies.

And these lessons do not apply only to communion. We can practice these principles at any meal we eat. For without God, who can have enjoyment? In general terms, I would say whenever you eat, give thanks to God who gives us every good thing to eat, and consider the company you invite to break bread with you. There are so many ways we can do this.

For example, the slow food movement which advocates cooking your meals from scratch. Some of you old Germans know this value. My own father would rather eat leftovers at home than dine at a restaurant. How many of us have time to cook from scratch any more? Yet there is immense pleasure in cooking a meal, especially when you are cooking that meal for others to enjoy. Furthermore, if we prepare it ourselves it will be healthier!

But not everyone loves to cook, and those who live alone may find it difficult. Remember, my aim here is not to make you feel guilty! I love to cook, but Sam has toddler tastes these days, so I don’t cook much. (He could totally survive on communion bread with St. Catherine.) So don’t stress about cooking if it doesn’t work for you. Remember, it’s not what

you eat that matters, but how. Whatever you eat, savor and enjoy it. Maybe it's a piece of fresh fruit. Maybe it's frozen vegetables, convenient but also flavorful. Whatever you eat, honor God by enjoying it.

But it's not just the food itself, it's also the company. Take time on a regular basis to share a table with others, and consider varying who you dine with. Much has been made these days about the importance of families eating dinner together, because you talk and share and bond. When was the last time you invited friends or neighbors over for dinner or even just coffee/ what about inviting a college student or a service member, someone who is far from home? Whenever I consider doing that, I start fretting about how I need to first clean up my house – which I'm terrible at, so I never invite anyone over. But here's the truth: when I go to someone else's house, I don't go to see the house! I go to see the people. So if your messy house is holding you back, let go! If your dining table is piled with three years of junk mail, that's what TV trays are for. Or skip the house altogether and eat outside. The point is to dine with others, and to vary the company that you break bread with. And please, don't count those calories. With the right approach, conquering the sin of gluttony may be one of the most pleasant experiences we can enjoy. For it's God who provides the enjoyment.