

Lent Series '17
First Sunday of Lent
March 5, 2017
Seven Deadly Sins: Pride & Envy
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At Easter, we will celebrate a great victory: Jesus Christ, by rising from the dead, has conquered death and restored life. The season of Lent prepares us by rooting out of our hearts whatever might obstruct our receiving that great gift. So Lent is a time for self-examination, repentance, and reform. In that spirit, during these five Sundays of Lent I will be preaching on the Seven Deadly Sins; namely-- pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

These seven are singled out and called “deadly” because they are sinful attitudes, the evil in the heart from which sinful deeds proceed; envy, for example, may lead to malicious talk, lust may lead to fornication, or anger may lead to murder. Pride heads the list because it is explicitly what all other sins are implicitly-- a self-exaltation in rebellion against the created order. Pride is usually linked with envy because pride, disordered love, easily spills over into envy, resentment of others. So let's consider pride and envy together today.

There is some confusion about pride. We use the same word for a proper kind of self-respect, and also for an arrogant exaltation of self above and against others.

It is proper, in tune with God's created order, to love myself. God made me and loves me-- who am I to hate what God loves? It is then also proper to take delight in something I accomplish. A basketball player who wins the game at the buzzer with a three-pointer can rightly rejoice in what he has done. The author who, after many revisions, finds the exact combination of words to say what needs to be said can rightly rejoice. What the great athlete or author accomplish seems almost beyond human ability, and so we say “How do they do it?” The answer is, long practice ... of a gift. The thrill is the thrill of approaching the divine, and so we are rejoicing not just in the accomplishment but in the Creator who makes such excellence possible.

This proper, rightly- ordered self-love is consistent with humility because humility does not mean thinking poorly about myself, it means thinking truthfully about myself. A humble person can delight in his own accomplishment because he knows it is not entirely his own accomplishment, and is also not the only important thing in human existence.

Humility is important because it keeps self-love properly ordered. If I don't see myself

truthfully, if I see only my own goodness and not the goodness of others, if I refuse to see my own weakness and failures, then self-love becomes disordered, delusional, the deadly sin of pride. I think I am the center of the universe, and all others are potential rivals who must be sabotaged, stepped on, pressed into service. I am the center, all others must worship.

We can see how envy tags along with sinful pride, but there is confusion about envy as well. Admiration and imitation are not necessarily envy. If I notice that Og has learned how to use fire to keep his cave warm, it is not envy to want to keep my cave warm too. "Good job, Og! How did you do that?" But if I am deluded by the sin of pride I resent that Og is warm while I am cold, I suspect that he got the idea from me somehow and so doesn't deserve it, I imagine that Og is feeling all smug and superior for what he stole from me in the first place, and so by rights I should go take his fire from him and bring it home to my cave. That would not be admiration and imitation that would be the deadly sin of envy.

Pride and envy are the most intellectual or spiritual of the seven deadly sins. The others are disorders of bodily appetites and impulses-- lust, gluttony, anger. Pride and envy are disorders of the intellect, of the capacity to perceive and respect truth. The story of Satan is of a spiritual creature who was so excellent that he became deluded, saw himself as rightfully the center, and rebelled against God as his rival. But no creature, not even a most excellent spiritual creature, can dethrone its Creator. The creature depends on its Creator for its own existence. Rebellion is suicidal. Well, Satan is so deluded by pride, so eaten up by envy, that he doesn't consider the consequences of refusing to serve God, and on his way down to destruction he tries to drag everything God loves down with him. Envy is like that-- if I can't have it, you can't either. Pride and envy are the most spiritual of sins, and so also the most Satanic. In Dante's "Inferno" Satan is not on any of the upper levels of hell being tormented for gluttony or adultery. He is at the bottom of the pit, locked in the ice of his own cold pride.

In the Book of Wisdom (2:23-24) we read, "God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it."

In the Book of Genesis we see how Satan attacked God's precious humans. He resented the trusting obedience Adam and Eve gave their Creator, he envied their innocent happiness, so he set out to ruin it by disordering their self-love. Soon he had them deluded, suspecting God's motives in forbidding the forbidden fruit, wondering if God was a rival who must be defied to achieve their own happiness.

To keep us in ruination Satan attacked Jesus when he was fasting in the desert. He

started with the bodily appetites. “Turn these stones into bread.” Everyone deserves to eat. He moved to a more direct appeal to pride when he challenged him to prove he was the Son of God. Finally Satan's own pride and envy got the better of him and he overplayed his hand: “I will give you the world if you worship me.” “Worship me!” That's pride and envy talking. That is satanic ambition, to dethrone God and take His place. Unlike our first parents, Jesus did not entertain the temptation even for a moment, but threw it right back in the devil's face. “The Lord your God shall you worship, Him alone shall you serve. Begone Satan!” Satan left and Christ, the new Adam, pressed on in his mission of restoring what the old Adam had lost.

Satan withdrew, but kept watching for another opportunity to prevent our restoration. It looked like Satan had won when the world turned against Jesus and crucified him, but by willingly laying down his life for love of us Jesus defeated pride and envy. By the envy of the devil death entered the world, but by the love of Jesus Christ life has been restored.

During this season of Lent we prepare to celebrate the triumph of love, we prepare to share the restoration of life, by rooting disordered pride and envy out of our hearts.