

Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Gluttony and Generosity

Luke 12:22-34 **Isaiah 55:1-3**

Interestingly, this reading is what follows Jesus' teaching and parable of the bigger-barn-builder-guy, in a warning about greed, which we will look at after Easter. Even though we're talking about gluttony this morning, this teaching from Jesus is so warm and gracious and encouraging. Hear the good news from Luke's gospel:

Luke 12:22-34

He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no

thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is the word of the Lord.

Today's topic is gluttony, and before we go any further, I would like to define what gluttony is (or is not)—lest some of you tune out, thinking “gluttony is not my issue.” Because we reflexively assume that gluttony only has to do with food and eating. And that's not true.

Gluttony can be defined as any form of conspicuous consumption (over-consumption), in excess of what is needed for living. And often when it is done to fill an emotional or spiritual need. That's why it's on the list of 7 deadly sins. Like the other 6, it displaces love—the love that God has for us and God's love in us, and the love we give, for others. So, gluttony can include over-consumption of food, but that's not all it is. Gluttony can include things like shopping, overconsumption of television, or the internet, for example. In excess of needs, or to fill a need.

Gluttony can involve any of these things.

Gluttony: excess consumption to fill the needs of life. Remember Imelda Marcos and all her shoes? She had up to 3,000 pairs at one point. That's gluttony. It's not always about food.

I'm sure that many of us have been to Las Vegas. There used to be a sign on the road into Vegas that read: "More women. More lust. More of everything. Vegas." Isn't that awesome? Now that's gluttony! More of everything. And that particular form of "everything" is degrading to women in particular.

That's an exaggerated form of our cultural norm, yet it is a cultural norm, isn't it? More, more, more. Which means: consume, consume, consume. It's one of the ways you and I are defined by government and business: we are "consumers." We have things like the consumer price index, consumer reports, we study consumption levels; our economy runs largely on the consumption of goods and services. That's not necessarily a bad thing, on principle. The problem is that we are more often than not encouraged to *want* more, even when we don't *need* more.

In business school at UW I studied marketing and advertising, and to this day I continue to have an appreciation for, and fascination with, good and creative messaging. I also struggle with it, on a corporate advertising level, because we are so often encouraged to consume more and more things and experiences to fill emotional and spiritual needs that could be met in the Lord and in basic necessities. And if there is such a thing as a spiritual hunger out there

right now (and there is) it's because the consumption of goods and services has left a lot of people feeling empty and malnourished, spiritually and emotionally.

It's amazing to me, for those of us who spend time online, that our personal information is gathered and analyzed so that, with great precision, products and experiences are marketed to you and to me when we log on to some of our favorite web sites. These aren't generic ads on your screen, but ads that are targeted specifically to you and me based on demographic data about us, web sites that we have visited, online shopping that we've done, or searches that we've entered into our search engine. It's very effective. Information is gathered and ads appear on your screen that are tailor-made for you.

It creates what I jokingly call the spawning salmon syndrome. Salmon that are spawning upstream in a river don't need to eat—they're on a mission. They don't eat once they've left the ocean and enter a river to spawn. They have one singular mission... But if you dangle an attractive and colorful lure in front of their nose that flashes and dances around and presents itself as interesting, the salmon will instinctively snap at it; it's a reflex to just snap at it. And when they do, then they're hooked, literally; and they've lost their mission!

That's what a lot of good marketing does. It dangles interesting products and experiences in front of us, gets us distracted and then we get "hooked" if we

instinctively snap at what's being offered. This has worked on me. For me, it's books—I search for a particular book online or order a particular book I want, then Amazon says, “Hey, you might like this book too. Others who bought that book got these other books too... You don't want to be a loser and not have these other books,” and then—snap!—I'm hooked.

For me, it's books. For you, it might be something else online or on television.

Gluttony is good for the economy; but it's bad for the soul. Because we do begin to worry about our life, what we will eat, what we will wear, and what will happen to us if we don't buy _____ product. We get distracted from our mission; we get distracted from seeking first the Kingdom of God.

One of the side effects of gluttony is that it creates a carelessness of beauty. A carelessness of beauty. God made the world beautiful, with wonderful gifts to be savored and enjoyed. And God made us to be *creators* of beauty, to savor and enjoy what we make and do. If we're gluttonous we are careless with the beauty of what God has given us, and with our creative acts of beauty.

One way I think of this: we have had dogs over the years; they're wonderful and we loved them. They are fun and loving companions, and they become members of the family. But whenever I fed them and watched them eat,

I would think: there is no beauty in the way our dogs eat. It's just a lot of slobber and gulping. Then I think about it: there is no beauty in the way *I* eat sometimes. Less slobber, but still, gulping sometimes.

There is no beauty in the way some people shop at Christmastime, right? God has blessed us with gifts that are meant for our enjoyment and to show God's glory. So the problem with gluttony is that we don't enjoy the object of our gluttony. We merely consume it. And beauty becomes a casualty.

This is the beauty of a well-prepared meal, savored with family or friends, or on our own. It's the beauty of a good book, read slowly and savored for its contents; it's the beauty of going shopping, but making an enjoyable experience out of seeking and finding the needed item and saying with contentment, "This is good. It's what I needed and it's enough."

The majority of the time, gluttony has to do with everyday things that we need as human beings: food, drink, clothing, housing, work. The necessities of life. Jesus lists these things in our text this morning, and he identifies them as basic needs. The accumulation of these good and basic things turns into gluttony when we start feeling like we need more and more of them, because, perhaps we're afraid we might not have enough, or we may not be satisfied with what we

already have. Or, because we're trying to relax ourselves, and reduce our feelings of stress or anxiety.

Jesus gets at the heart of all of this by identifying the core issue at work when it comes to gluttony: fear. And fear can manifest itself in several ways:

- I'm afraid I may not be taken care of (by God or by others), so I consume for security and for comfort;
- I'm afraid I may not fit in, as people look at me and my life; so I consume to keep up appearances or so people will approve of me;
- I'm afraid of bad feelings, so I consume to make the bad feelings go away, or to prevent them from coming on to start with.

The problem is, conspicuous consumption brings a *false* sense of security and contentment as we turn to *material things* to satisfy *emotional* and *spiritual* needs. Like an object of an addiction, they leave us empty after the initial high. So we keep going back for more.

I love how gentle Jesus is about this. With some of the other sins like pride, for example, Jesus is earnest and even tough in his love. Here, he is gentle and encouraging. Partly because he was a real human being, and, like us, understands what it's like to have real human needs for things like food and clothing and companionship. Also, he is kind and encouraging here because the solution to

gluttony, in part, is to be reminded of how good our heavenly Father is to us. That our heavenly Father is the one who meets our true and deep needs emotionally, spiritually, and physically. “Your Father knows what you need,” Jesus says. This would be a good sentence prayer to internalize and repeat for when fear is at our doorstep and we are tempted to let it in, or indulge: “My father knows what I need... my father knows what I need... my father knows what I need.” That can slow us down, and help us realize: I don’t have to reflexively snap at _____.

Jesus continues, “Do not be afraid; it is your father’s good pleasure to give you.... the kingdom.” Something huge; something massive (righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit as Paul puts it). “So don’t strive for what to eat, what to drink, what to wear.” “Strive” suggests struggling for, exerting great energy and will toward something. Jesus says we don’t have to exert so much energy and will toward basic needs. Strive, rather, for God’s Kingdom, and all of your true needs will be met. God will provide just what we need, to live the life that we need, simply. Simply.

Jesus teaches us to pray “give us this day our daily bread.” Help me to trust you, Father, for just what I need, just for today. One day at a time. And this is the great motto of AA and other recovery groups, right? One day at a time. It’s so

right on, and brilliant. We're all in recovery btw... from something! Maybe not a substance, but selfishness, ego (I love the version of the Lord's Prayer that says, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from *ego*...")

Then, Jesus says, be generous. He says, "Sell your possessions and give alms." Jesus seems to assume, here and elsewhere, that his followers will live a simple life. A life that is marked by generosity. Where we know God's generosity toward us, and where we become generous as a lifestyle.

What's deadly about gluttony is not that we're bad people if we over-consume. The 7 sins are never about "you bad people." It's about God's love; it's always about God's love. Knowing it, and making it known. So, what's deadly about gluttony is that it keeps me from experiencing God's goodness and generosity toward me and it prevents me from being generous. Because fear has me consuming or keeping things for myself.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't accumulate. It *does* mean that the more we *do* accumulate, the more we are called to be generous with what we have. That's the biblical theology of wealth right there. It is assumed that the more we have, the more we have to share.

Keep enough to live simply; be generous with the rest. That has been the rule for God's saints throughout history. Live simply, so others may simply live.

The central act of worship for God's people in Jesus Christ, is a meal. There is something about eating and drinking in remembrance of Jesus that helps us to know that our true and deepest needs can be, and are, met in him. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says, for they *shall* be filled.

Isaiah 55:1-3—such an appropriate word for our time on a number of levels. Let me invite you to quiet your hearts and minds for a moment as you hear these words again from the Lord, through Isaiah, and, in this moment of prayer, let them beckon you to God's love for you.

Breathe in the Spirit of God. Breathe out fear and worry. Breathe in God the Father's love; breathe out our need to grasp and control.

“Come, everyone who thirsts. Come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy bread and milk (bread and cup) without money and without price. Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labor on that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in the richest of fare. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, that you may live. I am making a covenant commitment with you; the same one I did with David: my certain and everlasting love.”