Homily for July 30, 2023 “Rotten Bones or Grateful Hearts?” Proverbs 14:30 and Colossians 3:15-16

A reading from the Proverbs: *A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.*

And now these words from Paul to the church at Colossae: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly and you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

We continue to lope along now, week by week, through the Seven Deadly Sins and their redemptive Heavenly Virtues. So far, we have addressed Pride and Humility, Greed and Generosity, Wrath and Patience, and today we tackle the formidable pair of Envy and Gratitude.

I think it is a fair thing to assert that the wisdom suggested by today’s proverb is spot on: that a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Envy, in other words, causes structural weakness, causes us to be unable to support our weight in the world. Envy is a more wicked version of greed – now there is a sentence I never thought I would say! What makes it more wicked is the desire on the part of the envious for harm or diminishment to come to those who are envied. Sure, envy is an appetite for something that is not yours, a debilitating desire for more, but envy comes *at the expense of* the current owner. There is a petty aspect to envy that often desires something, or someone, precisely because the object of one’s desire is currently unavailable, being owned or connected to another.

Envy also borrows from pride, right, suggesting that the current possessor of whatever you envy does not deserve to have it, does not deserve a spouse like that, a car like that, an income like that, etc. The Ten Commandments end with the command not to covet; that is, not to *envy* and seek to acquire the property or relationships of others. This deadly sin brings decay and rot from the inside out, eating away at the core of what makes us truly human, diminishing us. The medical knowledge of the time before Christ was quite limited, but the writer of the Proverbs understood intuitively that a life filled with envy would be internally weakened to the point of collapse. Which is surely why author [Carrie Fisher](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/90150.Carrie_Fisher) has famously said, *“Envy is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”*

We do not know who invented, recognized, or compiled the seven heavenly virtues, but they are truly the gems in the crown of Christ. They take the dark light of sin and transform it into the brilliance of the heavens. In the case of envy, there is only one known way to transform that ugly response into something useful and laudatory, and that way is the practice of gratitude. Gratitude is an emotional expression of love and thankfulness. Social philosopher [Meša Selimović](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/205563.Me_a_Selimovi_) said it this way: *“Everyone says love hurts, but that is not true. Loneliness hurts. Rejection hurts. Losing someone hurts. Envy hurts. Everyone gets these things confused with love, but in reality, love is the only thing in this world that covers up all pain and makes someone feel wonderful again. Love is the only thing in this world that does not hurt.”*

Which brings us fully on board with gratitude, the mechanism with which we can keep the hurts of life at bay by acknowledging the good within and without. Gratitude is more of a practice than a thing unto itself; hear again Paul’s advice: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and be thankful.* His wisdom reminds us that the peace, even the peace of God, does not just install itself in our hearts and rule there uninvited; we must *invite* it, we must cultivate it, we must, as he says, *let* the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. We must *allow* that to happen! And the rest of the passage details ways to welcome the peace and encourage it to take up residence within us, ways like teaching and guiding, living and demonstrating and acting out the truths we hold dear, and singing with gratitude. John Wesley would include acts of charity and kindness, and certainly frequent participation in the Lord’s Supper, as critical inner peacekeeping strategies. As we chase out sin and invite virtue in, no gatekeeper will prove more faithful that gratitude.

The Roman philosopher Seneca lived at the time of Jesus, and this was his thinking: *“True happiness is to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future, not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is sufficient, for he that is so wants nothing. The greatest blessings of mankind are within us and within our reach. A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it may be, without wishing for what he has not.”* If we had time, we could do a line-by-line comparison with the Sermon on the Mount, and discuss Jesus’ allegories of birds that do not labor and lilies of the field that grow tall and flourish in the absence of worry and envy. Even the great hymn writer Horatio Spafford managed to extol this truth: *“Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*” That, friends, is gratitude.

Allow me to close with the words of the incomparable [Ralph Waldo Emerson](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/12080.Ralph_Waldo_Emerson): “*Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”* This day, beloved, let us kick envy to the curb, and fill that void with gratitude. Every day, in every way, give thanks for the gifts of life and love and faith and peace. A heart at peace gives life to the body, and lives at peace enhance the life of all creation. Let us be grateful! Amen.