Sermon for JULY 9, 2023 Psalm 10.1-6 and Philippians 2. 1-4 “Eating the Biggest Rat First”

# First, a reading from Psalm 10 about pride: *Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts about the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride the wicked man does not seek God; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. His ways are always prosperous; your laws are rejected by him; he sneers at all his enemies. He says to himself, “Nothing will ever shake me.” He swears, “No one will ever do me harm.”*

For contrast, here are some words from Paul’s letter to the Philippians about humility: *Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.  Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but looking instead to the interests of the others.*

Every summer for the last several years, I have willingly departed from preaching texts from the lectionary and launched out on a sermon series. This summer’s blockbuster is in seven parts and is called *“Vices and Virtues – Seven Sure Strategies to Sabotage or Sanctification”.* Our focus, for the next handful of weeks, will be on the infamous Seven Deadly Sins, and their corresponding Seven Heavenly Virtues. If you can’t tick these right off in your head, please don’t be alarmed; you surely have *heard* of them all, and most likely done some of them, too! They have not loomed large in United Methodist teaching but they are a solid foundational part of our understanding of the human condition, foundational enough that spending a few weeks discussing them will be time well spent. And you have my word that I will make these discussions as engaging and entertaining as the subject matter allows.

When I was a kid I would retire each evening with a different volume of the encyclopedia as my bedtime reading, and I still find myself going there – to the encyclopedia, not to bed - for definitions all the time. Here is what Wikipedia would have us know: *“The seven deadly sins, also known as the capital vices or cardinal sins, is a classification of* [*vices*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vice) *within Christian teachings. Behaviors or habits are classified under this category if they directly give birth to other immoralities. According to the standard list, they are* [*pride*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pride)*,* [*greed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greed)*,* [*lust*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lust)*,* [*envy*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Envy)*,* [*gluttony*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gluttony)*,* [*wrath*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrath) *and* [*sloth*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sloth_(deadly_sin))*, and are directly contrary to the* [*seven heavenly virtues*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_virtues)*, which are humility, generosity, chastity, gratitude, moderation, patience, and diligence. The seven deadly* [*sins*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_views_on_sin) *are often thought to be abuses or excessive versions of one's natural faculties or passions (for example, gluttony abuses one's desire to eat). This classification originated with the* [*desert fathers*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Fathers)*, and arrived in more or less finished form under Pope Gregory the Great by early in the seventh century. The Catholic Church used the concept of the deadly sins in order to help people curb their inclination towards evil before dire consequences and misdeeds could occur; the teachers especially focused on pride (which is thought to be the sin that severs the soul from Grace, and the one that is represents the very essence of all evil) and greed, both of which are seen as inherently sinful and as underlying all other sins to be prevented.”*

We will come to greed soon enough, but for today, our focus will be the deadly sin of pride. This choice is not random; pride is said to be the sin which begets all other misdoings. Or, as Mark Twain once said, “If it’s your job to eat a frog, it’s best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it’s your job to eat two frogs, it’s best to eat the biggest one first.” The Scots have adapted this same truth using rats as the disgusting snack, which brings us to our launch. We need to talk about pride first because pride is definitely the biggest rat.

What’s the problem with pride? In a self-esteem driven culture, pride seems almost a healthy thing. And indeed, there is a positive side to pride. But the shadow side, where we acquire a distorted sense of our own magnificence, is where pride crosses over from being a useful survival strategy to becoming a deadly sin. The problem with pride, put most simply, is that it is idolatry; we become our own God when our pride gets out of control. Remember what the Psalmist said just a few moments ago: *In his pride the wicked man does not seek God; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.*  But there is room, as we see played out all across the world, room in the wicked man’s mind for his *own* needs, his *own* desires, and his *own* extravagance, no matter the cost to others. Pride sells us the lie that we are in charge, and like a god, have the right to manipulate other people and situations for our own benefit.

The other main problem with pride is that it divides our personal world into two categories, those who are superior to us, and those who are inferior. Where pride is full-blown, that first list is non-existent, right? Nobody is better than us! By default, then, everybody else is seen as your subordinate. And since life is composed of interactions and relationships, pride is a sure strategy to sabotage this essential aspect of living. How can anybody stand to be around you? Who wants to be part of that kind of unbalanced relationship? Like the Psalmist says, *Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?* If one is prideful enough, even God will be challenged to keep company with you!

The antithesis of pride is the heavenly virtue of humility. At last, we are on more familiar ground, for the Church has taught humility from the very beginning. Like pride, humility also has a shadow side, a groveling, cringing side that assumes that everyone and everything is better than you, more deserving than you. This shadow side leads to self-destructive behavior in the name of religion, and it is not pretty. Nor is it the path recommended by Paul or Timothy or Jesus, as they all teach the same balanced, interactive humility that is all about accurately assessing one’s place in relationship to God and other people and creation itself. The root word of humility is the same as our English word for human, and healthy humility leads us, not to winge-ing self deprivation, but to healthy, authentic, undistorted relationships of all kinds. Being fully yourself is not a California invention birthed in the Haight-Asbury fifty-five years ago; it is a bedrock biblical principle that leads to sanctification.

Most of you know that I just returned from a wonderful week in coastal Oregon, about as far out of big city life as one can get there, and one night I had the opportunity to sit out in the front yard and look at the stars, brilliant and uncountable, a clear Milky Way, all undistorted by any substantial light for miles and miles around. It was breathtaking and grounding and led me back into a proper humility with God and the cosmos. I was reminded of the anthem that our choir used to sing, whose opening line is “When I gaze into the night sky, and see the works of your fingers, the moon and stars suspended in space, O, what are we, that you are mindful of us?” And the answer is that we are part of creation too, but just a part, not it’s masters, not its owners, but a part. Being in right relationship with God’s world, neither hiding from it nor trying to subdue it, is a gift we seek too seldom.

And that is just humility with the created order…when it comes to the value of humility, it’s usefulness really shines when it comes to relationships with other people. How the world would change if we took just this one fragment of Paul’s advice to heart: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but looking instead to the interests of the others.* Paul, inspired by Jesus, could envision a world where we all were trying to make things better for other people, giving their needs and wants more priority than our own, which were in turn being given priority by others who cared for us. An interactive, sustainable society of caring and being cared for, rather than a rabble of exclusion and privilege. It is, to this day, quite a vision, but one we can glimpse and live within for shining moments of our own devising.

We could talk about these two subjects for hours on end, but I think we have the gist for now. Pride is definitely the way to go if you want your life to be horrible! But if you want the sweet concord offered and promised by God, the sure ticket to that happy place is humility. Allow me to summarize with a song:

**Pride is the worst of all the deadly sins, pride is the game nobody ever wins,**

**Pride makes relationships quite challenging, pride’s an impediment to everything!**

**Pride, other people set aside, other’s interests denied,**

**It’s the ultimate in self-obsessing, so distressing!**

**But, on the other hand, humility, gives us authentic Christianity;**

**Living the way that Jesus taught and lived, peacefully learning that we must forgive;**

**So, if eternal life we’d see, and if faithful we would be, we must have humility!**

**Yes, if eternal life we’d see, and if faithful we would be, we must have humility!**