**Sermon for AUG. 27, 2023 “This Too Shall Pass”**  **1 John 2. 16-17 and Psalm 119: 9-10**

  For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.  The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

 How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.  I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

England, 1848, is the place of the earliest known publication of this famous legend: *When an Eastern sage was ordered by his sultan to inscribe on a ring the sentiment which, amidst the perpetual change of human affairs, was most descriptive of their real tendency, he engraved on it these words : — "And this, too, shall pass." It is impossible to imagine a thought more truly and universally applicable to human affairs than that expressed in these memorable words, or more descriptive of that perpetual oscillation from good to evil, and from evil to good, which from the beginning of the world has been the invariable characteristic of the habits of man, and evidently flows from the strange mixture of noble and generous with base and selfish inclinations, which is constantly found in the children of Adam.*

These last six weeks we have been discussing the Seven Deadly Sins and their corresponding Seven Heavenly Virtues. We have talked at some length about things both base and noble, things both generous and selfish. And we have saved the deadly sin with which we are most familiar for the end of the series…today we talk about Lust, and its balancing partner in the dance of life, Chastity.

Now, when I say that lust is the sin with which we are most familiar, I do not mean to cast aspersions on your character. You may be virtuous, upright people, one and all. But you are nevertheless people who have grown up in the most sexually fixated and verbally open society in the history of the world. Maybe it stems from rebellion against our Puritan roots over here, maybe it was our forbears arriving in this land of opportunity and freedom like college freshmen flocking to the downtown bars, but whatever it is, it is a real American reality: we think about sex *a lot*. And when that sex we contemplate or consummate is not with the person to whom we are legally connected through marriage, the Bible, and history, describe it as lust.

Also, historically, lust has been considered the *least* dangerous of the deadly sins. As much as we obsess about it, that may be rather surprising. But I think that it is held to be more manageable simply because it is a *composite* of other sins, and when we are dealing with those, we are also tangentially dealing with our lusts. Take gluttony, for example: gluttony is the perversion of a natural human desire and need, the desire to eat. Lust is much the same, a perversion of the natural human desire and need to connect sexually with other humans. Study after study reveals what we all intuitively know, that human contact is good for us, *essential* for us. But history and religion and even civil law have all come to the same conclusions across the years, and those are that we cannot have a functioning society unless we observe certain boundaries. Marriage, in these formulations, has been the boundary marker for sexual expression of an appropriate sort. Lust is also partly formed of pride; the philosopher Osho said *“In love the other is important; in lust you alone are important”.* Lust is also partly greed, and some measures of envy and wrath are in there, too. Lust is a composite sin, you see, but not an unconquerable one. Because when we are working on any other path towards virtue, we are building our skills with lust abatement as well.

Not that our world makes it easy, no, not at all. Bombarded is the only apt word for the endless display of sexualized images and innuendoes and storylines that make up modern reality. [Sylvia Plath](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4379.Sylvia_Plath), writing in the middle of the last century as rock and roll was being invented, hit the nail right on the head: “If they substituted the word 'Lust' for 'Love' in the popular songs it would come nearer the truth.” She is right, of course; but popular music is just one arena where the graphic content of the lyrics would have brought outraged blushing to your parents’ generation, and maybe to some of you, as well.

Lust is easy to talk about, as it is so much better known and paraded about than its redeeming virtue, chastity. And poor chastity is so misunderstood! Let me turn from lust, as Paul would have said, and talk with you now about chastity. And the first thing I want to say is that chastity and celibacy are *not* the same thing! Religions that require vows of celibacy find it hard to keep going in this world, and the bitter fruit of enforced celibacy among some clergy groups is the scandal of the age. Celibacy is like a diet where you successfully lose weight because you don’t eat anything! Not very sustainable, nor very healthy. But chastity, on the other hand, is like a diet too, only we *moderate* our consumption, limiting it to specific foods in specific portions. Sustainable, healthy, and effective, but like any diet, hard for some folks to stick to it, hard for some of us to commit.

Allow me to turn to the dictionary, as you know I like to do: *In many* [*Christian*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity) *traditions, chastity is synonymous with sexual purity. Chastity means not having sexual relations before marriage; it also means fidelity to husband or wife during marriage. In* [*marriage*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage)*, the spouses commit to a lifelong relationship that excludes sexual intimacy with other persons. It is the* moderation *of sexual desires that allows us to be virtuous. Chastity is a central and pivotal concept in most Christian practice. Chastity's importance in traditional Christian teaching stems from the fact that it is regarded as essential in maintaining and cultivating the unity of body with spirit and thus the integrity of the human being. It is also regarded as fundamental to the practice of the Christian life because it involves an apprenticeship in self-mastery. By attaining mastery over one's passions, reason, will, and desire can harmoniously work together to do what is good and needful in the world.*

I know, I know, to some of you it sounds dreadfully boring, hopelessly limiting, needlessly restrictive. But the whole human family across the millennia have agreed in principle to the very boundaries that have been distilled into modern Christianity. As much as our own preferences feel right to us, defensible to us, there is an arrogance unspeakable in assuming that we are right and the billions before us were all wrong! The Sufi master Rumi wrote this centuries ago: “*When you have indulged a lust, your wing drops off; you become lame, abandoned by a fantasy.…People fancy they are enjoying themselves, but they are really tearing out their wings for the sake of an illusion.”* Talk about fake news…every day, multiple times, we are sold again the story of how happy we will be without sexual boundaries or guilt or limits. We could be soaring with the angels, but we have ripped off our own wings. The plain truth is that functional, integrated humans with at least a little self-respect take care how, when, and why they open their arms and bodies to others.

They have a saying in the South that when you are walking along the road on a hot summer day and you see that perfectly ripe watermelon on the vine, you can’t help but salivate, but you can keep on walking! This is all chastity is, in the final analysis; the willingness to walk on past the temptation and preserve one’s integrity. If we cross the edge of the watermelon field, we feel bad, because we know we are stealing. And when we cross the boundaries of chastity, we feel bad, too, because we are stealing from ourselves and our loved ones. Lust is an affect of the world, and it, too, will pass, if we give it a little encouragement.

Well, we began in England, and so we will end there, but I feel compelled to finish with a bad joke, and one that features the most famous nudist in history, Lady Godiva. Do you know what she said when she reached the conclusion of her famous naked ride? At last, she said, I have come to my clothes! And at last, this sermon has come to its close, and this sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins as well. May humility, generosity, patience, gratitude, moderation, diligence and chastity be our companions as we ride forth into your lives, lives that are sketched out by God, but fashioned in their myriad details by us! Amen.