**Homily for AUG 6, 2023** **Proverbs 23. 1-3 and Gal. 5:22-23 “Full of More than the Spirit”**

*When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.*

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

I am the oldest of six kids, and if you were part of a brood, or had multiple children yourself, I am sure you have noticed one of life’s odd patterns: that the parenting tends to get looser and more permissive with each passing child. Things that I *never* could have gotten away with were tolerated or even ignored by the time my youngest brother Terry was being raised. The same thing seems to be true of other sequences in life, too; the first few items on the list get the lion’s share of attention, but our stamina for the whole list tends to wane the longer we are at the task. And I bring all this up because we have, as you know, been delving into the Seven Deadly Sins and their corrective Seven Heavenly Virtues, and the Church, pretty universally, has been just like a parent in this regard. Some of the big sins are roundly condemned and vigorously preached about, with pride, greed and lust taking up most of the bandwidth. Others, as we will discuss momentarily, barely get a mention, and have kind of slipped between the cracks of our general awareness. It has been kind of easy to talk about pride and humility, greed and generosity, wrath and patience, and even envy and gratitude, they were pretty familiar. But today we are in rarely explored territory; I need to address the deadly sin of gluttony, and its corresponding virtue of temperance.

Gluttony is an area in which I am regrettably an expert. I make no defense; it is a sin whose evidence is visible in the world. Some sins you carry in your heart, or your soul, but gluttony shows up other places! If I were to try and *rationalize* my choices thus far, I would have to say that the sinful nature of overconsumption has not been really stressed in my Christian tradition. Wesley famously said, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.” And gluttony, frankly, has been a non-essential in United Methodist practice, a practice filled with potlucks and pie suppers and chili cookoffs and annual ice cream socials. And so, I have *enjoyed* the liberty, the non-censure, as my lack of self-control seemed to me a worldly thing more than a spiritual thing. That thinking, of course, is deeply flawed, but we need to start where we actually are.

The motivation to include gluttony among the deadly sins arose in the mediaeval mind as a logical response to the relative scarcity of food. When there is barely enough to go around, eating and drinking more than your share, and much more than you need, is a real problem. So, the original sinfulness of gluttony was couched in the language of deprivation; by overeating, one is depriving someone else, gobbling up their share. But over the centuries, that practical restriction gave way to things more subtle and spiritualized, as food production was streamlined, and we now have many plump cultures with far too much food, much more than can be bought, anyway. [Pope Gregory I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Gregory_I) (St. Gregory the Great) codified the following ways by which one can commit the deadly sin of gluttony: the first is eating before the time of meals in order to satisfy the palate; you know, snacking. We live in an era where whole aisles of our grocery stores are devoted to snack foods alone. Hmm. The second sinful zone is seeking [delicacies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delicacy) and better quality of food to gratify the "vile sense of taste." Admittedly, it was an ascetic time, and there was no Food Network on cable TV, but this is what the writer of the Proverbs was getting at too, a sense that food is for *nutrition*, not for entertainment. Seeking rare delicacies, seeking to elevate oneself socially because of the extravagant meals one can afford and consume, becomes idolatrous pretty quickly. Paul references some sinners ‘whose god is their stomach’…first century foodies, no doubt.

The third manner of being gluttonously sinful is a lot like the second: seeking to stimulate the palate with overly or elaborately prepared food. Now we are leaving the high-quality ingredients themselves and questioning the long hours and costly condiments that decorate those fine vittles. Because, let’s be honest, from food as plain nutrition to food as high art is a pretty broad spectrum. We need to eat, but how and when and why and *how much*, those are the questions our forbears in the faith were asking. The fourth risky zone is the most familiar to us, I would think: we are in the deadly sin area when we are exceeding the necessary *quantity* of food. We hold this truth to be self-evident; eating beyond fullness because we just can’t stop, or don’t want to stop, turns out that this isn’t just a dietary problem, this is a spiritual problem as well. We will come back to that one, but let me finish Gregory’s list. The fifth and final way to be a glutton he held to be the worst of all: taking food with too much eagerness, even when eating the proper amount, and even if the food is not luxurious. Gobbling and slobbering and wolfing it down, not good, not good at all. He sums up, thankfully, by reminding us that the over-the-top and irregular [*desire*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overeating) is the sin, not the food: "For it is not the food, but the excessive desire that is the fault".

Before we move to a discussion of temperance and moderation, I want to give a little comfort to those of us here who are prone to having appetites not fully controlled, and simply say that, while the church has loosened its focus on the sinfulness of gluttony, the secular world has enshrined it with the fervor of an athletic event. We are, at every turn, and in every way, every moment of every day, encouraged to consume more than we need. From outrageous bargains if you buy more, to ever expanding portion sizes, to restaurants whose buffets should have cardiologists on staff, the current trend towards culinary self-aggrandizement is a big reality in the food and drink industry. Food is for more than sustenance and nutrition now, it is for pleasure and for status and even for one-upsman-ship. I am sure some of you can remember Coca-Cola in its distinctive curvy bottle, so refreshing on a hot day, and such a treat! That bottle, friends, the one that used to be so satisfying, was six and a half ounces in the late 1950’s. By the mid sixties it was available in ten-ounce portions, then twelve, then twenty-six, and you know where we are today: most of the convenience stores offer their best price on the Big Gulp, seventy-two or even eighty ounces! A portion size more than ten times larger than the original! By looking the other way, and with good advertising and cleverly appealing to our nutritional needs with emotional enticements, we are now a supersized people. Yippee!

Sigh. The good news is that the heavenly virtue that can correct our laxity is a fruit of the Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit are like most vegetables in Weight Watchers, you can have all you want! There are nine fruits of the Spirit mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Gaulish Christians, and like most lists, most of the time, we focus our energy on the first few: love, joy, and peace. Lots of sermons and bible studies on those! Some energy is given to patience and kindness and generosity, but not nearly as much, and when was the last time you heard a sermon about gentleness or faithfulness or, to today’s point, self-control? The last kids in the family have the least restrictions, right? And of course, the irony here is that self-control is the fruit of the Spirit that makes all the other fruits worth having. We have technical words for those who have no self-control in love or in joy or in faithfulness, and even generosity needs a sensible balance. But we live in *this world*, a world that encourages lack of self-control at every turn, and then gets punitive and judgy about those who follow that very leading! What we need, now maybe more than ever, is healthy, balanced, spiritually grounded respect for, and cultivation of, temperance. Moderation. Self-control.

I am well aware that some of your forbears here, or you parents friends, were key members of the WCTU, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Another time we will do a sermons series on *them* and their profound effect on the world, but for today let me just clarify one little thing… the Women’s Christian Temperance Union did not give a rat’s patootie about temperance! No, no, no, temperance isn’t what they were after…they were going for full abstinence! Maybe they pushed the pendulum a little far, because abstinence is the product of iron-clad self - control, which they always framed as a moral virtue. But we are not discussing moral virtues today, but rather gifts, gifts of the Spirit, which God freely bestows, as the song said earlier, on those who humbly seek. If we genuinely want the gift of self- control, it will be given. It is God’s to give, and ours to enjoy, when our hearts and minds are ready to value such an old-fashioned virtue.

We will have Holy Communion soon, with tiny portions of bread and juice, enforced self-control. But I will never forget the complete lack of self-control exhibited by a five-year-old daughter of a seminary friend…there we all were, standing in a circle, while the communion servers made the rounds in the middle, offering big chunks of bread that we dipped in the lovely dark purple juice. These servers didn’t really know the beloved status of children at my seminary, and so they passed this little girl right by without serving her. And they got about two people downstream when the sweet reverent mood was shattered by “Hey! I want my Jesus!” True story, friends. I guess if Jesus is on the menu, we might need to rethink our standards of gluttony!

Since our tiny meal awaits, let me wrap up. Here is the thing about the fruits of the Spirit; since they are fruits, they need to be cultivated. Fruit cannot grow where there is no vine or plant or tree in place, and so we must have the Spirit deeply rooted in us if we expect fruit. We United Methodists believe in the indwelling reality of God’s Spirit in all persons, but just sticking a plant in the ground, even a drought-resistant one, doesn’t guarantee thriving. Thriving requires cultivation, watering, weeding, pruning, shading and light exposure, all of these are part of a thriving plant. So…Think of your life like a tree planted in the rich loam of God. If we want fruits of the Spirit, we have to take care of our trees, spiritually. That will mean prayer and worship and study and service. That will mean nature walks and contemplation and sometimes fasting, too. And if we want the fruit of self-control, it can grow in us if we desire it and seek it and create the conditions for its thriving. We are currently full of much more than the Spirit…but God’s fruits are native plants, and invasive, at that. And the presence of God will flourish within us if we will allow and cultivate it. Amen.