

“Pride - Image is Everything”

A few years ago, while driving with a friend, I was confronted with a question that I had no real good answer to. My dear friend observed that in the last number of years, they’ve noticed that the Church, and they were talking about the larger Church, had focused a great deal on God’s grace and God’s love. They thought that was admirable, and at the same time, because the church wasn’t talking as much about Sin anymore, the grace, they felt, had been cheapened. We had developed a theology of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would suggest is cheap grace. The question they asked me, was simply, why didn’t the Church talk more about Sin?

That’s a fantastic question. I could suppose a couple of responses. Perhaps it was because we, the Church, were reacting to experiences in our past which had harmed us. Perhaps it was because we didn’t have a good language to describe or engage with Sin anymore. Perhaps it was because talking about Sin seemed to be at odds with talking about God’s grace (or not), or that it was hard to hold the two in the same sentence without falling into former ways of talking. Perhaps. Or maybe we just don’t like to talk about Sin.

Whatever the reason, this question, “Why doesn’t the Church talk more about Sin?” is the question that has led us to this sermon series for Lent this year. I want to talk about Sin. But not just any Sin. I want to talk about the big 7, the traditional 7, the ancient 7, the 7 that for one reason or another, are so sneaky, so subtle, so subversive, that in some cases, they don’t seem like sins anymore. We’re going to talk about the 7 Deadly Sins, Pride, Envy, Greed, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, and Wrath. But we’re not going to stop with Sin, we’re going to talk about how we can be transformed, and we’re also going to explore cultivating the opposite of these vices in our lives, the 7 Holy Virtues; Humility, Kindness, Charity, Chastity, Temperance, Perseverance, and Love.

And we begin this morning with, Pride.

What is it?

In a nutshell, the Sins talked about in the Seven Deadly Sins, are misdirected love. Some are an overabundance of love, others are a lack of love, and still others yet, are a misplaced love.

Pride, it has been said, is the root of all Sins. Pride appears in our lives in a number of different ways, we might call it vanity, or vainglory, conceit, arrogance, egotism, boastfulness, self-glorification, or selfishness. Pride in it's simplest form, is an overabundant love of oneself.

With Pride we think of ourselves as more than what and who we are, we think of ourselves as more special than anyone else. That all that we do, and all that we aspire for, is to puff of our own image of ourselves. It's a putting oneself-first and ahead of everyone else. It's embodying the attitude that as long as I win, it doesn't matter what happens to you. And I imagine, that none of us have to work too hard to find an example in our lives where we've witnessed pride at work.

William William writes that the problem of pride is that "when we take too much credit for our lives, and our achievements, when we come to look at our lives as products of our own striving rather than gifts, we are moving close to that idolatry in which the creature refuses to give due credit to the Creator"

And for this reason, I would suggest, that Pride is first Sin.

Where does it come from?

I would assume that we're quite familiar with the story of humankind's banishment from Eden. Adam and Eve are created, and enjoy a beautiful, tranquil life in the paradise of Eden. They have free reign of creation, except for one thing. They're not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They obey, for a time, until Eve is tempted to eat of the fruit, then she shares it with Adam. And because of their actions, they're cast out of Eden. We've often interpreted the eating of the fruit as the first Sin, disobedience, breaking one of God's rules. The burden of which Eve has carried most of the blame.

I would suggest that's not the case. I would suggest the first Sin is committed before any fruit is tasted.

It's the serpent who appeals to the pride of Adam and Eve. When the serpent says "you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, *and you will be like God*, knowing good and evil." pride is tempted. It's the 'you will be like God' part which suggests to me that the first Sin in Eden is pride. By eating of the fruit, Adam and Eve, attempt

to be like God. In their pride they try to be God, to know Good and Evil. They wish to have knowledge and be like God. And that's the Sin of Pride, trying to be like God.

Subtly of Pride

Pride is a subtle Sin, it's not always obvious. Sure, we know it to see it in others, but to see it in oneself well, that's another story altogether. "Being proud of oneself" is often equated today with "feeling good about oneself": and feeling good about one's self is an altogether admirable ambition" but it's admirable only as long as that's where it stops. However, in our culture, that's not the case. I believe that our society has taken this Sin and tried to turn it into a virtue.

A Proudful Society

Theologian William Willimon reflects that "Pride is rather remarkable in that none of the other Seven, in any fashion, have enjoyed the benevolent transformation that Pride has undergone in recent years.

It has moved from being the root of all evil, to becoming the root of all virtue. Our politics seems to be dominated by politics of being the most right, being the best." The greatest.

"We're encouraged to take pride in our work. Our culture of celebrity highlights the one who can get the most attention, our glut of sports praises the one who is the best; the one who is the superstar; the one who can win the Gold, silver after all is just the first loser, and our social media, is about getting the most likes; the most attention. We're encouraged to develop a world that puts ourselves front and centre. In a way we have taken Jesus' command to "love thy neighbour as thyself" and shortened it to a hard and fast, ruthlessly enforced mandate: *love thyself!*"

What to do about pride?

So what are we to do about Pride in our own lives? The first step, I believe, to transforming ourselves, is to change the focus of our love and direct it away from ourselves, and return it to God and to our neighbours, like Jesus modelled. We have to let go of our place at the centre of attention; the center of the universe; and to admit that from beginning to end , "it's not about me." We need to shut out the voices, and return our focus to God, and to do this, we need to re-learn to pray.

“Humility - Putting God First”

Now, the same William Willimon I mentioned earlier also comments that he has a Jewish friend who “is fond of saying, ‘Jews have two major beliefs; (1) there is a God; (2) you are not it.’” I think that this saying is profound in its simplicity. It’s also a valuable lesson for us. If, at its core, Pride is about trying to be God, then Humility is recognizing our place in the order of creation. Remembering that God is God. Humility is remembering that we’re not the centre of it all.

While in seminary, as part of a class project looking at technology and church community, I was had the opportunity to spend an evening with an Amish family. During the course of the evening, we learned that the father of the hosting family had helped co-author a number of books about Amish culture. When asked by one of us about “how many he’s written,” his reply was simply “oh a couple I guess.” This to me was an incredible example and lesson in humility. He didn’t try to be more than he was, he didn’t need to show off, he didn’t need to be the centre of attention. Rather, he treated the question very matter of factly, and reminded us, that he was no better than the rest of us. This response stood out to us because it first highlighted our western preoccupation of achievements, and it demonstrated the embodied the humility to which, us followers of Christ, are called to. As Jesus describes in the beginning of Matthew 6:

“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. “When you pray, don’t be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Now it should be noted that humility isn’t the belittling or undervaluing of oneself. I should be clear about that. Humility is, at it’s core, about honesty. “The humble person not only sees himself, or herself, truthfully. They see themselves truthfully in relation to others.” and I would extend that to our relationship with God too. Someone who is truly humble is someone who is most aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and sees and rejoices in the gifts of others.

And I'll be the first to confess that I continually, daily, perhaps even by the hour, struggle with growing this virtue in my own life.

Another understanding of humility has captured my imagination. In his book *Changing Lenses*, author Howard Zehr offers another way of thinking about humility. He suggests that perhaps humility is "a profound recognition of the limits of what we 'know.'"

Howard Zehr reflects that "humility requires a real caution about generalizing and applying what we think we know to others' situations. Humility also requires a deep awareness of how our biographies", that is who we are and where we come from, "shape our knowledge and biases." He continues, "Our gender, culture, ethnicity, and personal and collective histories all profoundly shape how we know and what we know, and in ways that are often difficult to bring to consciousness." That is to say, where we come from, who we are, all shape us, our thoughts, our opinions, and we often don't realize it. Humility demands that we begin to notice these things. "Humility calls us, then to a deep appreciation for and openness to others' realities. Such openness is imperative in an increasingly polarized world."

Zehr's understanding of humility demands, that we recognize where we come from, and how that has shaped our thoughts and opinions, and also recognizing that what we know, that our knowledge, isn't the end all and be all; that there's always more to learn. That what we know, isn't always the absolute. That other's thoughts and opinions are just as valid as our own.

Zehr is writing from a restorative justice perspective, but I think his comments apply to our conversation too. We appear prideful when we assume that we know more than our neighbour, we appear prideful when we assume we know what's best in a given situation. We appear prideful when we assert that we know it all. In other words, humility is knowing enough to know what you don't know, and being honest about that.

Humility calls us to set our opinions and assumptions aside, and to listen to our neighbour, and to God, before we speak. Humility, calls us to consider, how others might be experiencing a situation, before assuming that what we're seeing is correct. And above all, humility calls us to possibly admit when we are wrong and change our minds.

If your back bristles, as does mine, at the thought of this, then perhaps that's a present example of the work that we each need to do in cultivating a more humble life.

Prayer and silence, help us to set our pride aside, and return to the humble spirits which Jesus modelled, and that God calls us to. If Pride is our own loud voices, praising our own honour and glory, then prayer returns us to place which reminds us that our voice isn't the only one that matters. If Pride drives us to seek to be God in our knowledge of good and evil, then prayer reminds us that we aren't the creator, but the created. It reminds us, that there is a God and we are not it. Prayer and silence create space for God to speak and be present, and to perhaps, move in ways, that we might otherwise get in the way of.

As we continue to explore these seven sins and these seven virtues, no doubt Pride; misdirected love of self, will emerge and re-emerge, again and again. And so I want to encourage you to not be discouraged but to, instead, take each of those moments, each of those insights, as an opportunity to try again. As I studied for this week, I was humbled as I noticed over and over how often Pride appears in my own life. But rather than being discouraged, which would have been completely understandable, I took it to be an opportunity to continue learn and to practice humility.

We will stumble in our attempts at humility, pride will rear it's ugly head, but by the grace of God, we will pick ourselves up, and try again. For it's by following Jesus, that we find ourselves carried by God's grace, and God's love.

Amen.