

# "Deadly Sins for Times Like These"

a sermon by  
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*"The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them,  
but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."*

-George Bernard Shaw

A couple years ago there was a Doonesbury comic strip that seemed to get right to the heart of religious liberals' attitudes toward sin. In the strip, a "church-shopping" couple is speaking to the minister of a quaint little lakeside chapel called "The Little Church of Walden" to decide if that might be the church for them. The minister describes the approach of the church to the couple this way: "I'd like to describe it as 12-step Christianity. Basically, I believe we're all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial; it's about re-commitment, about redemption. It's all in the brochure there."

The couple responds: "Wait a minute...sinners? Us? Redemption?"

Doesn't all that imply guilt?"

"Well, yes, I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray.

Guilt is a part of that."

The husband replies, "I dunno. There's so much negativity in the world as it is. We're looking for a church that's supportive; a place we can feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure the 'guilt thing' works for us... On the other hand, you do offer racquetball."

To which the wife adds, "So did the Unitarians, honey, and without the guilt!

Let's go back there."

My guess is that few of you lie awake at night taking inventory of the day's sinful infractions. And I'd go even further to speculate that most of you have long ago discarded the concept of sin as an antiquated and even oppressive concept. Our very religious tradition was born of the conviction that God was love, that Hell was a lie, and that all were saved, by virtue of being the children of God. Those old Universalists didn't deny the reality of sin, but held that all could and would be reconciled.

Over the past 150 years, we've lost the language to speak of the profound alienation that sin creates between ourselves and all that's ultimate and essential and sacred. We have, by and large, substituted alternate frames of reference to explain the consequences of sin. There are psychological diagnoses. There are sociological theories. There are environmental explanations. I have no doubt that such disciplines each have their rightful place in describing dimensions of human behavior. But, it seems to me, that what each respective discipline **lacks** is a certain moral dimension that goes beyond explaining cause and effect, and is capable of interpreting the **meaning** of our frequent sense of estrangement from the good.

I realize that for many of you, sin may remain something of a spiritual anachronism that is just more than you can incorporate into your religious vocabulary. I'm certain that I have less trouble with the concept of sin than most, since I grew up UU, and never heard of it 'til I went to Divinity School. I didn't have to peel away layers of guilt and shame that so many spend so much of their lives recovering from. Sin is a case of suffering; but it exists mostly, not as a consequence of our behavior, but as a condition of our being. Anger – one of the "Big Seven" sins is not a behavior. It is a state of being. A state of being, which brings about suffering, alienation, separation.

A lovely description of sin leapt off the page of a wonderful novel I read this summer. It's called The Solace of Leaving Early, and in it, one of the main characters, a minister, was wrestling with his own sermon on sin when he put to paper this sentence. "We have, none of us, lived our lives as we ought to have; and maybe that's a good, working definition of sin. God doesn't care, the angels don't care, no one is mad at us for our failures. But that's the agony [of sin]; to know our better selves, the life we might have lived is there, just out of reach."

After 17 years in the ministry, I need no more proof of the existence of sin. I've seen plenty. I see it not in behaviors that are evil, or in willful violations of conduct but in the form of profound obstacles to spiritual growth: in self-deception, in despair, in privilege, in helplessness. They arrest the possibilities of reconciliation with other people, with our own spirits, and with the source of all. When we're trapped by a state of sin, we become obsessed with ourselves, we not only forget **how** to find our way back in to the world, but we forget the reasons we would **want** to get back there. Sin seems to function as a spiritual anesthesia that keeps us from engagement with the full range of life's deepest joys and harshest pain.

The Seven Deadly Sins have been around since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Believe it or not, they even have their own website, complete with an online gift shop where you can buy T-shirts, coffee mugs, and bumper stickers emblazoned with your favorite sin. At that website there is also an invitation to nominate your own new deadly sin, and make your own mark on morality. Among the current nomination at the website are: whininess, letting your cell phone ring in public, and watching television. (I'm sure Bob Thompson – our guest speaker next week – would take issue with that!)

It just may be time for a new list. One commentator remarked that in this day and age, the current list might hold more promise for marketing a new line of perfumes than for guiding our moral compass. There is a certain amount of allure to many of them. All we have to do is look at our own culture to see the ways that old-time vices have been transformed into new age virtues.

Pride is seen no longer as the root of evils, but is justifiably recognized as the foundation of self-respect and self-esteem. Greed, the drive to possess, drives the engine of a consumer society like ours. Only now we call it prosperity. Lust ... well, what can I say! Where would most reality TV be without it? Gluttony may be passé to the extent that it is incompatible with a culture of thinness, yet the diet industry reminds us of all the hungers that eating never feeds. And with anger, the only sort that is bad is the sort that goes unexpressed. Envy works on us to be ambitious. And sloth is now better known as "leisure," and many toil at their work with one eye on the leisure that work will buy. In an attempt to build lives of self-

fulfillment, we have rendered the seven deadly sins into a cohesive, alluring, and culturally acceptable way of life. Clever, aren't we?

Yet times like these have generated a new generation of deadly sins for us to guard against. Other equally powerful forces stand between us and our longing for whole and fully engaged lives. My list is by no means comprehensive. (I suppose it's mostly made up of the one I'm most susceptible to.) I'd encourage you to consider drawing up a list of your own; so that when they appear you will know them for what they are.

I would first nominate for a seat in Hell, the person who invented "multi-tasking," that curse so well depicted in this morning reading. It's productivity run amok. We rush through life without even seeing what we are doing; so much it has become the norm. The most visible sign of this are cell phones. In cars, in malls, in restaurants, in church, at concerts. But best of all was watching two women walking together down Salina Street – both of them talking to someone who was somewhere else – on their cell phones. The curse of speed has its own seductions. It deludes us into believing our time is of a higher order of value than others. If you wonder what I mean – think of how you feel when you're stuck in a slow to non-moving line at the grocery store. Rather than repeating to yourself, "*thank you for this opportunity to breathe*" you feel like it's some grave injustice that you should have to wait, doing nothing, for four minutes.

Milan Kundera, in his book Slowness, suggests that our cultural need for speed promotes forgetting. He explains how if a person wants to forget something, he will pick up speed walking down the street. The person who wants to remember something, slows her pace. And speeding up in general makes a person forget not only specific things, but basic values and ideals for how to live well.

We rush and we run – it turns out – often away from ourselves.

Another demon that's always looking for a soul to torment is perfectionism. You know, it took me years to be perfect, and only then did I realize it was someone else's version of "perfection" I had attained. And I had to settle for imperfection in the eyes of others, to be able to accept it in my own. Anne Lamott calls perfectionism "the voice of the oppressor." It calls us into an accountability we could never satisfy, and unless we really step back to see the process at work – we become almost addicted to the meager rewards of now and then being thrown a treat for performing well. In the quest for perfection we lose sight – and satisfaction – of the good, but also we neglect the essential lesson and insights of our blessed failures. I guarantee you – no one other than yourself – will ever honor you imperfections ... so don't expect it. But you can befriend your flaws and failures... sit with them ... make some sense of them ... dissolve your fear of them. It's not a perfect solution, I know, but it's all I have.

To my "short list" of deadly sins for times like these, I would add judgment, and not the "good judgment" we hope for in our children, our courts, our counselors and clergy. No, not that kind of judgment. I mean the kind of judgment, which takes as its main ingredient arrogance. The kind of judgment which is so easy for people of privilege to impose on the world. There is a harshness about judgment that masquerades as confidence – as certainty – which actually may be a hedge against our doubts and uncertainties. Because once our judgments are finalized – we don't really have to think about it any more. (For me, the test is to remain open to the possibility that Donald Rumsfeld may indeed have a soul.) We no longer feel obliged to view any new evidence that might – god forbid – compel us to change our minds.

The related virtue isn't complete neutrality or ambiguity, but a humility that allows us to hold a position and risk learning otherwise. And sadly, humility is a virtue in short supply.

I would add to my list of sins particularly dangerous in the world we inhabit, the deadening curse of apathy. If sin is about separation and estrangement – apathy is a textbook case. Apathy is a form of unaccountability, or irresponsibility. Because if we find a way not to care, to distance ourselves from the blights that diminish the shared conditions of our being – be it urban violence, or environmental degradation, or economic injustice – then we will never be capable of the impulse to bring about healing and change. We would like to be innocent bystanders, but in the case of apathy, that's an oxymoron. We are, none of us, innocent. Like the bumper stickers I saw yesterday morning as I followed Amanda Brown's car up Meadowbrook Drive – ***“If you're not outraged, You're not paying attention.”***

I've saved the worst for last ... or at least the worst from my own experience of knowing estrangement from all that I value in my life, and that is despair. I distinguish this from depression, which I am also acquainted with. Despair is a spiritual malady, which can mingle with depression, but which cannot be mediated away. Despair is a place. We even speak of it as such – saying someone is “in despair.” When we go there – for all the obvious reasons we're given to despair in life – we become incapacitated by our own sense of resignation and grief.

It is, for me, the worst sin on my list, because it is a place without hope, without joy, without insight, without companionship, without power. It doesn't get much worse than despair. And anyone paying attention to the world these days is a candidate for despair. Iraq. The California recall. The state of the city schools. The drug culture. Terrorism. The Patriot Act. Fill in the blank. We are required to be what Cornel West has called “Prisoners of Hope” – captive of an illogical and irrepressible force of good...Always capable of trust, or wisdom, of laughter, and of justice.

In times like these, sometimes hope is all we have, and most of the time,  
it is blessedly enough. Perhaps it's always been that way...

The realities of life always have included the experiences of estrangement and separation. It is a part of how the world is made. It may be the condition to which all the early prophets and mystics were trying to name.

That living well – that living virtuously is a life-long work of art,  
marked by trial and error the need for forgiveness,  
and continual rededication to the quest to lie in harmony with the ebb and flow of life.  
It doesn't matter whether there are five, or seven, or seventy deadly sins. The crucial thing is  
to discover the trap doors that swallow us whole and impoverish our being, and the escape  
hatches that give us passage to the world in which we might live well, love fully, and to know  
that we are here and home and whole.

Happy campers,  
even as prisoner of hope.