

# WORSHIP SERVICE – AUGUST 23, 2020

## MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

### REFLECTION ON GLUTTONY – PASTOR CALEB

Ecclesiastes 6:1-9

Today's words are gluttony and temperance. Neither are words we normally use in every day life. I hope that I can convey what this is about during these reflections. As we have done in previous weeks, we'll address a sin that represents a distortion of love, then try out a spiritual practice to reorient us toward God's love, before finally understanding a virtue that exemplifies the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

You probably associate gluttony with overeating. Though we live in a culture that encourages overindulgence, we also ironically live in a culture that idolizes perfect bodies and piles shame on those who don't have perfect bodies.

When I was growing up, I was taught that you eat all the food on your plate and don't waste. Usually that wasn't a problem, except for the occasional church potluck where my friends and I would skip to the front of the line and sample something of everything. It soon became clear there'd be no way to get it all down!

In my mind gluttony is about more than just food. It is about our tendency to over-consume. All of the sins we talk about in this series are encouraged by our culture, and this one especially.

If greed is a desire to accumulate more and more because of a fear of not having enough or not being enough, then gluttony is the excessive consumption of food, things, pleasure, and experiences because we fear being left unhappy and empty.

I'll bring our attention to two verses in the passage from Ecclesiastes that was read.

Verse 2: "God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead." And verse 7: "Everyone's toil is for their mouth, yet their appetite is never satisfied."

The writer is talking about the fact that some people have everything, but yet seem unable to enjoy that fact. Ultimately everyone dies and loses whatever we had during this life, which makes the pursuit of things meaningless. Yet we all still work and work to acquire things, while our appetite is never satisfied.

There isn't time to say much about the overall message of the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer is described as a teacher – one who assembles people to hear words of wisdom. Yet the wisdom of the book seems shockingly depressing. Life and the things we pursue in our lives are meaningless, the Teacher claims.

One commentator puts it this way: "We need to hear the author of Ecclesiastes out. Time and time again, one is driven to admit the truth of what Ecclesiastes has to say, even though one might not want to hear it."

It would be fascinating, and probably depressing to study the book as a whole. The Bible needs the Teacher's harsh "take" on things to illuminate the paradox that we are called to be faithful and do the right thing, even though we can never really figure life out.

For me, these select verses lead me to this insight: our over-consumption, our inability to be satisfied comes from the fact that we are unable to enjoy God's gifts that are present to us in life.

There is nothing wrong with food or material things that we can enjoy; the sin or disorientation of the love that God intends for us to live out for God and one another occurs as we fail to receive the pleasures of life as gifts from God.

Gluttony in this sense means that God's gifts just aren't good enough for me. I've got to keep working for more. I fool myself into thinking that by working and toiling and striving, I can somehow make myself happier, when life itself is a gift of God, and there isn't true and lasting satisfaction that doesn't rest on the unearned grace of God.

Overconsumption is wrong, in part, because we live in a world where our actions affect others. I don't want to over-consume if it means there won't be enough for someone else.

We live in a strange world where much of humanity works in semi-slavery conditions to produce so that those with money can consume, whether it's undocumented fruit pickers, or low-wage workers in factories overseas.

Our culture assumes we need to produce, produce, produce so that we can consume. We assume a growing Gross Domestic Product is always a good thing.

Glen Stassen puts it this way: *"No other animal has attacked the earth as humans are now doing. No other humans in all of human history have destroyed earth as our energy-driven machines are now doing. Something entirely unprecedented is happening in recent years, and we are letting it happen as if it were all natural..."*

Over-consumption is both a cultural and an individual problem. As we come to realize our own captivity, we feel shame, whether it is in specifically addictive behaviors or in our participation in our culture's addictions. Yet shame keeps us in a vicious cycle, and never works as a motivator to do something different. We always have to have as our starting point resting in our deep worthiness simply because God loves us apart from what we do or don't do.

How do we begin to really live in a way that finds freedom from this trap of chasing after things, experiences, and pleasures? We'll get to that.

## PRACTICE OF LECTIO

Our next part of the service is engaging a spiritual practice that allows us to reorient ourselves to God's love.

*Lectio divina* (divine reading) is a very different way of reading scripture than "Bible study." The idea is less to engage the head, and more to engage the heart. Though historical study of the Bible is important, the words of scripture are living words, and they belong to us as believers to use as aids for prayer. For good Bible study, reading more is often better, but in a *lectio divina* practice, less is more. Fewer verses is better. We aim to be sensitive to the Spirit -- what is the Spirit saying through these words?

*"Hear this as a love letter from God to you"*

(Reading of Isaiah 43:1-3a, 5a)

*Which word or phrase stands out to you? Meditate on that word. (Period of silence)*

*After second reading: Which word or phrase stood out to you this time? The same one or a different one? What is the Spirit saying to you? (Period of silence)*

*I will read it a third time. Listen for confirmation of what the Spirit is saying.*

*After third reading: Identify the invitation, nudge, or call you will take from this reading, and bring that to mind whenever you are able for the rest of this day.*

## TEMPERANCE

Galatians 5:13-26

I chose this reading from Galatians, because it parallels what we are trying to do in this whole series.

This passage from Galatians presents us a list of both sins as well as virtues that are fruit of the Spirit. The words of the lists don't necessarily match up with the seven deadly sins or seven virtues of this series, but there certainly is overlap. Neither set of lists encompasses all forms of sin or qualities of life in God's kingdom.

Ancient writers like Paul often listed out vices that everyone knew were bad, but yet were part of the human predicament. Of these, Galatians 5:21 mentions "drunkenness" and "carousing" which are aspects of gluttony.

Verses 22 and 23 about the fruit of the Spirit are the best known. There are nine virtues named, and if you learned them in the NIV, like me, there is a useful mnemonic to remember them: the first three are one syllable – love, joy, peace – then two syllables – patience, kindness, goodness – and then three syllables – faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Since there are nine virtues, we often hear them called the fruits of the Spirit, but it's not a plural, but a singular. It's just like we don't talk about cutting wheats or hays. That's because the Spirit produces one kind of fruit that includes all of these aspects as ingredients. You don't get to pick and choose – well, the Spirit produces the fruit of kindness in me but not peace or self-control. It's a package deal! If you are connected to the root such that the Spirit produces fruit, the fruit includes all of these.

The last one on the list: "self-control" is our word. In the King James Bible, it is translated as "temperance," a less used word. I don't normally give the word in Greek, but I will this time: it's *enkrateia*. If you hear the "crat" in the middle of the word, it's the same root that shows up in words such as demo-crat, techno-crat, auto-crat, aristo-crat, and so forth.

It's about self-master or self-rule. It's a word that shows up when talking about athletes who do disciplined training in order to compete well.

When I was a high school and college runner, I had to go through some pretty tough workouts that I'd never choose to do for fun, without the powerful nudge from a coach and a team. In high school we were forbidden from drinking pop, and ever since I've never felt I needed pop.

As an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, self-control is not perfection or complete control of our thoughts and feelings, but being empowered to choose our actions and commitments with intention, even when it involves some pain.

Now, as always, there's a bigger story to Paul's words here, rather than taking them by themselves.

The bigger story was that Paul was trying to correct a spirit of division and bitter competition among the church assembled in Galatia. This is why Paul finishes the whole section saying: *"Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another."*

And if we go back to the beginning of the passage, Paul says in verse 13: *"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."*

So, this is more than a problem of individuals needing self-improvement from the "works of the flesh" to the "fruit of the Spirit." It's about the well-being of the community as a whole that Paul is calling to reflect the new world made possible through God's action in Jesus.

I have a commentary in Spanish written by Mennonite Brethren professor Mark Baker. Baker emphasizes that both the vices listed and the fruit of the Spirit are about life in community. This isn't so much about the moral perfection of the individual believer as it is about the health of the community as a whole.

The main controversy that was dividing the Galatians is whether everyone, including those of non-Jewish background, needed to undergo Jewish rituals like "circumcision" in order to be "in."

Paul counters that by telling the Galatians that they belong to God's people only because of God's action through Jesus that opens up a new way of life through the Holy Spirit. We don't practice love, joy, peace, etc. by pulling ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps. The Spirit produces fruit in us organically as we are connected to the root that is Jesus.

Mark Baker writes: "Temperance is born out of our being rooted in a different narrative, a perspective given and created by God. What are the things that we can do as a congregation to strengthen an alternative perspective to the perspective of our society so full of excess? What can you do as an individual to be more rooted in an alternative perspective?"

So what are some practices that we can engage in to help us see ourselves in this different narrative, this "alternative perspective to the perspective of our society so full of excess"?

I'll point out a couple. An obvious one that we may need special attention in the midst of a pandemic is refocusing our connection to the faith community, which in our case is Alexanderwohl. While we are subjected to our culture's messages all the time during the week, it is here that we can remember a different story.

We can't escape the urge to over-consume or a variety of other temptations without being continually re-oriented toward God's love. We need each other. Setting aside the time to intentionally engage ways of worshipping with and connecting with the church community is essential. Even if your circumstances are particularly limiting right now, the human connections you do have provide community on a small scale where you can practice the fruit of the Spirit.

Secondly, you may already have some form of prayer or spiritual practice in your daily life. I was so struck by a man dying of cancer that I had multiple visits with while interning as a hospital chaplain. He talked about embracing simple joys. This was specifically in reference to the hospital orange juice that he could order for breakfast.

Most of us wouldn't love hospital food and would take something like that for granted. In the midst of terrible pain and loss – this man didn't need the reflections of Ecclesiastes to be looking at death in the face – he was granted enjoyment of a simple glass of orange juice.

A simple practice any of us can weave into ordinary life is to say a sentence prayer receiving and enjoying the small gifts and pleasures of daily life. Truly appreciating them in their simplicity and small quantities counters the urge to over-consume for diminishing returns of satisfaction.

A final practice I'll mention is a social practice that is difficult. My suggestion is for us to find ways where we are able to purchase products – whether food or material goods – where we can know that everyone who produced it was paid a living way. Fair trade or buying local or patronizing local businesses are a few ways to do that.

It will mean spending more, but the act of spending more can itself teach greater appreciation for the gifts God has placed in our lives. I know this is something my family could afford to do more.

So, to quickly review, I've mentioned our connection to church community, simple prayers to receive our daily gifts, and seeking to make purchases that reflect our ethics as best we are able.

May God help us to enjoy the simple things and find an imagination to comprehend God's great love-drama that we find in Jesus.