

WHEN FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTENTMENT

Sermon, August 29, 2010

Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Many of you may know the catechetical category of the *Seven Deadly Sins*, also known as the Cardinal Sins. The listing varies slightly between sources, but the most commonly accepted seven are (1) Pride, (2) Envy, (3) Avarice (or greed), (4) Wrath, (5) Lust, (6) Gluttony, and (7) Sloth. This list of seven does not appear as such in the Bible; as best we can determine, the compilation seems to have originated around the fifth century, when monastic orders basically tried to address "What causes sin? What are the root causes, the root sources, in human nature that lead to destructive activity in and among human beings?" The premise was these seven basic sins were the wellsprings from which *all* sinful actions came. Around 600 A.D., Pope Gregory the Great formalized the list of seven as we know them today, and this listing gained a great deal of recognition during the Middle Ages. For example, I read that in the early fourteenth century the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered every minister in the Church of England to preach on the Seven Deadly Sins a minimum of four times a year! (*Now, this will be the second time I've preached on the seven deadly sins in fourteen years; I've some catching up to do!*) The Seven Deadly Sins show up in medieval literature, most notably Dante's *Inferno* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. As a teaching tool, some early catechisms associated each deadly sin with a familiar animal. Again, lists vary, but Pride was usually associated with the Peacock. Envy, interestingly, was associated with the Dog (*Perhaps this is the origin of the envious saying, "You lucky dog." You may remember the line from Julius Caesar, "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!" Well, when the dogs of envy are released, the havoc is comparable!*) Wrath was associated with the Wolf; Sloth, the Donkey; Avarice, the Fox (*long before the house of greed known as the Foxwoods Casino was built*); Gluttony, the Pig; and Lust is associated with the old Goat.

This animal association not only served as a teaching tool, but as a reminder of the animal nature of sin, and that humans made in God's image should strive to rise above our animal natures. I'm reminded of what I think is my all time favorite Ann Landers letter: Seems this man was carrying on simultaneous affairs with three different women over a period of months, and he wrote to the advice columnist: "*Until a few days ago, none of them knew the others existed and things were going fine. By chance two of them met each other, compared notes and found me out. Now they are furious with me. What am I going to do? Signed, Trapped.*" Ann Landers responded: "*Dear Trapped: One major thing separating the human race from animals is a God-given sense of morality. Since you obviously don't have that, I suggest you consult a veterinarian. Signed, Ann.*"

It is good to be aware of the deadly sins, in order to avoid them. However, in doing so we can run the danger of getting our focus in the wrong place ... we can get so focused on avoiding bad behavior and its consequences that we start to forget about what is right and good in the first place. We try to run from the bad, but we run in confusion because we don't know where to go, or we have forgotten which direction to run, and sometimes (quite often, in fact) we just run into more difficulty. Too many people don't know where the good and right paths are anymore, and we certainly hear less and less about the good and the right and the noble in our culture today! We can be like the panicked squirrel in the middle of the road ... scurrying in terror from those nasty automobiles bearing down on him; but in his panic and terror he loses his way ... he has forgotten where to run, and often just runs into more trouble! Have you ever felt like that? Everything's coming at you at once, you're trying to avoid all the bad things "out there" and you just lose sight of the way to go. And we don't remember which way to "run."

There is a way marked for us to run. As we read two weeks ago the author of Hebrews told us, "*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" He wants to tell his readers which way to run, how to run. He told us to "*fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.*" And now he ends his letter with what our pew Bibles has subtitled "Concluding Exhortations." Rather than warning of seven deadly sins or traps to avoid, he exhorts us with seven lively exhortations, seven steps for keeping and running on the right track. Follow these and not only will you be successful as a follower of Jesus, but you will be successful as a human being ... which will make you a better parent, spouse, neighbor, employee or employer.

These seven positive exhortations for the church and for the individuals in the church: 1. Keep on loving each other, 2. Extend hospitality, 3. Remember those in prison, 4. Honor marriage, 5. Keep trusting God, not money, 6. Imitate the faith modeled by your leaders and finally, 7. Keep offering to God a sacrifice of praise. These exhortations may appear to so familiar, to the point of being almost mundane. Love each other, show hospitality, remember prisoners, honor marriage, don't love money, respect your leaders, praise God. Yeah, yeah we know these things, we're familiar with them, we've heard these words before. But have we? It's said that familiarity breeds contempt, and sometimes we who've been in the church a long time hear religious sounding exhortations like these so frequently we just stop paying attention, thus treating them with a practical contempt and/or disdain. "Yeah, sure, I've heard these things before, but we have to live in the 21st century, in the real world. Nobody practices these things anymore." I believe with all my heart, though, that if we become familiar with *practicing* these exhortations, as we continually try to honor them, that kind of familiarity will breed in us not a contempt but a contentment, a happiness, a security that will enable us to keep our running our race with confidence and grace.

These 7 mandates seem so ordinary, so familiar, but let's hear them with fresh ears, read them with fresh eyes. Hebrews 13:1-3 *"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."* 3 things:

1. Keep on loving each other. Love is primarily a verb, not a noun; it is primarily something you do, not primarily something you feel. Be loving toward people you go to church with, people you live with, people you work with ... even when they're too liberal, or too conservative, or too obstinate, or too small minded, or too stingy, or too thick, or too prickly, or too out to lunch (*like people are in some other churches, but not here, of course*). And for that matter, be loving toward people you don't even know. Act lovingly toward people you normally wouldn't even associate with ... which brings us to the next exhortation:

2. Extend hospitality. *"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."* Do we offer hospitality? Not just with our coffee in the fellowship hall after the service ... although we do offer that! Do we have an open-door policy in our church and in our homes to welcome friends AND strangers? Do we have a warm receptiveness to all God brings our way wherever we go? You never know ... in your gracious hospitality, you may be receiving an angel in disguise, and you just never know how that angel might bless you!

3. Remember those in prison: *"Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."* This is not a reference just to remembering those behind iron bars in a literal brick and mortar jail, as this church does so well with mission projects like Angel Tree, but it is also an exhortation to be mindful of those stuck in prisons of the soul and body ... trapped behind the bars of addictions, or illnesses, or emotional handicaps, or physical limitations. Anything that locks people up, immobilizing them, keeping them from living freely, is a jail. We are to remember them as if we were their fellow "prisoners," visit them, pray for them, be compassionate toward them as we would want people to do for us if we ourselves were in similar situations.

4. Honor Marriage. Verse 4, *"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."* How many lives have been shattered by failure to follow this one simple exhortation? Do we honor and protect and uphold the institution of marriage? Do we honor our own marriage(s)? Do we honor and protect and uphold the marriages of others, even if we have been unsuccessful in ours? Do we uphold the institution with the flying buttresses of the church's prayers, teachings and encouragement? Or, do we undermine the institution by such things as our continual denominational waffling on issues of human sexuality, or our making light of and/or scoffing at this God-ordained institution? Are we preparing our young people, modeling for them, the sanctity of marriage, the only God-ordained relationship with which sexual activity is appropriate? God honors marriage, and so should we. As I pronounce at every wedding, "God has ordained and sanctified marriage for the welfare and happiness of all people." A perennial theological question I often put to confirmation classes is this: Does God command things because they are right, or are those things right because God commands them? While the latter has merit, I've always believed and practiced the former, and have really staked my life on it ... God commands things precisely because they are right and good. He's the Creator, the Architect. He knows how things are supposed to work, and He wants the best for us. So, *trust* Him, which brings us to:

5. Keep on trusting in God. Verse 5, *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.'"* Our currency reminds us with the motto emblazoned on every coin, "In God We Trust." It's almost as if every nickel, dime, and quarter jangles in our pockets with a chorus singing, "Don't trust us, trust God!" Do we trust God? Do we love and honor Him more than the material "stuff" we have amassed or would like to amass, especially when the dogs of envy are unleashed? As long as we believe and trust in God, we can cope and we can keep running the race even if we lose everything else. In the little time remaining, quickly review the final two:

6. Imitate the faith modeled by your leaders. Verse 8 - *"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."* This isn't necessarily just a reference to the church leaders, it also includes remembering all the storied leaders of our faith, as highlighted in chapter 11, all those who have earned the right to be seen and respected as leaders by their faithful examples and their faithful words. Remember, call to mind, those who are leaders by example and word, and *consider the outcome of their way of life* ... Take a look at their lives, see the good things in their lives and in the lives of those around them which have resulted from their faithful integrity, and imitate that faithfulness! And if these six are faithfully practiced, number seven comes very easily ...

7. Verse 15: Continue to offer God a sacrifice of praise -- the fruit of lips that praise His name. Basically, this means we are to verbally give credit and thanks where credit and thanks is due. God is pleased when we worship him, when we pray to Him, when we publicly acknowledge him ... by the fruit of lips that praise His name, and by our intentionally doing good and sharing with others in His name.

Let us practice these seven exhortations, let us become familiar with them by our obedience to them, and I guarantee that familiarity will breed much contentment in our lives.