

II Kings 5: 1-18

Seven Deadly Sins: Pride

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month and next our theme for worship will be Good and Evil. We will ask the question each week- “How good do you have to be?” I believe that most of us try hard to be good.

When my son Jonathan was growing up I watched how hard he tried to be good. He has always been so disciplined and kind and thoughtful. Then in the sixth grade he tried out for a children’s theatre program, and he got in and was cast as a bad guy. He was one of a group of villains. The villains were lovable as they tried to be evil. It was a fun show to watch because the boys in this group of villains were silly, and were obviously enjoying their evil personas. For the first time I saw another side of Jon. He enjoyed being bad, and I suspect it was because he was always trying so hard to be good, every day. In this assignment someone was asking him to be BAD.

Most of us are who try so hard to be good need a break. We need a chance to be bad. Some of us who pride ourselves on being virtuous all the time are tempted by the lure of lowering our standards. We are curious about what it might feel like to be less virtuous. But often we go along trying to be good when things get away from us. Sometimes a detour in life beckons and it turns out to be more dangerous than we imagined. Sometimes we fall in with people we trusted only to discover that they are not the best influence on us, and we have trouble saying “no”. Maybe we pursue a goal so passionately that we begin to tell ourselves the ends justify the means. Or we want to be perfect and when that is impossible, we do things we are not proud of, in order to prevail.

In our series of sermons each week as we talk about good and evil we will examine a Bible story and look at one of the Seven Deadly Sins and consider the topic of good and evil through the lens of one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

I want to start this sermon series by saying that though we are talking about sin you will not hear from this pulpit that we believe in original sin. In this church we put much more emphasis on original promise evident in creation, than the sinfulness of people. When God created the world and all of us, God declared it good. That is the first word of life which undergirds everything else. A lot of churches today build their whole theology around the notion that sin is so woven into the fabric of life; that we all have to struggle against the fundamental urge to go astray. I don't believe that. I believe that the Bible says first and foremost that human beings are good. That does not mean that we all make the best choices, or that we all act responsibly. That does not mean that we could not improve but it does change the human moral equation significantly if we don't believe that it is always an uphill struggle to be good because the deck is always stacked against us.

The Seven Deadly sins are pride sloth wrath, greed, lust, envy and gluttony. Today we will be talking about pride. What can we learn about pride for our lives today?

In the first place, human beings are a mix of good and evil. In 800 BC, Aram was the dominant kingdom in the region. Aram included Syria, Jordan and Western Iraq and it dominated the whole region for three hundred years. No country maintains that kind of power in the Middle east without a powerful army. Naaman was their commander in chief; he answered directly to the king. In a position like that, he would have had to be strong physically, and tough mentally. Shouldering such great responsibility, he must have been disciplined, and competitive. He must have tested himself and proved himself again and again. If he was able to lead such an army he must have been courageous and charismatic, too.

But Naaman was not perfect either. The Bible describes Naaman as someone who, for all his prowess, was also tormented by terrible skin disease; he had leprosy. Now in the history of medicine it is not entirely clear if all the cases of leprosy correspond exactly to what we currently think of as leprosy but Naaman had a very obvious flaw, and everyone knew he struggled with his health; everyone could see it. He is this wonderfully powerful man who commands the respect of everyone in his world. But for whatever reason he is an obvious mix of good and evil. As the story unfolds we also see that he is insecure and petty. He commands the respect of the whole Middle East but he hears about a possible healing from his wife's maid. A spoil of war, herself, she takes compassion on him and recommended a healer of local fame in Israel, one of the lands that Naaman has raided many times. It is a region he has a certain disdain for, so he approaches the healing with haughty attitude. "I may need this healing, but I am also prepared to make Israel feel like I can demand it of them." So he gets the king to send along a fortune in gold and money. The Syrian king sends a letter to the king of Israel which makes the Israelite ruler suspect that Syria is picking a fight to start more warfare. In the end Naaman shows up at Elisha's home and the prophet does not bother to come out to greet him, but sends a servant to tell Naaman that he should bathe in a small river in Israel and he will be well. Naaman is insulted by this news and walks away from his cure, until the servants talk common sense.

In this story the servants are all pretty wise. The powerful people look pretty foolish. We humans are all a mix of good and evil.

Secondly, pride is not evil. For centuries the Christian Church has preached that pride is the worst sin. It is always listed as the first of the seven deadly sins. Frankly I don't believe that pride is the same for everyone, and lots of people need more self-esteem, and genuine pride, not less. Last night if you watched the U.S. figure Skating Championships on television you might have been like

me and realized that this is a hard sport to watch. It is nerve-wracking to see young men and women trying to nail the triple jumps that make you hold your breath. Often the ones who pull it off are the competitors who have incredible self-confidence, or some experience to have found a certain level of pride. Watching people perform their routines on a razor's edge, quite literally, it seems to me skater's without enough pride struggle more. You need self-confidence to do your best in that sport.

How many of us have known people in the LGBT community who have struggled because their family or community told them that they were worthless, and the best thing that ever happened to them was to march in a parade in Boston or somewhere else? Those events are called Pride events because they communicate to people that they have inherent worth. For this community pride is life-giving.

How many of you have known people who keep getting overlooked for a promotion and you wonder if they are not living up to their potential because they are too humble. Or maybe you know someone in a relationship where they don't feel affirmed or valued, and pride is not the enemy for them. It is pride you want to instill in your children because otherwise they will be an easy target for bullies. We all know people who are deflecting praise. Even when they do a great job, they are never satisfied, or they never own their success. I cannot believe that this is even honest. Pride is not bad, but we need balance.

Finally, beware of unexamined pride. For a man who had everything, Naaman had to cover his weakness. So, he was not confident enough to be vulnerable. He was so proud of his station in life that he was disdainful of others. His shame at having leprosy had not made him humble, but haughty. For all his power he was an insecure man. He prided himself on his strength and he was dismissive of his servants, of Israel, and anything that appeared to be weak. He had so little understanding of his own pride that he would have walked away from the healing of his life because

he was so dismissive of people beneath him. As this story illustrates so beautifully, it is easy to be blind to your pride, and to miss the gifts that you have been hoping and praying for, the gifts God is trying to give to you.

This week we learned that last fall in New Jersey top staffers in the governor's office took offence at some political snub and decided to punish a local politician in Fort Lee, New Jersey. So they created a traffic problem one morning which affected thousands of people who commute to work using the George Washington Bridge. The question everyone is asking is how much Governor Christie knew of this pettiness which stranded two ambulances and inconvenienced many others. Whatever the governor knew, or did not know, his team looks arrogant and vindictive. Even if you overlook the political ramifications of this debacle, it tells us all a lot about how easy it can be to be blind to our own pride and pettiness. It is sad to see one of the most powerful governors in the country have his administration exposed for this foolishness and people who have so much to feel confident about, revealed as so insecure.

While I don't believe in original sin, I believe it is easy to be blind. We compensate. We get lucky and we tell ourselves we earned all our fortune. We feel guilty about what we have and we tell ourselves others who have less are lazy or stupid. We justify our lives and we look down on others. We feel insecure and we fail to do the hard work that builds real confidence. Pride is not all bad, but it can do damage. It can be our friend if it makes us whole. But it can also prove our undoing, if we let it rule us, instead of the other way around.

In 1863 President Lincoln wrote: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have grown in wealth and prosperity. We have forgotten the gracious hand that preserved us...intoxicated with our success we have become too self-sufficient too proud to pray to the God who made us."

*(On the next hymn feel free to think about the small rock you received when worship began. You are invited to think about how this pebble may symbolize something you would like to relinquish, or leave here in God's care and keeping.)*