

Luke 12: 22-21

**The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony**

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The Congregational Church of Needham

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At the beginning of the year, friends gave me a gift certificate to REI as a thank you for conducting their wedding on a very cold January morning at World's End in Hingham. This was very exciting because (wait for it): I love that store. It has everything that my little outdoor heart desires for biking, camping, kayaking, cool clothes and shoes. I planned my trip carefully because one needs a good chunk of time to roam the store.

The day came, I was very excited. With money in my pocket I combed through the store for about two hours, and left - **with nothing**. There was nothing that I needed. And there were few items that I wanted. And then I felt I little guilty spending the money all on me, so I dragged my spouse with me one day. And together we still had a hard time spending the money because nothing that we looked at we needed, and what we wanted we did not need or would spent money on.

In the end we spent some of the money on practical items like traveling books for our next summer adventure, inner tubes for our bikes, and a boat load of hiking socks.

Today, we are going to talk about gluttony - the last sin for us in our sermon series on Good and Evil based on the seven deadly sins. What has my little shopping excursion to do with gluttony? I'll come back to that a little later.

Today we are going to explore what gluttony is, how it manifests itself in our lives, and what we can do about it.

Of all the deadly sins, gluttony seems benign, harmless. I assume that the first association we make when we hear gluttony is food. The common definition of gluttony is to eat, gloriously, generously, wildly, to the point of being so stuffed that one simply cannot eat any more. Think – All-you-can-eat buffets. Supersize me fast food options all the time.

Gluttony is defined first and foremost as an over-indulgence on food and drink, and in its historical context it was considered an evil and destructive sin. This idea originated with Egyptian monks in the fourth century. They renounced earthly pleasure to get closer to God, and their greatest temptations were food and sex. Thus, gluttony and lust topped the monks' list of no-nos.

Pope Gregory in the seventh century took up that definition of gluttony and took it further from mere overeating to eating too early, too eagerly, too expensively and with too much or too little attention. Thus, he argued, it is wrong to think about food the minute you awake, to eat rapidly without saying grace or to fail to recognize God's hand in providing the sustenance.

It is sinful, then, to stuff yourself rather than savoring each bite, to spend so much on food that you go broke, or to be too picky about what you eat. The emphasis is on the little word: too, as in too much.

In our world today, I think that gluttony goes beyond just food and our relationship to it. It is the sin of greedy consumption, the ravenous yearning for more, more and more – not just for food, but for everything. And in that, gluttony is a symptom of other, greater failings – such as pride, vanity and selfishness.

How does gluttony – this ravenous yearning for more and more – manifests itself in our daily lives today? In surprisingly many ways – ways I had not thought about.

The first of course is food and our relationship to food: As a nation, we are obsessed about food. Eating too much is only a small part of exercising gluttony. Fixating on the three grapes and two curds of cottage cheese for lunch is a form of gluttony. Buying Lean Cuisines and obsessing about fat grams and calories is gluttony. Of course, we cannot be blind to the fact that obesity has ballooned to an epidemic in the U.S., food portions have expanded, plates have grown ever larger and daily caloric intake has skyrocketed. Americans wolf down 815 billion calories of food every day – roughly 200 billion more than needed and enough to feed 80 million people – and throw out 200,000 tons of edible food. (Taken from [www.mindfully.org/consumption-by-the-United-States](http://www.mindfully.org/consumption-by-the-United-States))

When obsessing about food is gluttony, then we also need to mention eating disorders. An overemphasis on thinness and body image in the media has led countless people, overwhelmingly young girls and women, to adopt very unhealthy eating habits. This is also a form of gluttony.

Now we have to admit that our relationship to food is very complicated today. It's very intimate. Technically food is just fuel for living. That's all. But it has become so much more to most of us: we use food for pleasure and comfort; we turn to food when we are sad, depressed, lonely or hurt; we use food to socialize, as reward, when we are bored; we use food as gifts, it can be a chore; we use food for health and medicine, and yes, many a time food becomes an obsession and/or addiction, and food can make us hate ourselves. Our relationship with food is complicated!

How about our gluttony (obsession, excess, ravenous yearning) when it comes to resources/lifestyle? Food is not the only thing that has been supersized. The average

American consumes as much energy as two Japanese, six Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis or 370 Ethiopians (same website).

We might think of gluttony as a personal issue, but in many ways it is as much a communal problem. We are trying to get something new, or build up our material possessions, but are never satisfied. Our modern lifestyle too often keeps us so caught up in accumulating more and working harder that we fail to understand the inequalities around the world. But this is also a problem in Second and Third Worlds and emerging economies, as all people seem to be striving to live as Americans do.

There are so many other ways gluttony is deeply ingrained. I have been watching the Olympics. I guess each country is going that route with the obsession with being first, or making history, or being unfairly treated. Every time I open my yahoo news or listen to the broadcasts, it's right there in your face. People are obsessed with finding that new thrill or spiritual experience that will lead them to enlightenment, hopping from faith to faith, from one self-help book to another. People are gluttonous when they can't get enough attention (or what they may think of as love) from family and friends. Parents are gluttonous when they demand too much from a child, requiring too much time or too many accomplishments from someone too small. Even pets get excessive attention at times, but they don't seem to mind.

Anything that has become of an obsessive nature and is running our lives falls under gluttony. Even worry and anxiety! Worry has an uncanny knack for holding people in its grip: worry has become so ingrained in people's personalities that once old worries are gone they are easily replaced with new ones. They've become dependent on worry as a lens through which to view life, and they've forgotten any other way to live. Is there reason to be worried today? Most people would say there is. The environment, the economy, threats of terrorism, widespread job layoffs, and political tensions all around the world – all these make for uncertain times. Economic stress is taking its toll on

Americans' emotional and physical health. Surveys show that more than half of Americans report irritability, anger, fatigue, or sleeplessness. Almost half say they self-medicate by overeating or indulging in unhealthy foods. Money and the economy topped the list of stressors for at least 80 percent of those surveyed. Finances now overshadow the more typical daily stressors of work and relationships.

And here comes Jesus telling us not to worry, not to buy the conventional wisdom, not to get caught up into our wants and drives and obsessions but to lay our focus on more spiritual things like the kingdom which in turn would offer us a life in freedom for our soul and peace for our minds.

Jesus reminds us that life is more than food and the body is more than clothes (or stuff); not worth our time to worry about. He also reminds us that life is about people and about relationships and about God. To make our gluttonous pursuits the center of our existence is to completely miss the point. We are not to focus on what is temporal but on what is eternal. We are to focus about seeking God's kingdom – and that revolves around loving God and loving people.

The thing is that when we are so caught up in the pursuit of satiating our appetites, we miss noticing who is **not** sitting at the table.

When we are so obsessed with owning the newest stuff, we might neglect the impact that the stuff that is left behind has on the environment.

When we cannot see the little joys in life because our hearts and minds are filled with worry and anxiety, we forget that we actually have a loving and kind God who is there for us – present and easily accessible – through prayer each and every moment.

I don't think and say that the solution to gluttony is to go the opposite direction and completely neglect our physical needs, get rid of our stuff, and move into the monastery.

We could practice a little fasting, a spiritual discipline Christians have practiced for ages, from the activities we are gluttonous about. But I don't want anyone to develop an unhealthy martyrdom complex in which we give ourselves points according to how we work for others and how much we have sacrificed our own needs.

What if we considered being more mindful about everything we do - mindful of God, of others, of our community? What if we would treat everything we do and have with reverence and consider it sacred?

What if eating was a sacred activity? Not just saying grace before we dig in but to recognize that what is on our plate is there to nourish us (and not just fill us) so we can do the work God calls us to do? And what about the company we keep around the table? Maybe thinking that way would encourage us to reach out to our lonely neighbor or the new family that just moved in next door to invite them to our tables. We'll have to eat anyway. But how we do it can take on a whole different meaning.

What if each shopping trip was a sacred activity? Would it change what is in our baskets? Maybe by making it a sacred activity we actually would take fewer trips which would give us more time to spend with family and friends. Who knows?

What if we were to make our worrying a sacred activity and called prayer? When we pray honestly and mindfully, we allow God to be part of our journey who will help carry our burdens. And sometimes we just have to hand things over to God.

The seven deadly sins - pride, anger, sloth, greed, envy, lust, and gluttony - will always be part of our humanity, will always tempt us. But if we remember whose we are, children of God, and if we keep close to community reminding each other that we take this journey of life and faith together, we have a good chance of keeping them at a safe distance.

Coming back to the beginning: our shopping trip to REI - I think was such a dismal experience because we mindfully realized that there was nothing we needed, because all that we really needed, we already had been given by a loving God. Amen.