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“Deadly Sins: Pride”

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Luke 4: 1-13

We begin our journey through Lent, this season of reflection and introspection, by examining some of the Deadly Sins which tempt and snare all of us. Today we are dealing with the biggest of them all-- Pride. In nearly every single listing of the deadliest sins known to humankind, pride is at the very top of the list. In *The Canterbury Tales* we are told that the root of all deadly sins is: “Pride the general root of all harms.” Pope Gregory called it “The mother and queen of all vices, the trunk of the tree from which others branch.” Pride is defined as “inordinate self-esteem,” “unreasonable conceit,” “an overweening opinion of one’s own abilities.” Pride’s synonyms are not very attractive either—vanity, conceit, arrogance, egotism, self-glorification, boastfulness, a stuck-up snob.” Alexander Pope wrote that “Pride is the never failing vice of fools.”

It’s really too bad because pride feels good. What is wrong with feeling good about yourself, and being proud of your talents and accomplishments? If you are created in God’s perfect image, then shouldn’t you be proud of yourself? And what is wrong with being proud of your spouse, children or grandchildren? Or to take pride in your work, or pride in your country or your church? Why is pride such a big deal?

Well, with every deadly sin, there is a corresponding positive component. Gluttony starts with eating, and eating is a good thing. But when we no longer eat to live, but live to eat, it becomes a problem. When it comes to pride, there is definitely such a thing as good, healthy pride. We read in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth: “I often boast about you, I take great pride in you.”

Pride is natural and it can be good. You should be proud of yourself for your God given gifts—for the ways your life has helped and blessed other people and the things you have accomplished. You should be proud of your kids when they do something well, get good grades, win games or exhibit the sort of musical talent that the kids in this church do. You should be proud of your kids when they do not give up and exhibit generosity, forgiveness, or compassion. We should all be proud of our country for the many things we as a nation do to make the world a better place. And we should be proud of our church, because we are doing many things to bless this world. Right now several of our members are in El Paso, Texas working at the Lydia Patterson Institute, which provides a bi-lingual, cross cultural education to a primarily Hispanic population. Be proud that you get to be the heart and hands of Jesus in the world, without ever leaving home. Be proud that last year our church gave nearly \$80,000 to Missions locally, nationally and

globally. We might exceed that this year with your generous gifts to relief efforts in Haiti. Our Rocky Mountain Conference has given \$250,000 to Haiti, and sent 13,000 Health Kits. The United Methodist Church itself has sent a total of \$11 million to Haiti and 350,000 Health Kits. Pride can be a very good thing, especially if it inspires us to action on behalf of others.

The problem is when pride is **not** counterbalanced with humility. For instance, if I said to you: “A highlight of my career was being featured with my mother in Life Magazine.” I would share that with you because I am honestly proud and thankful to have had that experience with my mother before her death. But if instead I said this to you, “I was just wondering, have YOU ever been featured with a full page photograph in a national magazine like I have?” I would be putting you down to lift myself up. If you have a bumper sticker on your car that says “My child is a Honor Roll student at...” that is just fine because you should be proud and you are blessing your child. But if that bumper sticker is there so that you can make sure other parents know that your child is superior to their child that is a problem.

So often sinful pride is all about motive, and whether or not you are lifting yourself up in order to put someone else down. We do this as individuals and as a nation. If a nation considers itself superior to all other nations, having the best of everything, then that nation will decline because every empire, kingdom and nation that has become too arrogant and full of itself, ultimately failed. So pride always needs to be counterbalanced with humility.

When a negative form of pride is mentioned in the Bible it is described by the Greek word “hubris” which means “to outshine” to be perceived as better than others. In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis called pride a spiritual cancer, but not for the reasons you might assume. Not because pride puffs you up and implies superiority, but because pride has the potential to devour relationships. It has a distancing effect upon others. Lewis says that pride is one of the worst of all of our temptations, because it blocks intimacy, prevents us from becoming truly close to other people. It sets you apart and keeps people from getting close. Not only because people aren’t going to want to be around you, but because when you are a proud person, usually you are also too proud to ask for help, too proud to admit you were wrong, too proud to tell someone how much you need them and love them. Pride has the potential to isolate us and separate us from the very people we need so much.

When I think of pride I am always reminded of the Disney movie *The Lion King* and the scene where Simba sings, *I Just Can’t Wait To Be King*. Simba

sings: *“I’m gonna be the main event, like no King was before, I’m brushing up on looking down, working on my roar. No one saying “Do this,” no one saying “Be there,” no one saying “Stop that,” no one saying “See Here.” I just can’t wait to be King. Free to run around all day, Free to do it ALL my way. Everybody look left, everybody look right, everywhere you look I’m standing in the spotlight. Oh I just can’t wait to be King.”* Of course Simba himself can demonstrate this sin of pride himself—let’s watch.

(Lion King Video clip)

Now Jesus had a chance to be a mighty King, and among his temptations by Satan in the wilderness, I would guess that the most seductive of all was the temptation of having all of the Kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. He could have been a world ruler, like no King ever before him, even the Greek or Roman Gods. It would have been so easy to give in to that kind of recognition and power. When the devil wants him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, he says, “You don’t live by bread alone.” When the devil offers him all the kingdoms of the world he says, “I will worship God alone and serve God alone.” When the devil asks him to jump off the Temple to prove he is the Son of God he says: “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” He does not give in to pride, when it was so very tempting. Instead he keeps his mind focused upon who he is and what God would have him do. He understands that feeding one’s ego never makes you a better person. It only gives you a bigger ego, and makes you want to prove yourself better than others again and again. He knows that earthly power would diminish the quality of his relationships and the lasting power of his message. He will draw far more people to him through gentleness, humility, meekness. And interestingly enough, he gains everything in the end, anyway. Jesus would eventually have all of the things he was initially offered by the devil. He would always have enough to eat; he would triumph over death, and become much greater than a King ruling all of the Kingdoms of the world. He would be remembered for centuries after his death, with more power over human hearts than the devil even dreamed of offering him. Funny how delaying gratification often ends up giving you more than you ever thought you wanted in the first place. Jesus demonstrates that resisting the temptation of pride and ego is not about will power, as much as trusting in a higher power.

I love Parker Palmer, a Christian writer and theologian. In his book *Let Your Life Speak* he tells of how he was invited to become a University President several years ago. He was so flattered and agonized over whether or not to take this job. Being a Quaker, he did what Quakers do; he gathered 12 of his friends to

help him gain clarity on this decision. One of his friends asked him this question: “Parker, why would you want to become the President of this University?” Palmer answered that question by listing all the reasons why he would NOT want to be the President of this University. His friend then said, “What a minute. I did not ask you why not, I asked why you **would** want to take this job.” Palmer said, “I know I’m going to get there, hang on.” And then he continued to enumerate the reasons why he would not enjoy that job. His friend finally says, “You are avoiding my question. Why do you **want** to be President of that institution?” Palmer finally answered that question. He writes: “This time when he asked the question I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed. An answer that came from the very bottom of my barrel, an answer that appalled even me. “Well”, I said, in the smallest voice I possess, “I guess what I would like most would be getting my picture in the paper with the word “President” under it.” Though my answer was laughable, and my mortal soul at stake, they did not laugh at all, but went into a long and serious silence, a silence during which I could only sweat and inwardly groan. Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up and cracked me open. “Parker,” he said, “Isn’t there an easier way to get your picture in the paper?” At that moment I realized this was **not** the right thing for me to do and I wanted it for all the wrong reasons. With relief I turned it down, realizing it would have been disastrous for me and for them.”

I appreciate his honesty, because there are times when we all make decisions based upon the impression it would give to others, the ego needs it would satisfy. It helps to know when we are acting out of foolish pride.

Now, perhaps you struggle most with pride when someone hurts your feelings. In marriage, friendship, or working relationships it is so easy for somebody else to say or do something which hurts your pride. And when that happens, you want to hurt the one who hurt you, to prove that you are right, or have the last word. Or sometimes our pride is wounded when we are told no, we do not get our way, and become infuriated. It happens in so many different ways that it is hard to identify.

Jesus tells a powerful story about two men who go to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee is wise and accomplished, and he launches into a proud prayer at the expense of others. He is lifting himself up by putting others down. He says, “Thank you God that I am not like these other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or like this tax man here. I fast and tithe on all of my income. Aren’t I wonderful? Don’t you just love me, God? I love me too.”

He is starkly contrasted with a tax collector, standing far away and humbled to the depths of his being. This man really doesn't care about anyone else; he only knows how much he needs help. He cannot even look up to God, but beats his breast and says, "God, please have mercy upon me, a sinner." The Pharisee cannot be helped, because he doesn't believe he needs help. But the tax collector is broken, an empty vessel, ready to receive God's redeeming love. His lack of pride allows him to receive the mercy and forgiveness God wants to give him. Every time I read that story I identify with both of these men. I can be so much like that Pharisee, thinking to myself, "Well, I may be bad off, but at least I am not like that person!" Comparisons are never helpful, and this story illustrates that the worst sort of pride is spiritual pride. The tax collector teaches us that it is best to focus only upon ourselves, to pray: "God, please have mercy upon me, a sinner." We all need God so much, and have no right to judge or condemn anyone else.

I struggle with pride on many levels. I have been far too concerned about what other people think of me and my family. I have been completely immovable in some of my opinions and beliefs, from politics to my faith. I have been stubborn when I had to get my own way, indignant when I did not get my way, and I have gotten my feelings hurt too easily and been slow to forgive, all of which point to foolish pride.

The Bible tells us: "God humbles the proud, and gives grace to the humble." I have learned that sooner or later you either learn to humble yourself or God humbles you. And usually, it is more painful when God humbles you. Better to let go of that pride which is such a barrier to intimacy and spiritual growth. And the way to do that is by staying close to God and serving others.

The season of Lent beckons to us to let go of pretenses and remember who we are. Last Wednesday night about 65 of us gathered in Great Hall amid soft candlelight. We sang, prayed, and visited various stations and then received the mark of ashes. We were reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Lent, more than any other season is a humbling time, a wilderness time, symbolized by the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness. Lent is about admitting that we need help, that we cannot get through this life on our own. It is a reminder that we are not the center of the universe, and our opinions, beliefs, ideas, or lifestyles are not the least bit superior to anyone else's. We are dust and to dust we shall all return.

Of course, we will wrestle with pride in its deadly form our entire lives. But that is good, God wants us to wrestle with it—to at least be aware of it and try to grow in humility, grace and service to others.

Shortly before his execution in a German concentration camp in 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When you finally give up trying to make something important out of yourself, you throw yourself into the arms of God.” Throw yourself into the arms of God. There you will find all that you need.

Let us be in the attitude of prayer....

Forgive us, gracious God when we are proud, arrogant, full of ourselves. Forgive us for believing that we have the correct answers, that we are superior to others. Hear us now, as we silently confess the ways we have been too proud before you...

You, O God, know how insecure, needy and fragile we really are. Give us the gifts of honesty and humility. Help us to empty ourselves that we might receive your forgiving love. Help us to become the answer to our prayers, to be your agents of hope and renewal in this world. Guide us throughout these 40 days as we journey with Jesus, that one who took the form of a servant and poured out his life to save us all. In his name we pray, Our Father...