



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 25, 2023
GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7; PSALM 32; ROMANS 5: 12-19; MATTHEW 4:1-11

SOCIAL SINS AND LENTEN GOODNESS

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, 21 *[The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"* But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.... Gen 3:21 reads: And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.]

Lent is a season that invites us to consider many things: a mark of ashes reminding us of our mortal existence and dusty retinue of the earth; we hear the disorienting stories from the Garden of Eden and Jesus' Temptations as portals into our own wilderness experiences that we might see them as opportunities for spiritual growth (this is the

crux of the Lenten journey); and we get a good deal of talk of sin in this season, not to beat us down into puddles of depravity, but to invite the turn into new life.

We never lose sight of the absolving grace of God's love for us along the way, and this is an essential element of Lent if we are to find our way to the cross and on to Easter.

If you read a bit further in Genesis to verse 21, you will see that God actually was the one who clothed Adam and Eve to relieve their naked shame.ⁱ This mythic saga only makes sense if we see it as our story revealing our brokenness against the contrasting light of our innate goodness, and that God never gives up on us. The rest of Scriptures, and the whole of this Christian life, unfolds onto that trajectory of a relentlessly loving God yearning for us to see ourselves as God does.

I know the language of sin carries a lot of baggage for many. The Church has a good deal of blame to bear for that, having used the language of sin as a tool of subjugation; more a bludgeon than bandage in dealing with our wounded existence.

You may find it interesting that nowhere in the Book of Common Prayer, or in our Anglican doctrinal teaching, is the list of the seven cardinal sins, aka the seven deadly sins—pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth. They are referenced in the litany of penitence we say on Ash Wednesday, and surely we all know them as part of our human condition, but let's set aside the impulse to use them to score keep or to beat up ourselves or others. Let's angle in from another way, here on this first Sunday in Lent, shall we?

I want to talk about seven social sins today. Often mistakenly attributed to Mohandas Gandhi, it was actually an Anglican priest, Frederick Lewis Donaldson, who formulated the list that shaped the sermon he preached at Westminster Abbey on March 20, 1925, during the Season of Lent. Gandhi published them in a newspaper later that year, and they became attached to him and his movement, but their roots are thoroughly Anglican.

Donaldson was a Christian socialist who tirelessly advocated for the poor against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, a Victorian caste economy, and the dreadful sequelae of World War I.

Here is the list of his seven social sins, for brief reference, with a bit more to say about each in a moment:

- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Religion without sacrifice
- Politics without principleⁱⁱ

Donaldson's brilliance in formulating this list is that he seized on seven significant aspects of human existence—wealth, pleasure,

knowledge, commerce, science, religion and politics—all of which are worthy enterprises in moderation, but each is corruptible when taken to the extreme. What is good can be broken when it stifles human flourishing.

I should say here, with particular emphasis, that this is not an invitation to use this paradigm to make righteous pronouncements of indignation about others; there is a time for such, but on this first Sunday in Lent, the invitation is to examine our own complicity in these as the primary work at hand.

So let's unpack them.

1. Wealth without work. It is the human vocation to work, although that can take many forms. Wealth runs the risk of dividing people, prompting comparison and creating rivalries. Work that is informed by shared values, or work for the common good, is antidote to such rivalries.
2. Pleasure without conscience. The experience of pleasure is a gift from God. Utter denial of pleasure is a distortion of life as God intended, but conversely, an addictive approach to pleasure without limits becomes idolatrous, destructive. A conscience effort to moderate pleasure for the

divine gift it strikes the balance that will be life-giving.

3. Knowledge without character. Learning is not principally about the assimilation of information. Knowledge is intended to shape our humanity as interconnected, communal, and stimulating, so that we become more grounded in our identity as part of the whole, as persons in the tapestry of creation. Character is the means by which we come to integrate that.
4. Commerce without morality. Market forces alone will not make for an equitable landscape for human flourishing. History has proven that. Scarcity is inherent to the system. To use economic terms, there must be intentional infusions of social capital, moral capital, and relational capital if we are to move beyond the economics of humanity into true society where thriving is normative.
5. Science without humanity. I could preach a sermon series on this one alone but suffice to say here we must be guided by a clear ethic when using science for the benefit of humanity, not just some subset thereof.ⁱⁱⁱ
6. Religion without sacrifice. Much has been written about the decline of

American Christianity, and the causes for it, but a consumerist approach to religion in which entertainment, flabby theologies, and reductionistic feel-goods seeking only peace of mind leave little to the religious imagination that guides vocational and missional identity. Remember sacrifice literally means to set apart the thing as sacred. What is sacred, or sacrificial, about your religious practice?

7. Politics without principle. What are the values that guide the art of compromise for the common good? Much of politics has become the art of cultivating fear of the other, a zero-sum game. Fear, in my estimation, is not a principled phenomenon.

I know this is a lot of detail to download in short order. The manuscript is in the narthex and will be on the website as well, if you want to refer back to these seven social sins. How might they guide your observance of a holy Lent this year? How might you employ the “withouts” as pivots of awareness as you make your way in your life? How might you see the cross by the light of these social sins?

But in it all, remember that God created you from the substrate of innate goodness. So let the talk of sin this season be one of clarifying purpose that leans into that good nature. It is the locus of true identity, of liberation and life-giving peace, and the place to which God is relentlessly calling you.

ⁱ Gen. 3:21 reads: *And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.* (NRSV)

ⁱⁱ This list, and much of the exegetical content in this sermon, are drawn from an essay by Charles Hoffacker, “*The Anglican*

Origins of the Seven Deadly Sins,” The Living Church, Nov. 27, 2022, pg. 18-19.

ⁱⁱⁱ I recently taught a series on [Embodied Spirituality in the Age of AI](#) which delves into a good deal of these ethical questions.