Sunday, July 16, 1978
THE 8th DEADLY SIN
Philippians 3:1, 4:4-7

Traditionally, there are seven deadly sins: pride, greed or avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Maybe there are seven so there is one for each day of the week. I once knew a preacher who announced that he was going to preach a sermon on 189 different sins. A number of people wrote to him and asked for the list so they could try them.

The seven deadly sins, however, are known as being "deadly," because they will inevitably lead to other sins. They are vices. They are not distinct acts, but habits, passions, or appetites. Each one is a kind of inward attitude. They are therefore a continual deflection from the order of right reason and an offense against our dignity as human beings, children of God. They are the kind of vices or habits that put us into bondage. We can become slaves to one or more of them.

Each of the seven deadly sins is particularly tempting because in each case the sin is based on something that may be good and worthy in itself, but what happens is that it is lifted out of place and its importance is magnified and the appetite or need becomes an end in itself.

Sex, for example is basically good, but when it is magnified and takes too much control of a person, it turns into lust. We all need food to eat, but when that appetite gets out of control and controls us, it is gluttony. A certain amount of desire to have things is quite natural and needful, but when that desire gets out of control, we have become a slave to greed or avarice. That's what makes these seven sins so deadly.

But I think there is an eighth deadly sin, and it may be the one that is often responsible for making us slave to one or more of the original seven. The 8th deadly sin is "boredom." Bertrand Russell once said, "Boredom is a vital problem for the moralist since half the sins of mankind are caused by fear of it."

It's not a new problem — boredom. Years ago, a London physician wrote --

"After all, the greatest of human miseries, the most deadly of diseases, is one we cannot touch with the knife or save men from with drugs. I mean boredom. There is more real wretchedness, more torment driving men to folly or what you parsons call sin, due to boredom than there is anything else. Men and women will do almost anything to escape from it; they will drink, drug themselves, prostitute their bodies, and sell their souls; they will take up mad causes, organize absurd crusades, fling themselves into lost hopes and crazy ventures; they will torment themselves and torture other people to escape the misery of being bored. And one who will discover a cure for that would put an end to more tragedy and misery than all the doctors and physicians put together."

Another person wrote: "The longer I live, the more I think the major sin is boredom, not blasphemy, which is just making proud noises when you can't think of anything better to do; not even idolatry, because that is only a silly escape from the real to the artificial. The true menace to life; the root of all tl1e dangerous things we do — is being sick and tired, bored."

The world is filled with people who are bored: sick and tired of life. It's not that they want to sleep through life; it's just that they are not aware of all the wild possibilities. How often have you heard people say — "I'm bored," and not just young people make this statement.

I. What then are some of the causes of boredom?

1. To begin with, some people are always rushing around so much that they get used to, it so that if they have to stop being busy, they get bored. They can't switch gears. Others keep hurrying all the time because they are afraid if they stopped and took it easy for a bit, they would be bored. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves — they even continue rushing and hurrying while on vacation. Some of us always have to have something to do, we can't just be.

2. Secondly, boredom is related to loneliness. Many people get bored most easily when they are alone. It's almost as if they can't stand themselves. Thus, they are bored with themselves. They don't enjoy themselves. Such people always have to have something being done to them, whether it's watching television or being entertained by some other medium. They don't know how to entertain themselves. They've forgotten how to use their imaginations, forgotten how to be creative.

Some people will do everything possible to avoid the con-frontation with the experience of being alone with nothing to do. We've become so used to being occupied in a kind of state of anesthesia that we panic when there is nothing or nobody left to distract us. When we have no project to finish, no friend to visit, no book to read, no television to watch, or no record to play, and when we are left alone by ourselves, we are brought so close to the revelation of our basic human aloneness and are so afraid of experiencing an all-pervasive sense of loneliness and boredom that we will do anything to get busy again.

Part of the problem is that we are afraid to face the pain of our loneliness and boredom. By running away from our loneliness and by trying to distract ourselves with people and special experiences, we never get to know our deeper selves and never realistically deal with our human predicament. We are in danger of becoming unhappy people suffering from many unsatisfied cravings and desires and expectations that can never be fulfilled.

3. This means thirdly, that boredom is at its base a religious problem. Boredom is telling us that none of the things that pass away, will ultimately satisfy us. Boredom is also telling us that the emptiness we feel at times is the lack of the feeling of relatedness to the deeper things in life. Boredom speaks to us of being separated from ourselves, from others and most of all from God.

We are bored when we have no foundation but are simply living on the surface of life. Bored people are shallow people! Our boredom then speaks to us of an emptiness that needs to be filled, not just with more activity, not just with possessing more things, not just with a search for new excitement. It is rather a seeking for unity and wholeness in life. In that sense boredom. can be good if we pay attention to what it is telling us. Boredom comes from not being skilled in the inner life where the real roots of our problem lie.

II. What then is the cure for boredom?

1. First, we can recognize that there are some things in life we should be bored with. Some movies are so boring we ought to walk out. Some books should not be read. Pornography is

boring. Some sermons are boring. I hope this one isn't for what could be worse than a boring sermon on boredom.

But being bored with things we are doing or with things that are being done to us is a different kind of boredom than being bored because nothing is going on or because we are alone with no activity. This is a deeper boredom that is related to an emptiness deep within us. How do we deal with that?

2. We begin to cure this kind of boredom by facing it and not just running from it. Listen to it, go into it, pay attention to the void in your life. There is a lot of mental suffering in the world. But some of it is suffering for the wrong reason because it is born out of the false expectation that we are called to take each other's boredom away.

When our boredom drives us away from ourselves into the arms of companions or into trying to find some activity to entertain us, then we are in fact driving ourselves into the wrong kind of relationships and the wrong kind of activity.

By accepting our boredom, by not running from it, we are beginning to admit and know deep down that no new friend, no new lover, or new automobile, or entertainment, or anything else will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness in our lives.

It is sad to see how often people suffering from boredom look at a new friend or a new lover or a new object with Messianic expectations that this will be the final solution to their boredom. Although their mind knows about their self-deceit, their hearts keep saying, "Maybe this time I've found what I have knowingly or unknowingly been searching for." But then boredom returns again.

3. So the next step after facing our boredom and not running from it or trying to fill the emptiness with something that will not last, is to listen to the advice St. Paul gave to the Philippians in our scripture lesson — Paul wrote, "In conclusion by brothers and sisters, delight in the world. It doesn't bore me to repeat a piece of advice like this, and if you follow it, you will find a great safeguard for your souls."

Delight in the Lord! It's a way of saying, delight in all of life! What those who are easily bored have lost is the sense of delight. A little later in the letter to the Philippians, St. Paul put it another way — "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"

Recently, there appeared a collection of letters between two of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. These men were rather close friends, but became by way of politics, leaders of opposing political parties. Despite the animosity of political conflict, they reestablished their friendship in their old age and exchanged letters frequently.

Jefferson was a kind of Christian, influenced by deist rationalism. He wrote to Adams that he was a Christian in the only sense that Christ, so he thought, would admit discipleship. He believed in a universal benevolence. But this was not enough for Adams. He said religious faith must mean something more than that. So, Jefferson asked what it did mean? Adams gave a classical answer. He said, "Faith means that I rejoice in God and his creation, and I exult in my own existence." Adam's answer sounds almost like the answer to the first question in the Westminster Catechism. "What is the chief end of man. Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

So again, the answer to boredom is to delight in being, not just in doing! Try sitting alone sometime, perhaps in the evening on a clear night. Just sit, do nothing, just be. Look at the stars, delight in the evening breeze, have a sense of delight. Try it for an hour or more. Learn to be with yourself. Learn to delight in God's creation which includes you.

Or take a walk by yourself. Notice the scenery as you walk. Take time to smell and savor the fresh air, to notice the flowers and the trees. Become aware of the simple beauty of God's creation. Rekindle your sense of wonder. Sense your connectedness to all of God's creation.

Not being bored is learning to live life from the Divine Center. Such a life is one of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. We need not get frantic and rush about. God is at the helm. And when our day is done, we can lie down quietly and in peace, for all is well. Amen.