Sunday, September 23, 1984
THE SECOND DEADLY SIN (Greed or Avarice)
Matthew 6:19-24

Tradition holds that there are seven deadly sins. In case you have forgotten what they are, here's the list: pride, greed (sometimes called avarice), lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

These seven vices are deadly because they lead to other vices. They are not distinct acts, but habits, passions, or appetites. They are deadly because they are an offense against our dignity as human beings. We lost control of ourselves to them. They eat away at us and sap our energy. We put ourselves into slavery to them.

When this happens, we take things which are good in themselves and life them out of their place and magnify their importance. Thus, for example, to have a desire for things is not bad in itself, but when we have an excessive desire for things, then it becomes greed, and it is destructive of ourselves and others.

So, this morning the sermon is about the number two sin in the list of the seven deadly sins — greed.

Jesus talked about the destructive force of greed many times. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal." In other words, "Do not possess things just for the sake of possessing them." When one does this, that is greed.

Greed is the love, not so much of possessions, but of possessing. The greedy person does not love his or her possessions for what they are, but loves only the fact that he or she possesses them. An example: here is an individual who collects paintings. He has hundreds of them, and they are very valuable; in fact, they are masterpieces. But he does not love these paintings for that reason. He loves only the fact that they are his, that he possesses them and no one else does.

Our Christian faith teaches us that the individuals who surround themselves with things they do not need will in time cease to know what they do need, and in a little more time, they will cease to know what they want.

Greed, then, is a form of death in life. Perhaps that's why Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." We've all met people who have become their possessions, who are possessed by them, and we say that they live in museums. They have been taken over by the objects around them.

It is instructive to note that throughout history all culture and all religions have stories within them which tell us about the destructive force of greed. Most of us have heard the story of the man named Midas. Midas asked for and was given the power to turn everything which he touched into gold, and it meant, of course, that he turned his food also to gold. He could no longer eat what he needed to live.

Here's another story from another culture:

Once there was a poor man. He lived with his wife and two children, a boy and a girl, in a small cottage at the forest's edge. For some reason this man fell ill. He grew weaker and weaker. As he lay dying, a single thought filled his mind: "If I must now die, I wish at least somehow to be of help to my family." This was his last conscious wish, and soon afterward he died.

His wife and children were grief-stricken and filled with worry. How would they live without their kind husband and father? That night the children had a dream. They saw their father once again. "Dead children," he told them, "do not grieve. I will be back with you soon. I cannot say if I shall be a man or bird or beast when I return, but this I will say: you'll know me by a great, shining light."

The children awoke, their eyes bright, and ran to tell their mother, but she only laughed bitterly when they told her the dream. "No," she said, "No, my littles ones. What is gone stays gone — forever. Forget your dream. Our lot will be hard enough without such dreams." So, the children didn't speak of the dream to their mother again, but between themselves they spoke of it.

One evening several months later as the sun dropped below the trees, a strange light shone through the branches. The leaves gleamed and seemed to turn to gold. Something was coming along the forest path. The children looked at one another and then ran out to meet whatever might be coming. A large white goose with golden eyes and yellow legs waddled into the clearing. Stretching out its neck, it honked loudly in a human voice, "Children, it is I."

"Father! Father!" they cried, "it is you! We saw the light, just as you said in the dream!" "Yes," said the goose. "I have come to help you as I promised, but oh, it is good to see you!" He wrapped his wings around the two children, who knelt by him. "How big you have grown! Hush now," he said at last, "and listen. You must promise me you won't tell anyone who I am." "We promise," said the children.

"Good. Now listen carefully again. Every day just as the sun rises above the trees, you must pluck one of my feathers and hold it up to the sunlight. The feather will turn to pure, gleaming gold. In this way you and your mother will never lack for anything. But remember, you must tell no one, not even your mother, who I am, and you must be careful to pluck only one feather each day."

"We'll remember," said the children, "but father," asked the girl, "won't it hurt you when we pluck your feathers?" "Yes," said the little boy. "We couldn't do it if it hurt you." "Don't worry, children," honked the goose. "Every feather you pluck will quickly grow back, and as long as you pluck only one at a time, no harm at all shall come to me. Now, quickly," said the goose, "But the sun sinks below the trees, pluck a feather!

So, they reached out together and plucked a short downy feather from the goose's breast. They held it up to the sun's last rays, and at once it turned to pure gleaming gold! They ran to their mother, "Look, mother, look!" they cried. "We have a feather of pure gold, and Father... the goose said that we shall be able to have all we want, too!" And, joining hands, the two children began to dance around and around the astonished woman.

"What are you saying?" she cried. "Where did you get such a bright feather? Why," she cried, "it's gold — pure gold!" "Yes," they cried. "Of course, it's gold, just as the goose said." "What goose?" asked the mother, placing the golden feather carefully on the table. "why, the goose in our yard," said the children. "Come, Mother," they said, taking her hands. "Come and see."

There stood the goose watching them quietly from the very center of the yard. “Why, it’s a handsome goose,” said the mother, “but its feathers aren’t gold.” “No,” said the boy. “The feathers only turn to gold when you pluck them.” “And,” said the girl, “you must pluck only one feather each day.”

Naturally their mother found this hard to believe, but, as she had no other explanation for the golden feather, she agreed to wait and see. She closed the gate so the goose wouldn’t wander away and then returned to the house.

The children stayed out in the yard and played with the goose until it grew dark. They petted the goose and talked to it, but though the goose seemed delighted with their company, though it wrapped them in its wings and lay its head and neck against them and touched their hands and fee and cheeks lightly with its orange beak, it only honked and gabbled. Not once did it speak to them again in human words.

The next morning when the sun rose bright as gold above the trees, the little family gathered in the yard. The children held the goose tenderly. Then as the sun’s rays fell upon them, their mother bent down and pulled a long feather from the bird’s wing. She held it up to the sunlight. At once the feather turned to solid gold. The mother gasped and almost dropped the feather. “Ah!” she cried, “so it’s true!”

“Yes, yes, mother!” cried the two children. “Of course, it’s true! We told you! We told you!” “Well,” she said, recovering herself, “we must feed this goose well. We shall not starve after all! This goose is our benefactor. We must take good care of it,” and that’s what they did.

Every day, just as the sun rose above the trees, the little family gathered in the bare, dirt yard and plucked one of the goose’s feathers. And, as the sun’s rays touched the feather, it turned to gold. Soon the mother began to buy good food and new clothes for all of them. Then she bought shining copper pots and polished ladles of dark, smooth wood. She bought little mirrors, and she hung tinkling bells on the roof poles. She bought carved wooden animals for the children. After that she plastered the walls of the cottage and fixed the door. She put a strong fence around the yard. She got chickens and built a henhouse, and soon they were eating fresh eggs. Next, she bought a buffalo to help them plow the fields and to give them its rich, sweet milk. She even bought a little golden dish from which the goose could eat.

They were content, and the goose seemed content, too. Every morning after they pulled out a feather, it would flap its wings, stretch out its neck, and honk as if for joy. Then, after it had eaten and preened itself, the goose would even follow the children out into the fields and return with them at twilight.

One night the mother awoke in the darkness. She thought about their extraordinary luck. Who would imagine that a goose with feathers that turned to gold would suddenly appear and save them from hardship? It was a miracle!

But as life became less burdensome, the mother found it harder to be content. “Why,” she thought, “we’ve got a living gold mine waddling around out there honking in our yard! One feather at a time keeps us secure, it is true, but if we plucked the whole bird all at once, we would be rich. We could buy whatever we wanted and go wherever we wished. And, indeed, we should move soon. The neighbors have already begun to wonder where we are getting our money. Once they learn of the goose, someone will try to steal him. How can I be content with

this tiny trickle of gold when I could wash away all our cares forever by plucking the whole bird?"

The children begged her to be content with what they already had. "Our life is secure," they said. "We have all we need. Besides, the goose told us we must pluck only one feather at a time. It would hurt him if we plucked them all. Please," they said, "Please promise us that you won't pluck the goose." So, in the end the mother agreed.

But again, the desire for all the gold rose within her. "It's only a goose, after all," she reasoned. "Why should I be concerned? And, though children have tender hearts, they soon forget. I'll be using the gold for their welfare, anyway. Surely that can't bring us any harm. As to plucking one feather at a time, I've never heard the goose say that — or anything else, for that matter."

So once again she decided to pluck the whole goose, but again the children begged, pleaded, and cried. Again, she held off, discomfited and confused.

"It's a goose," she told herself, "just a goose. What do children know of life? How can I weight a single goose against my family's welfare? It's ridiculous! Absurd!" So, at last she made up her mind: "I shall pluck it," she said. "As a mother I can protect my children best with gold."

That morning, just as the sun rose like red gold, the mother crept quietly out into the yard and caught the goose. While the children slept, she quickly pulled fistfuls of feathers from the uncomplaining bird, who shivered uncontrollably, watching her all the while with sad, golden eyes. Feathers flew like whirling snow, stuffing the white feathers into a sack that she had at hand.

Pushing her hair back from her sweaty brow, she at last released the bare bird, which ran off and hid under the leafy bushes in the farthest corner of the yard. It seemed to her that as the bird ran off, tears had trickled from its eyes and that now, from beneath the leaves, came the sounds of soft sobbing.

With a shiver, the woman set her jaw and lifted the sack of feathers up to the golden light just as the sun rose once again above the tallest trees. The pure golden light shone upon the sack, but the sack stayed as light as down. She lowered the sack and peered inside. The feathers were all still soft and white. Not one had turned to gold.

The poor woman cried aloud. The children heard her and ran out into the yard. Fistfuls of feathers blew from the open sack and across the yard like snow from the mountains. "Oh, mother," they cried, "Oh, mother, what have you done? The goose — the poor, poor goose! Oh, Father, Father! We promised we wouldn't tell, but yes, it is our own father you have plucked so bare. Remember our dream? Well, he is the goose."

The mother sobbed and sobbed. "Well," she finally said, sniffling, "I don't know anything about that. Your poor father is gone forever, but feathers grow again." Blowing her nose loudly, she concluded, "We'll take care of the goose and wait. Next time, I promise you, I shall pluck only one feather at a time."

But, when the goose's feathers grew in again, they were speckled and gray, and not one ever turned to gold.

The little family lived on. They worked hard and got by. Later, when the children had grown and set off into the world on their own, the goose spread its wings and flew away, and it was never seen again.

The woman grew old and learned to be content with little. Eventually, she became known throughout the neighborhood for the simplicity of her life and for her hard work. “Don’t be greedy,” she would say to everyone she met. “Everything comes in its own time.”

Somehow those who heard her took it to heart. Though her words were simple, everyone could tell that here, at last, was someone who really knew what she was talking about. Amen.