Sunday, July 31, 1994
ANOTHER DEADLY SIN
Philippians 4:4-7, 3:1

Traditionally, there are seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Why seven instead of six or eight? I don't know. Maybe there are seven so that there is one for each day of the week, or because in many traditions, seven was considered a complete number.

I once knew a preacher who announced that he was going to preach a series of sermons on 189 different sins. Before he could begin, a number of people wrote to ask him for the list so they could try them. It reminds me of one of my favorite limericks:

There was a young woman named Lynn
Who confessed one day to her kin,
I've tried all the lot
And discovered there's not
One single original sin.

The seven deadly sins are known as "deadly" because they all 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 that can influence everything else we do.

When I was with the choir on our trip to England, I had a long conversation with the husband of a choir member from a choir in California. I asked him what his profession was. He said he was a professor and researcher in psychology, and his specialty was studying human motivation. He had been doing this for years. I asked him to tell me what he had discovered to be the most powerful human motivation, and without a pause, he answered, "Greed." Then I asked him if he was aware that "greed" was considered one of the seven deadly sins, and he knew that it was.

As we talked on, we concluded that 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, its importance is magnified, and the appetite or need becomes an end in itself.

For example, pride can be an excessive form of self-esteem. We all need a certain amount of pride, but too much is deadly. Greed can be an excessive or overly magnified form of the need to have a certain amount of goods for survival and undoubtedly grows out of our built-in instinct for self-preservation. But again, too much greed can destroy us. Sexual desire and sex itself is one of God's greatest gifts and is related to the instinct for the human race to reproduce itself. But when it is magnified and takes too much control of an individual, it turns into lust and can cause all kinds of damage.

We all need food to survive, but when that built-in desire gets out of control, it becomes gluttony. That's what makes these seven deadly sins so deadly. Each grows out of something that, in moderation, is one of God's gifts to us.

In addition to the seven deadly sins, there are said to be seven godly virtues. They are prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, and love. However, these godly virtues

can also become deadly when mispracticed, and when this happens, they can cause more evil than the seven deadly sins.

Today, however, I want to talk about another deadly sin, one that is not included in the original seven and one that is not a corruption of the godly virtues.

This eighth deadly sin is boredom. Bertrand Russell said, “Boredom is a vital problem for the moralist since half the sins of humankind are caused by the fear of it.”

Boredom is not a new condition, although I doubt that children 50 years ago said as often as they do now, “I’m bored.” Years ago, a London physician wrote, “The greatest of human miseries, the most deadly of diseases, is one we cannot touch with surgery or with medicines. I mean boredom. There is more real wretchedness, more torment driving people to folly or what people like to 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 from 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 the dangerous things we do — is being sick and tired, bored.” Dr. Carl Jung, in his book, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, wrote: “About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. This can be described as the general neurosis of our time.”

There is even a book in the Bible that deals primarily with boredom. It’s in the Old Testament and is called Ecclesiastes. It’s a short book, barely a dozen pages long. It is the work of an angry, cynical, skeptical man who doubts God and questions the value of doing good. “What point is there in working hard?” he asks in the opening lines of the book. “A generation passes, and another comes along, but the world remains the same forever.”

What, then, are some of the causes of boredom?

First, there are people who are always rushing around so much that they get used to it, so that once they stop being busy, they get bored. They can’t switch gears, can’t change their pace. 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 — even when they go on vacation, they continue to rush around. Boredom is not simply having nothing to do. Boredom is believing and living as if life has no worthwhile purpose.

Secondly, boredom is related to loneliness. Many people get bored most easily when they are alone. It’s as if they can’t stand to be with themselves. Not only are they bored with life, which to them has no meaning and purpose, but they are bored with themselves. They don’t enjoy themselves. Such people always have something being done to them, whether it’s watching television or being entertained by some other medium. They’ve forgotten how to use their imaginations, forgotten how to be creative.

Thus, there are people who will do almost anything to avoid the experience of being alone with nothing to do. When they have no project to finish, no friend to visit, no book to read, no television to watch, or no record to play, they are lonely and bored.

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. We are then in danger of becoming unhappy people suffering from many unsatisfied cravings, desires, and expectations that can never be fulfilled.

This means, in the third place, that boredom is, at its base, a religious issue. There's an important lesson to be learned from boredom. It teaches us that none of the things of this world that pass away will ultimately satisfy us. Boredom is reminding us that the emptiness we feel at times is the lack of our relationship with God.

In other words, we are bored when we have no foundation but are living on the surface of life. Bored people are shallow people. Do you think, for example, that Mother Teresa was ever bored? Was St. Francis ever bored? Our boredom, then, speaks to us of an emptiness that needs to be filled — not simply with more activity, not with possessing more things, not with a search for new excitement. It is rather a seeking for a unity and wholeness in life. It speaks of our search for God. In that sense, boredom can be good for us if we pay attention to what it is trying to tell us.

What, then, are some of the cures for boredom?

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. Many television programs are boring. Some books are so boring I stop reading them. Pornography is boring. Some sermons are boring. I hope this one isn't, for what could be worse than a boring sermon on boredom?

Being bored with things and activities we should be bored with 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 more devastating kind of boredom because it is related to an emptiness deep within us. How do we deal with that?

We begin to cure this kind of boredom by facing it and not running from it. Pay attention to it. Listen to what it is trying to teach you. Here's a person who claims to be bored with a marriage partner. But that may only be an excuse. The person may be bored because he or she has no purpose in life or sense of direction.

By accepting our boredom, by not running from it too quickly, we are beginning to admit deep down that no new friend, no new lover, no new automobile, no new form of entertainment will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity, wholeness, and purpose in life.

It is sad to see how frequently people suffering from boredom look at a new friend, or a new lover, or a new toy with Messianic expectations that this will be the final solution to their boredom. They keep thinking and hoping that maybe this time I've found what I have been searching for. But then boredom returns again. Oscar Wilde once wrote: "In this world, there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." He was trying to warn us that no matter how hard we work at being successful, success won't satisfy us.

I remember reading of a young man who left home to find fame and fortune in Hollywood. He had three dreams when he set out: to see his name in lights, to own a Rolls-Royce, and to marry a beauty contest winner. By the time he was thirty, he had done all three, and he was a deeply depressed young man, unable to work creatively anymore despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that all his dreams had come true. By thirty, he had run out of goals. What was there for him to do with the rest of his life?

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 reading, which is the same kind of advice that the writer of Ecclesiastes discovered and passed on.

Paul wrote: “In conclusion, my brothers and sisters, delight in the Lord,” which also implies to delight in God’s creation. It’s a way of saying, “Delight in all of life.”

The author of Ecclesiastes wrote: “Go eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy, for your action was long ago approved by God.”

In other words, instead of brooding over the fact that nothing lasts, accept that as one of the truths of life, and learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory, in the joys that fade. That’s what Job in the Old Testament was saying when he wrote: “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever. In fact, learn to savor it because it is only a moment and will not last. Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting.

Can you stop and close your eyes and remember something that happened for only a moment even though it was years ago? It may have been a view of a spectacular landscape, or a loving relationship with someone who has died, or a conversation that made you feel loved and appreciated. In a sense, it did not last very long at all, but in another sense, it has lasted all those years and is still going on.

Can you close your eyes and conjure up the memory of someone who is now dead but once meant a lot to you? Can you, in your mind, hear her voice and feel her touch? There is proof that a person, by learning how to live, can cheat death and live on beyond her allotted years.

Our Christian faith teaches that the answer to boredom is to delight not only in doing but also in being. Try sitting alone sometime, perhaps in the evening on a clear night. Sit, do nothing, just be. Look at the stars. Delight in the evening breeze.

The answer to boredom can also be in doing. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: “When we stop searching for the Great Answer, the Immortal Deed which will give our life ongoing meaning, and instead concentrate on filling our individual days with moments that gratify us, then we will find the only possible answer to the question, What is life about?” That’s why I believe someone like Mother Teresa was never bored.

A star football player interviewed on the eve of the Super Bowl some years ago was quoted as saying, “If this is the Ultimate Game, how come they’re going to play another one next year?”

We could also say, if we could do something today which would permanently and finally answer the problem of living, what would we need tomorrow for? Life is not a problem to be solved once; it is a continuing challenge to be lived day by day.

“Go eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy, for your action was long ago approved by God.” In a world where not everyone will do great deeds or achieve great success, God has given us the capacity to find greatness in the everyday. Amen.