

What is the Greatest Sin? A Sermon on Pride

Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8

Luke 14:1,7-14



A generation ago the Christian essayist Dorothy Sayers wrote a kind of imaginary catechism in which she summarized what she thought people of her time actually believed about Christian faith. It included the question “What does the Church call sin?” And the answer was: “Sex . . . getting drunk; saying ‘damn’; murder’ and cruelty to dumb animals; not going to church; most kinds of amusement. ‘Original sin’ means that anything we enjoy doing is wrong.”¹ In another essay, she mentions a young man who once said to her, “I did not know there were seven deadly sins; please tell me the names of the other six.”²

I would like to ask the question this morning, “What is the greatest sin?” I think that fifty years after Dorothy Sayers, a lot of people still think that the church believes that sex is the greatest sin. Perhaps the only sin. At least the conservative or orthodox church is thought to believe that. On the other hand, a good argument could be made that the progressive church believes that “lack of inclusiveness” or

“intolerance” is the greatest sin.

It might be interesting to ask people to set aside their assumptions about what they think Christians believe is the greatest sin, and answer the question in their own way. What do you think is the greatest sin? Murder? Hatred? Betraying a friend? Certainly these are things that people do that cause real harm, and everyone would agree that they are morally wrong. The Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson suggests that all societies endorse the content of the second table of the Ten Commandments – the commandments that prohibit lying, stealing, murder, and so on, because any society that does not prohibit these things will not last long as a society.³

What might surprise people is that historically the Christian church has not specified any of these as the single greatest sin. What the Church has seen as the greatest sin is found in the readings from Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) and Luke today – the sin of pride. The Sirach reading ends with the statement “Pride was not created for human beings, nor fierce anger for those born of women.” (Sirach 10:18) Luke makes the same point in a positive way. Jesus says “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)

What is pride? We could probably come up with a number of possible definitions. But the best definition is that pride is the sin of living as if we were God. It is the sin that says that we can run the world on our own. It is the sin that says that winning is the most important thing. There was a popular book a couple of decades ago whose title was: *Looking Out For Number One*. That is pride defined in a nut shell.

It is also the case that pride is prevalent in our culture today, as it has been in every culture. Just before he died, Steve Jobs, the creator of Apple Computer, said that he was going to destroy Google’s Android operating system, and that he would spend all of Apple’s money, and his last dying breath

if that is what it took to do that. Jobs is dead, and Android is still here, but there is really something sad about going to your death still insisting that you have to be No. 1. Six or seven years ago, there were a book and documentary movie entitled *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, about the people who made billions of dollars at Enron – before it went bankrupt, and a lot of those “smartest guys in the room” went to jail. But you don’t have to look at the richest and most powerful people on the planet to see pride at work. Read the stories about spousal or child abuse in the crime news section of your local paper. Trying to control another person even to the point of physical abuse is about pride, about proving that you’re in charge.

Why is pride so bad? What makes it the chief sin? First, pride is the ultimate anti-God sin. By putting ourselves in the place of God, we make it impossible for God to be God. As the passage in Sirach says: “The beginning of a person’s pride is to depart from the Lord.” (Sirach 10: 12). St. Augustine has a famous prayer at the beginning of his book *The Confessions* in which he says, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” But if God has made us for himself, pride is the sin that says we exist for ourselves, not for God.

Second, pride is the sin that leads to all other sins. Again, we find in Sirach: “For the beginning of pride is sin, and the man who clings to it will pour out abominations.” If you think about it, almost all sins are connected to pride, find their beginnings in pride, and are made worse by pride. Murder is, of course, the worst act we can commit against another human being, but it is a sin that often begins with wounded pride. When we find ourselves saying, “I’m going to get even with him or her,” we have taken the first step toward what leads people to murder. Greed is a desire for money, but pride is a primary motivator of greed. There comes a point at which more money and possessions and power will not make us more happy. What

drives people who already have more money than they could ever spend to never be satisfied, and to insist on having more and more? It is pride – the pride of having more than someone else.

Pride creates antagonism between people because it is inherently competitive. Pride is the attitude that says if I am going to win, then someone else has to lose. Pride is not satisfied unless it has not just enough, but more than the next person. If you want to see how pride begins, look what happens when you place some small children together in a room full of toys. No matter how many toys there are, at some point a fight will break out because two children will want the same toy. It does not matter how many other toys there are. There is only one toy that both children want. C.S. Lewis points out that the more pride we have, the more we hate pride in others because their pride interferes with our pride.⁴ Because they want it all, we cannot have it all, and we want it all, just like they do. As the line goes in the old Western movies, “This town ain’t big enough for both of us.”

Perhaps the worst aspect of pride is that it allows us to justify some of our worst characteristics. Pride can infect and ruin everything around us, even the good things. There was some smart aleck who remarked that if you want to understand what causes wars, all you have to do is take the characteristics of the average church choir, and expand them to thousands or millions of people. I’m a seminary professor, and one of the jibes about academics is that the fights are so vicious because the stakes are so small. Pride is the force that lies behind racism, classism, and sexism, which are simply examples of pride turned into institutions. Because of pride we look down on those who look different, talk different, think different, or just come from a different part of town.

And it is this aspect of pride that causes people to hate it

so much in others. As Sirach says, "Arrogance is hateful before the Lord and before people, and injustice is out of tune to both." (v. 7) If you doubt that this is the case, ask yourself what your response is when the driver behind you blasts his horn immediately after the light changes from red to green, or when another car cuts you off in traffic. I never find myself wanting to say to those drivers, "Thank you for reminding me that I am supposed to go now," or, "I appreciate that you have to go somewhere very important, and you needed to move into that space as quickly as possible. I did not at all mind slamming on my brakes."

But pride is also necessarily a deceptive sin. The problem with pride is that, at bottom, pride is about trying to do something that is impossible, making ourselves the center of the universe. Rational people realize that the universe existed before they were born, and it will continue to exist long after they are gone, so it really is not all about us. Unfortunately, none of us is rational. And so, from the time we are infants, we imagine that the universe really does revolve around us. Fortunately, the universe has a way of being rather indifferent to our illusions. So inevitably the sin of pride backfires when we discover that we are not in charge after all. Sirach has a whole list of the ways that this can happen. The most obvious of these is death: "A long illness baffles the physician, the king of today will die tomorrow." Sirach instructs us that God has a way of bringing the most powerful down to size: "The Lord has cast down the thrones of rulers, and has seated the lowly in their place." (v. 14) Jesus portrays the problem of pride in a very down to earth way in today's gospel reading: "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place." (Luke 14:8-9).

In summary, pride is the great sin because it is the sin by which we try to put ourselves in the place of God. Pride leads inevitably to conflict and antagonism between human beings because it is competitive. If there is only one bone and two dogs, things are not going to go smoothly. And, finally, pride is deceptive and leads inevitably to disappointment because pride conflicts with reality. We might wish that we were the center of the universe, but the universe has a different opinion.

I have to admit that I find all of this talk about pride to be rather depressing. If all that Christianity had to offer was a rather dismal diagnosis of the human condition, it would be a rather grim religion. At most, it might be something like Buddhism, a religion that takes seriously the desparateness of the situation we find ourselves in, and then offers some techniques and principles for self-control as a way to contain the problem. But, of course, the problem of self-control as a solution to pride is that pride is itself rooted in a self that wants to be in control. To try to cure the problem of pride by an appeal to self-control is sort of like trying to cure a leaking faucet by turning on the water full blast.

Fortunately, the good news of the gospel offers a completely different solution. First, and a really helpful point, I think, is that God is not proud. The gospel tells us that God has himself taken on our problem of pride by becoming one of us. By becoming one of us in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God has humbled himself and taken on our lot, even to the point of dying for us. As Philippians 2 says of Jesus, "Although he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:6-8)

Through the incarnation, the gospel completely subverts what we might call the "pride system" of the world in which we

live. When Jesus came to live among us, he was not a chief executive officer of a corporation, but a Galileean peasant, who came from a backwater town called Nazareth, the “Podunk” of the first century. The first way that Jesus subverted the “pride system” was by refusing to play the game. Although Jesus was the Son of God incarnate, he did not put himself first; he did not live as if he were the center of the universe. Instead, he spent his entire life living out the mission his Father had given him to do, and seeking to do his Father’s will. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. . . I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.” (John 5:19, 30) There is no pride or jealousy in Jesus’ doing the Father’s will because Jesus obedience grows out of the mutual love that the Father and Son share with one another. “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.” (v. 20)

Second, Jesus came not as a ruler, but as a Servant, one who came to seek and to save the lost, one who lay down his life for his friends. Jesus ministered to the poor and the sinful, not the powerful and the proud. Jesus healed the sick, he cast out demons, he ate with sinners and tax collectors. And he forgave sins. It is no wonder that when we read the gospel stories of Jesus, we are not offended when we read his words: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:29) Jesus was the only person who ever lived who could truly claim to be humble, and could be believed in his claims.

Third, Jesus not only subverted our world’s “pride system” by the way he lived, he invites us to join into his way of living. As Jesus came as a servant to sinners, so to follow Jesus means that we are invited to become servants ourselves. In two stories in Mark’s gospel, Jesus addresses this question

of what it means to be servants rather than buying into the system of pride that runs the world. On an occasion when the disciples were arguing among themselves as to which of them was the greatest, Jesus taught them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) On another occasion, when the other disciples were angry with James and John because they had asked Jesus if they could sit on thrones of glory in his kingdom, he contrasted the way of his disciples with that of the leaders of this world, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

And, then, of course, there's the story that we are all familiar with from the Maundy Thursday service, when Jesus washed his disciples feet, and told them afterward, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than him who sent him." (John 13:15-16).

Finally, there is today's lectionary reading, in which Jesus says that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." And he goes on to tell us exactly what that means in very practical terms: when we give a dinner or a banquet, we should not invite our friends or relatives or rich neighbors who can pay us back. Instead, we should show hospitality to the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind – those who cannot return the favor.

So there it is. The gospel has provided us with the solution to the problem of pride, and it is not self-control, but servanthood. As Jesus came among us to be our servant, so, as followers of Jesus, we are invited to become his disciples,

and to become servants of one another as Jesus was of us. How do we go about doing this? In the few minutes I have left, I just have time to say a few things.

First, giving up on pride is both hard and easy. On the one hand, pride is about who we are at a deep level. Although we might not want to admit it, we are all proud. We all tend to place ourselves at the center of the universe. We resent it when we do not get our own way. For the first six months of my marriage, I thought that I had married the most selfish person in the universe, someone who always wanted to have her own way. At the end of that six months, I realized that she had married the most selfish person in the universe, and I had been unhappy for the last six months because I was the one who had been insisting on having my way. To give up pride and to learn to serve others involves a genuine death to self. It means giving up being the center of the universe.

At the same time, it is a great relief to be able to give up the lie that we are at the center of the universe, and that we are in charge. We can now allow God to be God rather than thinking that it is our responsibility to run the universe. We can give up on trying to control the lives of our families, and friends, and co-workers, and strangers near and far. And, really, isn't it rather a relief to be able to drop that heavy burden? Isn't it a relief to allow the real God who created the universe to run the universe, and to take the responsibility for making everything turn out right out of our hands?

Second, it is important to remember that the reverse of pride is love, not self-deprecation or phony humility. People sometimes associate the word "humility" with characters like Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens's novel, *David Copperfield*. Uriah Heep is an unctuous character who talks constantly about being "umble," but who turns out in the end to be a genuinely evil person who was using his fake humility as just another way to get his own way. The humility the Bible talks about is not

this kind of self-centered self-deprecation. It is not pretending to think less of ourselves than we really do. Genuine humility consists rather of recognizing honestly who we are as God's creatures, created in God's image and made to be friends with God, but also sinful, selfish, and fallen, and redeemed by Christ. Humility is accepting our own lives and the lives of others as gifts that God has given us in love, and then responding to that love with love in return. Humility is about learning to live as creatures in the world that has been created by a good God who loves us and our fellow creatures, who has come among us in Christ to be our servant, and now invites us to share that love by becoming servants to others in return.

How that works out in everyday life is shown in our reading from Hebrews this morning:

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers . . . Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them . . . Let marriage be held in honor among among all . . . Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb. 13:1-5)

And the key to this whole way of living is found at the end of our Hebrews passage: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (v. 8) The problem with pride is that it looks for security in that which cannot offer security because it cannot endure. Our self-centered egos can never be big enough to support and run the universe. But Jesus can. Jesus is solid. As the old hymn says, Jesus is the "Rock of Ages, Cleft for me" and we can hide ourselves in him. Let's let the one who knows how to run the universe run the universe. We don't have to carry that burden.

1 Dorothy Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama," *The Whimsical Christian: Eighteen Essays* (NY: Macmillan, 1978) 26.

2 Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," *The Whimsical Christian*, 157.

3 Robert W. Jenson, "Male and Female He Created Them," *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments*, Carl E. Braaten, Christopher R. Seitz, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 176.

4 C.S. Lewis, "The Great Sin," *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1960), 109.