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Wednesday July 30, 2014

The eighth deadly sin

By Jim Taylor

With all due respect, I think Pope Gregory the Great got it wrong. Gregory is commonly given credit for devising the list of the Seven Deadly Sins: anger, avarice, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony.

Gregory was right that these actions (or attitudes) are harmful and damaging. But he failed to recognize that each of them is a virtue taken to an extreme.

Without anger, struggles for justice would fade away. Without sloth, humans would never have developed technologies that reduce physical labour and enhance health. Without avarice, no one would have had the ambition to achieve more.

But the same virtues can also be taken to the opposite extreme.

Pride, for example, exaggerates healthy self-esteem until it becomes destructive of the self and of others. But those with no self-esteem are equally handicapped. They will be depressed and depressing, perhaps suicidal.

The opposite extreme to sloth is not a willingness to work hard but a frenetic busy-ness that accomplishes nothing – uncontrolled hyperactivity.

Pope Gregory did not define these opposite extremes as also being sins. That doesn't make them "good". Is starvation or anorexia preferable to gluttony? Apathy to anger? Loathing to lust?

Indeed, the pattern applies to almost every aspect of life. Everyone knows child abuse is wrong – but so is child neglect. Healthy child care lies somewhere in the middle.

Too little water results in death from dehydration. Too much water

causes death from drowning.

Too little warmth and we freeze; too much warmth and we burn.

No one ever knows exactly where the perfect middle lies, but we all know that it is not at either extreme.

Vandalism

I can think of only one “sin” which does not – at least, to my mind – derive from taking a virtue to an extreme, and for which there is no similarly harmful opposite. That’s vandalism.

Recently, people in the Kelowna area read news headlines about a “chainsaw massacre.” Someone sneaked into an area where an adventure park was being developed, and cut halfway through three large trees that supported a network of rope bridges, platforms, and zip lines high overhead.

The trees can’t be saved. Had no one noticed the cuts, had the park opened on schedule, that part of the overhead network might have come crashing down, killing and maiming its users.

No one claimed responsibility. No one offered an explanation. Presumably, therefore the cutting was not done to protest an injustice, real or imagined. It was not done to protect children or the environment. It was not even done to cut firewood, or to gain an advantage for some competing enterprise.

Vandalism’s sole purpose, it seems to me, is to destroy.

Unless I’m missing something, I can see no redeeming virtue at the core of vandalism. What beneficial attitude or behaviour, taken to an extreme, leads to killing trees, smashing windshields, mugging old ladies, overturning garbage cans, and hacking into medical records to alter them?

Vandalism is damage done for its own sake. It is its own justification – harming for the sake of harming, hurting for the sake of hurting.

It has no saving grace, no redeeming virtue. Which makes it, I think, a particularly deadly sin.

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YOUR TURN

Columns touch people in different ways. After last week's column on roots, branches, and how we grow, Henry Simmons just wrote, "Thank you, Jim."

Linda Baxter said much the same: "Thanks for your weekly columns... I always enjoy them."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "I don't have anything to add. Just wanted to say that this is lovely."

Other people were moved to explore the concepts further. James West noted that "Trees do resemble inside-out, upside-down lungs -- with even the colors complementary opposites, though that last one is a bit of a stretch."

James added, "It's good to know that deadwood serves a purpose. That is so like God, to use everything."

Carl Freeto pushed the analogy a little: "I was thinking about my grandchildren as I read your branches-and-roots column, musing...I'm writing an email, a form of communication my 16 year old child says, 'only a grandfather would use!' When I asked her what she meant she explained that email was so '90s that she never used it anymore. She uses twitter and text. Meanwhile, something called 'ambient backscatter' (a way for battery-free devices to communicate by riding to the signals already all around us without needing a power source at all) is being explored by other young minds. Our 11-year-old builds 'virtual' buildings and communities with a game called Minecraft. I do believe they may well be our branches and roots.

"I would assume that social exploration operates in a similar fashion...But that does not seem to be the case. We condemn those who are different and hate those we fear. I'd like to think that if we intentionally keep growing we could find ways to live together in peace. Historical evidence seems to indicate that we humans are less able to grow in relationship with each other, and that your image of roots and branches works in technology but not in that most critical area of human relations.

"One thing is for sure -- without growing edges, we die."

Janie Wallbrown returned to the theme of the previous week's column, about seeking truth: "I can be a slow learner. I think it's only been in the last year or so that I realized the 'truth' of my own life is a multi-faceted thing. Now, sometimes, I physically stand in the middle of my living room focusing on the 'fact' of one troubling issue. I do a slow turn as I consider all the dozens of ways the 'fact/truth' could be viewed and eventually resolved. So it is with my

life. It isn't just one fact that could be looked at several different ways -- it's whole years where I have, at some point, made the decision to remember just one or two things in one light. It's squashed and flat; one-dimensional. Certainly not the whole truth.

"I could go on and on. The topic...what is truth...endlessly fascinates me."

Gayle Simonson, getting caught up on reading her e-mails after a holiday, thought that my column on seeking horizons resonated with a favourite poem by Robert Frost:

**Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths -- and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.**

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The writer of Psalm 17 clearly saw himself (I doubt if the writer was female) standing in judgement before his Lord. I merely shifted his plea into more modern language.

**I plead Not Guilty, Lord; let me present my case.
Listen to what I have to say.
I tell the truth; my lips do not lie.
When you hear my story, you will know I am in the right;**

**You have the wisdom to see through any pretence.
Check up on me at any time, at any hour of the day or night.
Test me, and you will find me pure.
My words and my actions will prove my integrity.**

As for what others do, well, do what you will with them!

**But I have avoided their ways; I have walked the straight and narrow path.
I have not wandered away from the route you defined;
My feet have not strayed.**

**That's why I trust you to treat me justly, God.
Show me that I am right to depend on you.
You have a reputation for helping those who turn to you, who seek sanctuary
from their enemies.**

**I rest my case.
I am satisfied that you will be fair.**

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book
Everyday Psalms from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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