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Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus:²

“Set not thy heart upon thy goods; and say not, I have enough for my life. Follow not thine own mind and thy strength, to walk in the ways of thy heart: And say not, Who shall controul me for my works? for the Lord will surely revenge thy pride. Say not, I have sinned, and what harm hath happened unto me? for the Lord is longsuffering, he will in no wise let thee go. Concerning propitiation, be not without fear to add sin unto sin: And say not His mercy is great; he will be pacified for the multitude of my sins: for mercy and wrath come from him, and his indignation resteth upon sinners. Make no tarrying to turn to the Lord, and put not off from day to day: for suddenly shall the wrath of the Lord come forth, and in thy security thou shalt be destroyed, and perish in the day of vengeance. Set not thine heart upon goods unjustly gotten, for they shall not profit thee in the day of calamity. Winnow not with every wind, and go not into every way: for so doth the sinner that hath a double tongue. Be stedfast in thy understanding; and let thy word be the same.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke:³

“And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the

abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Good teachers are often good sloganeers. Like successful advertising copywriters, they craft short, pithy, and memorable slogans, phrases, jingles, and summaries to help their students remember important points in their curriculum materials.

The Church is, to a very important degree, a teaching institution, so, like any good teacher, it has, over the centuries, come up with many examples of this sort of little mnemonic device. One of those, which enjoys a very catchy title, is “The Seven Deadly Sins”.

“Deadly” or “mortal” sins are those whose nature cuts us off entirely from the operation of sanctifying grace.

assessing, and repairing, the state and health of his relationship with God?

Was his soul’s engine likely to be in running order, or was it parked immobile at the side of the road?

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹³
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Ecclesiasticus* 5: 1-10 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 12: 13-21 (KJV).

⁴ St. Luke 12: 15 (KJV).

⁵ Traditionally, there are at least five “Popes”, the Patriarchs of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. In fact, over time, several church traditions have acquired more or less colorable claims to the latter three of these Patriarchies, so that, today, there are at least eight Popes and very probably more. For example, there are simultaneously at least Syriac Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, and Maronite (Roman Catholic), Popes and Patriarchs of Antioch; Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Melkite (Roman Catholic), and Latin (also Roman Catholic) Popes and Patriarchs of Jerusalem; and Coptic, Greek Orthodox, and Coptic Catholic (*i.e.*, Roman Catholic) Popes and Patriarchs of Alexandria. In addition, there was until 1954 a Latin (*i.e.*, Roman Catholic) Patriarch of Alexandria.

⁶ Born *ca.* 540 AD, died 604 AD. He is said to have formulated his list of seven mortal sins *ca.* 590 AD.

⁷ LOREN GAVITT, ED., SAINT AUGUSTINE’S PRAYER BOOK, REV. ED. 113-121 (West Park, NY: Holy Cross Publications 1966).

⁸ “Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transsexual”. Of course, that acronym ignores the facts that “bisexual” is inaccurate and should really be “ambisexual” and “transsexual” is, in reality, merely a name for something that does not actually exist, *viz.* “changing” or “reassigning” one’s inborn sex.

⁹ *Sirach* 5: 2-3 (RSV).

¹⁰ *Sirach* 5: 4-6 (RSV).

¹¹ *Sirach* 5: 7 (RSV).

¹² St. Luke 12: 15 (RSV).

We are given an indirect example of this in today's Second Lesson. St. Luke reports Our Lord's parable of a man who has done extremely well in life, at least from the material standpoint. He is rich and is about to harvest another bountiful harvest. However, from that man's own thoughts, we can see that he has never given any thought to the source of all these riches.

So, by ignoring God's rôle in blessing him with all this material wealth, this man implicitly attributes all of it to his own unaided efforts. In Christ's parable, the rich farmer is not precisely punished for his presumption; instead, he merely discovers, as we all will someday discover, the fleeting and impermanent nature of worldly benefits.

Unexpectedly and in the prime of his life, he is called by his Maker. Thus, in an instant, all his material wealth becomes, for him, completely useless, and he will be left to stand before his final Judge with only his rectitude to plead for him and his sinfulness to plead against him. In this forum, his wealth or poverty will be completely irrelevant.

Conclusion:

It is this moment of judgement, in which a man or woman must rely on the health of his or her soul, as developed over a lifetime, that we can see the truth of Our Lord's warning: "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."¹²

This is where the rich farmer in today's parable was at grave risk. He had spent his whole life contemplating the wonderful but outward things his own wisdom, diligence, and luck had brought him, and seemingly spent no time at all contemplating God's part in bestowing those riches upon him. If he was so self-absorbed in the matter of his outward blessings, how much attention do you suppose he spent on

To understand what this means, think of what the theologians call "our journey of perfection" as a car trip on which we set out from the place we usually live and on which we intend to end up at a relative's home for a prolonged visit. In this case, the relative is our Father, the loving and merciful God, and because His home is heaven, our visit with Him, if we ever achieve it, will be for eternity.

Like any car trip, however, various obstacles and difficulties can interrupt, delay, or even make impossible our journey to heaven. If the engine of our car throws a rod, our trip grinds to a halt and we will remain motionless, making no progress whatever, until that car is repaired. Where the breakdown is a major one, the repair will also be a major one.

A "mortal" sin is like that blown engine. So long as one remains in a state of mortal sin, one's journey toward fellowship with God is halted. Only a major repair to the sinner's soul can get it back on the road so the journey can be resumed. The overhaul that will permit the repaired soul to resume its journey is the Sacrament of Penance.

So we can see that it is important for the Christian to be able to avoid, or in extreme cases repair the damage caused by, these "mortal" sins, that is, these sins which can cause the spiritual death of the sinner. To avoid them, we must be able to identify them, which is why the concept of "The Seven Deadly Sins" is so useful. We owe the beginnings of this to a Roman Pope,⁵ St. Gregory the Great, who lived in the Sixth Century.⁶ The modern formulation of these particular sins, in a format familiar to many Anglicans,⁷ is:

- Pride,
- Anger,
- Envy,

- Covetousness,
- Gluttony,
- Lust, and
- Sloth.

We live in an age of acronyms and initials, so I like to think of these seven categories of dangerous spiritually dangerous misbehavior as “the PAECGLS lifestyle”. Of course, thanks to that tendency to thwart God’s wishes that we call “Original Sin”, all of us are followers of the PAECGLS lifestyle.

In fact, some sets of initials or acronyms that are more familiar than is “PAECGLS”, such as the currently-popular “LGBT”⁸, are just specialized subsets of the overall PAECGLS lifestyle, usually concentrating on “L” for Lust, often with a touch of “P” for Pride thrown in.

Which brings us to the message of today’s First and Second Lessons. Ben Sira gives us a clear warning against the dangers of pride, of thinking we are in control of our own destinies and can successfully manage our own fates without reference to God:

“Do not follow your inclination and strength,
walking according to the desires of your
heart.
Do not say, ‘Who will have power over me?’
for the Lord will surely punish you.”⁹

This sense of self-sufficiency, of independence from God, is the very essence of the mortal sin of Pride. Because it prevents us from turning to God, and from relying upon God, so long as it exists it creates an impassable obstacle to our proceeding further toward God. After all, how can we successfully complete the extremely difficult journey toward

the One of whom we have previously decided we have no need?

This same deadly sin of Pride may also manifest itself in our presumptuousness. Ben Sira reminds us that we presume dangerously when we rely on God’s mercy towards us without exercising ourselves by making the necessary preparations to receive that mercy. In other words, it is dangerous pridefulness knowingly to continue in a course of mortal sin, assuming that in the end a warm, fuzzy, all-forgiving God will save us even though we have consistently and deliberately flouted His commands:

“Do not say, ‘I have sinned, and what happened to me?’
for the Lord is slow to anger.
Do not be so confident of atonement
that you add sin to sin.
Do not say, ‘His mercy is great, he will forgive the
multitude of my sins,’
for both mercy and wrath are with him,
and his anger rests on sinners.”¹⁰

This is the great error of “universalism”, the belief that, in the end, everyone will be saved regardless of his or her demonstrated rejection of God – for that is what our repeated and unrepented disobedience toward God amounts to, to rejection of Him.

Thus we should take to heart Ben Sira’s warning:

“Do not delay to turn to the Lord,
nor postpone it from day to day;
for suddenly the wrath of the Lord will go forth
and at the time of punishment you will perish.”¹¹