Pride: From Individualism to Community
Luke 15:11-32

Today we are beginning a Lent series on the seven deadly sins. I thought my last sermon series should be a real uplifting one. 😊 Now we can trace this list back to the third and fourth centuries A.D. As Christianity took root and began to spread across the Roman Empire, people began writing theological treatises and debating some of the finer points of this young religion. In those first centuries the early church fathers thought of sin as belonging to three main categories – physical, emotional, and mental.

Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth century monk, created a more expanded and detailed list, identifying eight core sins. In the year 590, Pope Gregory I revised the list down to seven sins, and this is the list most denominations still recognize today. The sins on this list are pride, envy, anger, gluttony, sloth, greed, and lust.

And why are they the seven *deadly* sins? Well, Thomas Aquinas, the great 13th century theologian and philosopher, says that these are the "capital sins," because they are the head and form of all other sins. The idea is that if you take any sinful behaviour and peel back its layers, you will find at its root one of these seven core sins.

Now you may be wondering why we would name a sermon series on the seven deadly sins "Fully Alive." This phrase comes from St. Ireneaus, a 2nd century Greek bishop, who said that "the glory of God is a human being, fully alive." The Christian writer and podcaster Elizabeth Oldfield, who I've mentioned before, is really intrigued by this statement, and in her work is always asking the question, "What does this look like? What does it mean to live life fully alive?" Asked another way, she's also

wondering, “What are the things that keep us from living? What are the things that lead us away from life, and towards death instead?”

So last year she wrote a book based on the seven deadly sins, and in each chapter, she examines what it is that brings death, and then what would be on the opposite end of the spectrum, those behaviours that leads us towards flourishing and life. The titles for these sermons are taken from her chapter titles: as we look at each sin, we’ll look at how that sin affects us, and what God is inviting us into instead.

So this morning we start with pride. Now we have to clarify right off the bat what we’re talking about when we say “pride.” Because pride isn’t always bad. When your kid learns to ride a bike without training wheels, they are proud of their accomplishment, and likely so are you! When Canada beats the United States at hockey, we feel…maybe a bit more pride than is healthy. For people who are oppressed, taking pride in who they are can be a way of re-asserting their own sense of dignity and worth. It’s not always bad to be proud.

But we’re talking about pride on a more encompassing scale. This isn’t pride about something, or in something…this is pride that focuses all our attention, all the time, on ourselves. Elizabeth Oldfield writes, “Pride is a problem because humans are made for and oriented towards relationship – primarily with God, but also with others. It’s our proper “end,” *telos* or goal. It’s why we exist. Pride, though, resists that orientation, making our own soul “an end to itself.”

For this reason, many theologians, across the centuries, have said that pride is the most fundamental of all sins. Augustine said that pride is “the beginning of sin.” Why? Because, says Augustine, “sin is humanity

turned inward on itself." And pride is the driving force that pushes all our thoughts and energy towards ourselves.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells a story of two brothers who are turned in on themselves. At the beginning of this story the main focus is on the younger brother, who decides he's tired of living under his father's care and wants to strike out on his own. He demands that he get his inheritance now, which is basically like telling his father to drop dead. The money is more important than his own family. Doing what he wants is more important than the feelings of those around him.

His father, in an incredible act of graciousness, gives his son the money. And off the son goes, to a distant land, leaving behind everyone who's ever loved him. He has no need for them anymore. Life is to be lived on his terms now.

Only his terms aren't very wise ones. The young son squanders all of his money until he's got nothing left. And then – disaster. A famine strikes the land. Resources become scarce. Food is hard to come by. People don't have anything to sell, let alone hand out to the kid they saw only months ago dressed in designer labels, buying drinks for everyone at the club.

Desperate, the younger son hires himself out to a pig farmer. This is the moment in Jesus' story where the audience would have gasped and groaned. Pigs are unclean in Jewish culture. Jews are not only forbidden to eat pork, but to touch the carcass of a pig. There would have been an extensive purification process to go through in order for this man to re-enter Jewish society. To say that he had to sleep out with the pigs is to say that he has reached the lowest point imaginable. He's cut off from everyone and everything he's ever known, completely alone.

Which is exactly the imagery Augustine uses when he talks about pride. In our pride we want to puff ourselves up, walk around broad-shouldered and tall. We think that by caring only for ourselves we'll find the path to flourishing and vitality. But Augustine says that in fact the opposite happens. "The person who reaches toward God," he says, "and wants to please God gets 'stretched' by this move and ennobled by the transcendence of its object. But the person who curves in on himself and tries to please only himself ends up contracting into a little wad."

This is how we can imagine this younger son. Curled up into a ball, huddled next to a pig for warmth, alone and hungry, and at the end of his rope. Now, in this place, his pride is gone. He resolves to return to his family home and ask to be hired as one of the servants, because at least they're guaranteed food. And up he gets to make the long walk home.

It's not just this younger brother who suffers from pride, though. When the younger brother comes back and the father, overjoyed at his return, decides to throw a massive party to celebrate, the older brother is outraged. What about him?! No one's ever thrown him so much as an afternoon tea to thank him for everything he's done around the farm. He didn't squander his inheritance. He didn't turn his back on his father. He's been the very model of a moral fiscal citizen. Why should he celebrate this scoundrel of a brother? He'll do nothing of the sort. He'll stay out in the field, where his brother should have been for all those years.

Elizabeth Oldfield says that pride is, ultimately, isolating. She writes,

"Pride is the sense of a sequestered, solipsistic self, determined to never compromise, never surrender. We often think humility is the opposite of pride, but I'm now wondering if the true opposite is love. Iris Murdoch famously said that 'love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real." And when I'm proud, love is what I am missing. For me, believing I'm the center of the universe looks like a shameful mix of entitlement, subtle disdain for others and a desire to insulate myself from their suffering, their needs. And when I let it rule me, I also insulate myself from my own full humanity. It's death dressed up like self-esteem."

For the younger brother, pride showed up as a disdain for others. The older brother's pride kept him from considering his younger brother's needs. In both cases, each brother ends up isolated. Outside the spaces of love and community, apart from the people who know them, who can provide them with that sense of being known, of being *somebody.*

The tragedy of pride is that it removes us from community. The irony of pride is that the antidote for pride is…community.

I said earlier that not all pride is bad…for example, having a sense of pride in where you come from or live can provide an important sense of identity and belonging. But that patriotism…that pride…can quickly grow too big and turn into something uglier. It can lead to a sense of disdain for other peoples, a denial of any responsibility for other people's needs, a sense of isolation and exceptionalism.

In Canada, we're feeling the effects of that kind of pride, that kind of ugly nationalism, from our neighbour to the south. "America First" is a form of pride gone off the rails.

And there's something super satisfying about reacting in kind. It felt GOOD to win the Four Nations gold against the United States. And my heart, like everyone's heart, expanded three times in size when I watched Jeff Douglas' new "We Are Canadian" rant. And there certainly needs to be some response to Trump's language and actions.

But you can't solve nationalism…with nationalism. You can't solve a problem with the same energy that created that problem. We have to be careful lest our legitimate concern drives us towards the exact same kind of isolated exceptionalism that we're condemning. Lest we become the older brother, so bent on condemning the behaviour of the younger that we become closed off from any possibilities of reconciliation. And lest, in our desire to promote our own sense of community, the boundaries of that community become narrower and narrower.

Because we were made for community. We need community. Only in community, in relationship with other people, do we come to know ourselves fully. Only in community do we recognize that we can actually be kind of petty, and sometimes we're even mean, and we're not always right. Only in community do we realize that, as Solzhenityn said, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Only in community can our pride die a slow and painful death.

But it's also then true that only in community do we experience grace. When we show up with all our faults and foibles…all our bad habits and annoying traits…all the times we've been wrong when we were so sure we were right…and people love us anyway. Only by letting others in, by letting ourselves be known, by being vulnerable and honest about our imperfections, can we truly experience love.

Maybe on a global level we're not looking to experience love from the United States. But in our more local relationships…in your relationships with family, friends, classmates, and colleagues…are you allowing yourself to experience love? To be known, with all your faults and foibles, thus to be received by grace?

One of the ways we experience this community is through the church, through being part of a Christian community. When you stop and think about it, church is a weird space. Every week a group of a few hundred people get together for an hour and a half. They come from different backgrounds and walks of life. They do different jobs and have different family situations. They vote differently and have different opinions about the social issues of the day. They even have different opinions about the very thing they do together - church. And yet they still come together, to sing, to read Scripture, to drink coffee, to teach, to learn, to make decisions, to pray.

Sometimes that coming together feels easy. Sometimes it feels really, really hard. Sometimes our opinions clash. Sometimes personalities rub up against each other. Sometimes we act unkindly. Sometimes, like the younger brother, we show disdain for others. And sometimes, like the older brother, we hold grudges and lean on our own self-righteousness. Sometimes it would be all too easy to let our pride get the best of us.

And yet, every week, we gather together and say, "The Lord be with you," and respond, "And also with you." We say this, me to you, and you to each other, and us to our children. And when we say this it's like we're saying, "May you experience the love and grace of the Lord today." Which is another way of saying, "You are worthy of the love and grace of the Lord."

To say those words is the greatest antidote to pride that I can think of.

So too is coming to this table. Where each of us receives a feast provided by a generous and gracious father. A feast we don't deserve. A welcome we haven't warranted. A love that should have turned its back on us after all the times we've turned our backs on the giver of that love.

When we come to this table, we come together. We are reminded that those who belong to Jesus belong to those who belong to Jesus. That we are a community, interdependent, interconnected, and united by the blood of Jesus. That none of us are deserving of this table, and all of us are welcome here.

The love of God moves us from individualism to community. So let us gather as one to keep the feast, and rejoice in the grace that welcomes us home.

Would you pray with me?

O God,
We want to live for ourselves,
and sometimes its easier to keep others at bay.
But you have made us for relationship,
and by your grace, have called us into community
so that we might experience grace.
Help us to be vulnerable with one another,
to be ourselves, and to love each other.
Help us seek the good of those around us,
in our church, our cities, our country, and our world.
May we not boast in ourselves, or turn inwards out of pride,
but live with arms wide open, boasting only in you.

Thank you that you welcome us with rejoicing,
that you always turn towards us with gladness,
and that you have set a table before us.
May we gather before it as one people,
glorifying your grace and mercy.
We pray this in the name of Christ Jesus,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen,.