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Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37
Lust

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about lust. It is based on this morning's Gospel Reading from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Especially I want to lift up Matthew 5:27-29. Jesus says this:

²⁷You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. (Matthew 5:27-29, RSV)

In the dynamics of the human soul, lust seems to be midway between desire and adultery. We cannot help desires. They come upon us willy-nilly, respecting no boundaries. They are simply part of human life.

But lust goes beyond desire. Lust is a lingering with desire and an intensification of desire. It is a kind of dwelling with the desire, and a provoking of it, until it becomes a wild, inordinate desire for one another's bodies. Marriage permits and rejoices in a kind of holy lust — that is the desire for our spouse. But there is other lust in this world that amounts to yielding ourselves over to a whirlwind, a tornado of desire in which we lay aside the duties of charity and respect for others and perhaps even for ourselves.

In this morning's Gospel text, Jesus talks about cutting off the hand and plucking out the eye. Jesus is not counseling self-mutilation here. It is very much in the spirit of Jesus that Saint Paul should write:

¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

So, let there be no plucking out of our own eyes among us or the cutting off of our own hands. Let there be no abuse of our bodies, no slashing with razors, no dulling of our brain cells or destroying of our liver by abuse of alcohol. Such as our bodies are, they are beautiful in the eyes of our Maker. Whether our bodies are old or

young, they are precious to the Lord, and he wants us to take good care of them from now on.

When Jesus talks about plucking out the eye and cutting off the hand, he is not so much talking about those useful parts of our bodies. Rather, he is talking about our hearts. Jesus teaches a heart-religion. He wants us to get the impulses of our heart under control. In particular, in today's Bible passage Jesus wants us to get our wrath and our lust under control. The cure for wrestling with one another on the ground and hitting with wicked fist is not that we should cut off our fist, but rather that we should relearn the ways of peace in our heart. And the cure for adultery and prostitution and pornography is not that we should pluck out our eye, but that we should get the lust in our heart under control.

EYES

There is a fun scene in the Jamie Foxx movie about Ray Charles (2004) where the blind Ray Charles has developed the notion that he can tell how beautiful a woman is by the size of her wrist. So, in this scene Ray is meeting someone new and you see him casually slip his fingers around her wrist, measuring her wrist and then smiling to himself. You can tell what's on his mind. Lust, you see, has less to do with the eye than with the heart and with the mind.

And yet...lust does indeed have something to do with the eye. Lust concerns how we look upon someone, and how we conduct ourselves that others might look upon us and desire us.

Long ago now, a plumber in my internship congregation in Buffalo, New York taught me something important about lust. He pointed out to me that his profession back then had a somewhat scandalous reputation for infidelity. He said that it was connected with the reality that sometimes the plumber was alone with the housewife. Sometimes they flirted with one another. Sometimes they went beyond flirting. But, this plumber said, he had never flirted on his job, not been flirted at. There was not the slightest suggestion of seduction in all his years as a plumber. Why? His answer was firm: "Because I love my wife and mean to be true to her for the rest of my days." The man had eyes, yes, but eyes only for his wife. And the world sensed this about him and credited him with integrity.

In this sermon, let's explore this matter of the eyes and the heart and the battle against lust.

It is not always easy to sort out *looking at* someone versus looking *with lust* at someone. I remember being on a subway once and being struck by how beautiful the young woman was who was standing near me. She was standing there reading. I was standing there thinking what I always seem to be thinking, "Women are great!" I was somewhat separated from her. She had no way of knowing that I had noticed her. But suddenly the train came to its stop, she put down her book, looked right into my eyes, smiled, and stepped off the train.

A passing event. A nice passing event. But perhaps danger lurks in such passing events. The truth is that there is a path available to each of us which if we

follow it far enough, we might end up with such regret that we would gladly pluck out our eye and throw it away if only we could go back and not make that mistake again. And the *beginning* of that heart-breaking path has something to do with how we gaze upon one another even now.

In this morning's Bible reading, Jesus forbids lust:

²⁷You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28, RSV)

Jesus speaks here of men lusting for women. But it could just as well go the other way around: Jesus also forbids women to lust for men. In fact, there is to be no lusting at all. We are not to covet one another's bodies. We are not to make space in our hearts for the wild winds of sexual desire except for our own spouse.

What this passage refers to is our human capacity to open ourselves up to our own destruction by enflaming our passions. We seem able to do this—to take a mere ember of desire and nurse it along and blow upon it until it breaks forth into a roaring flame we can hardly control.

Are we speaking of our own destruction? Yes, judging by this morning's First Lesson, from Deuteronomy 30. The Lord is appallingly clear in the matter of the choices that lie before us:

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live... (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

We choose life by following the Lord's commandments. And blessed is the one who walks in the way of those commandments. It is with that one as our Psalm says:

¹Happy are they whose | way is blameless,*
who walk in the law | of the Lord!
²Happy are they who observe | his decrees*
and seek him with | all their hearts! (Psalm 119:1-2, LBW)

But there might well be a world of trouble in store for the one who permits himself or herself to lust in his heart after others. Nursing along such lust opens the door to the devil to take up residence in the heart, and that is not going to work out for the good of anyone. Why would we open the door to the very lion that stalks us, "seeking whom he can devour" (1 Peter 5:8, KJV) Why would we play with such fire? The devil is a gentleman in the sense that he will gladly go where

he is welcome. The testimony of the saints is that the devil will depart from those who resist him:

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (James 4:7, RSV)

Do not, then, open the door to Satan and bid him enter your heart by lingering with unholy desires.

FRIENDSHIPS

Do not harm friendships by introducing sex where it does not belong. Do not toy around with others by *imagining* sex where it does not belong. Rather, pray and work toward purity of heart.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

For some stretch of our lives — a period when we feel especially buffeted by lust — perhaps the most dramatic part of our offertory prayer will be the part that concerns *our selves*:

- Ⓐ Let us pray. Merciful Father,
- Ⓒ we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us--*our selves*, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

In seasons of passion, it takes strength to lay aside lust and offer ourselves to God—to dedicate our bodies to the glory of God, to entrust them to him, praying for a season of more peace. Alas, the world is not always on the side of the one who would pause from the pursuits of lust:

“You are abnormal. Who can understand you?”

“Use it or lose it,” the world might taunt.

“If you do not play this game of lust, you might miss out on the great love of your life.”

These are powerful arguments. And yet many a grey-haired man and many a grey-haired woman could testify that they dedicated themselves to the Lord as best they could and things worked out fine for them. Such dedication is in the holy direction of life for neighbors and for ourselves. And then there is heaven beyond these years.

Desires come and go according to their own whimsy. Desires are no respecter of boundaries. They trespass with abandon. But, as Martin Luther says, though we cannot always stop the birds from flying overhead, at least we can stop them from building a nest in our hair:

It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows (Eph. 6:16) stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: “I cannot,” he said, “keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair ...”¹

Do as Saint Paul says in Ephesians 6:

¹⁶besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one.. (Ephesians 6:16, RSV)

Oh, yes! Lust is indeed a flaming dart. But it is possible to quench it by the shield of faith, by remembering our Saviour, by remembering the One to whom we belong. We might not be able to stop desire from coming into our heart, but I do believe we can stop desire from transforming itself into lust.

JESUS TOO WAS TEMPTED

Finally, remember that your Savior Jesus has been tempted in every way such as you have, yet he did not sin. I am referring to a remarkable teaching about Jesus. Let me quote it for you to get it right. The letter to the Hebrews twice speaks of Jesus being tempted as we are.² Here is one of the passages, from Chapter 4.

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:5, RSV)

So, Jesus was tempted in every way such as we are, but did not sin. That means that Jesus was tempted by desire, but he did not let the desire become lust and then onwards to sin. The Bible has stories of Jesus interacting with women, even

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1956). *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (21:88). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

² The other passage is Hebrews 2:18: “For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.” (RSV)

scandalous women. There was the Samaritan woman at the well, for example, who had been married five times before, and the one she has now is not her husband:

...for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly. (John 4:18, RSV)

She might have been a woman of high spirit, but there is nothing in Jesus toward her but kindness and yearning for her spiritual benefit.

On another occasion, Jesus permitted his head to be anointed with expensive ointment and his feet to be washed with the tears of a woman who the Bible said was a “sinner” and whose very presence was an offense to the righteous folks:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:39, RSV)

Jesus defended the woman, setting aside her former sins, and looking upon her with the highest integrity.

And finally, there is the kindness of Jesus toward the woman caught in adultery.

¹⁰Jesus looked up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.” (John 8:10-11, RSV)

She was vulnerable, she was grateful. Perhaps another man would have exploited her. But the thing about Jesus is that he looks upon our human flesh with the innocence and the delight with which a mother looks upon her little baby. He has nothing but purity in his conduct toward others. And he bids us to such purity too.

Being a tempted man or woman is not the problem. That is part of life. Sinning is the problem. But midway between temptation and sin often can be found lust, which does not even try to resist the temptation, but lingers with it and stirs it up.

Whenever Jesus beholds someone, he cherishes them altogether—body and mind and soul. He is our great example of purity of our heart, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.