

12 February 2023—The 6th Sunday after The Epiphany: Matthew 5:21-37

Good morning! I'm Geri Nelson, an ordained deacon at Calvary Church. Usually my ministry is more 'undercover' than today. Deacons are ordained to bring the needs of the world to the Church and bring the Church's ministry to the world's needs in a kind of 'official' way. Of course, priests can do that, too, but Deacons do not have the administrative, liturgical, and pastoral responsibilities priests do. I'm standing here today because our priest, Fr. Richard, tested positive for Covid early last week. He is following doctor's orders, including quarantining. As you know, he never likes being away from you; I'm certain he is viewing our livestream right now, longing to be here. Please keep him in your prayers and, since I'm married to him, me, too—he's not the jolliest patient! I'll be reading a sermon he wrote. He realizes the readings appointed for today are not easy to hear, let alone live. However, one of the blessings of following a lectionary—a set schedule of readings for every Sunday—is we are confronted with passages we might otherwise ignore.

In the Gospel Jesus said: *You have heard it said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (5:27-28).* Obviously, this also applies to women's lust. Lust is obsessive thoughts and cravings that drive us to use and manipulate others for our own pleasure. Lust is self-obsessed, springing from and fed by a distorted spiritual attitude about oneself and others. Lust trades momentary pleasure for long-term emotional, spiritual pain. Lust is a self-medication against low self-esteem, isolation, and fear. Yet, the more one lusts, the more one's self-esteem suffers, the more isolation, and the more fear; as one keeps turning to lust as a remedy, a downward spiral of moral and spiritual sickness occurs.

Why is lust so powerful? As with all sin lust is a misuse of something good. God made us for joy. We experience pleasure when our brains produce endorphins, serotonin, adrenaline, dopamine, natural to human biology. We can learn to control their release; we begin to use outward stimuli and inner thoughts to trigger their release. Some triggers are harmless: beautiful sunsets relax us; good food satisfies. However, when one's natural search for joy becomes obsessive and exploitative, the 'cure' becomes the problem. Sin is when something good is taken to extremes, practiced in harmful ways or becomes uncontrollable; the naturally wholesome becomes destructive. Therefore it is undeniably true that the opposite of love is not hate, but lust!

Lust is the huge elephant in the room of American society. We bring sex into just about everything, but we are scared to death to talk about lust. Two facts illustrate the prevalence of lust: The US is the largest multi-billion-dollar pornography producer in the world. Pornography is the perversion of sex for the sake of greed. However, lust is not just a "male sin." Second fact: the best-selling category of books are romance novels aimed at women; lust set on fire with words not images.

It is normal to appreciate beauty. Lust objectifies; its purpose is exploitation. Lust makes others valuable only in what they do to or for the one lusting. Lust takes from others to fill up what is lacking in oneself. Feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, and self-loathing feed lust; Lust dehumanizes both its object and the one lusting. This is the core of Jesus' teaching about all sin: sin dehumanizes, does violence to others' worth, uses others for one's own ends, and debases the sinner. All unchecked sin slowly, inevitably degrades the mind and heart. Compulsive, habitual lust is a spiritual cancer.

How does one live lust-free? First recognize lust in your thoughts and actions. Persistent self-honesty and self-awareness are required; a soul friend or spiritual companion can help. As you are aware of lustful thoughts or intentions, surrender them immediately to God. Second, if you are dependent on pornography, romance novels, fantasy, other media that trigger lust—these activities and materials must stop. One cannot let go of lust while practicing the thoughts and actions of lust. Next, replace the negative with the positive. As an example, if you find yourself lusting after a person, replace lust with prayer: "God, bless this person and make her/him a blessing." Each morning, admit your character flaws to God and ask for God's help for today. It might go like this: "God, I am powerless over lust; my life is unmanageable. Whatever I am looking for, may I find in you. Be with me and work with me, that I may better know your will; deliver me from the bondage of self so I may better do your will; take away my defects—that your victory over them will be a sign to those I would help of your power, your love, and your way of life. Your will, not mine, be done in me today."

Our lustful habits of mind and body are usually deeply ingrained, and lust desensitizes us to their presence and effects. It takes time to live differently: ask for willingness, wisdom, patience, and humility. Be easy with yourself; you will likely not be healed all at once, but God will heal us day by day if we are willing. At times,

old ways of thinking and acting may seem irresistible, triggers can be vivid and persistent. Surrender everything to God every second if need be. Turn from darkness to the Light. Gently place yourself in Christ with each relationship, encounter, and environment. Begin each day offering yourself to God; live each day relying on God's power at work in you; end each day asking God's protection in the night. And be thankful.

These are incomplete thoughts on a cunning, baffling, and powerful soul-sickness. While this homily has focused on lust, the good habits of mind, soul, and heart apply to every sin we face. Perhaps your greatest difficulty is anger, envy, greed, or another sin. The same principles apply. Jesus promises healing, a holy life. He will fulfill his promise if you want His power and wisdom to work in you; if you give yourself to Christ each day as unreservedly as you are able; if you rely on the Holy Spirit's power to guide, strengthen, and protect you, you will surely find the true joy and fulfillment for which you are made.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.