



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, February 23, 2020**  
*The Last Sunday After the Epiphany*

*Festal Evensong*  
*at 4:00 p.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
Lenten Sermon Series: The Seven Virtues - Humility  
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### **Down to Earth**

In John Michael McDonagh's hard and dark and beautiful film "Calvary", the Irish Catholic priest Father James says, "I think there's too much talk about sins and not enough about virtues." I believe there's something really true in that statement.

There is a guy, a street preacher, on State Street in Chicago who rain or shine, summer or winter stands out in front of a department store with a microphone hooked up to a battered speaker berating passersby for their sins. He covers the usual themes in the genre. Sexual sins, mostly. But by far his most frequent target, when I was walking by anyway, was smoking. This guy was utterly convinced that the Lord hated smoking. And that if you smoked a cigarette, you were going straight to Hell. He even had the Surgeon General's Warning, copied off the side of a pack of smokes, enlarged and taped to the side of his loudspeaker for added rhetorical emphasis.

There's an image of Christianity in popular culture that this fellow on State Street exemplifies. Of the red-faced, shouting, fire and brimstone preacher telling everyone they're going to hell. The loud and confident moralist who considers the work of the Gospel to consist mostly of telling others how poorly they're living their lives. Usually fixating on the really prurient stuff too. Or on some risky and potentially addictive habit like gambling or drinking or, well, smoking. It's an easy caricature of Christianity because it seems, all too often, like the prevailing pastoral strategy of people in my line of work. Tell people how sinful they are and how that's going to cause them to burn forever. Focus on a narrow range of easily identifiable bad behaviors. And make stopping and policing that behavior what repentance and holiness is all about. I'm not convinced that's helpful. That it actually achieves what it sets out to achieve. I don't know how many people that street preacher scared out of smoking with his hellfire-and-damnation routine but I can confidently guess that every day he frightened more than a few people away from Christianity entirely.

That preacher is on a mission but it's not like sin is something we can really wage a holy war against anyways. Sin isn't something we can fight to death like an invading army or scrub out like a stain. Sin is our default setting, our easy mode as humans. Sin is what we slide into in the absence of self-awareness and contrary action. Kind of like darkness and cold are the default in the absence of light and heat. We can't through brute strength drive the darkness out of a dark room. We can't by sheer force of will make the forest in February less cold. We can choose, though, to turn on a light or to kindle a fire. We can't choose to not have sin within us as an ever-tempting option, waiting for when we're tired or resentful and ready to throw in the towel. But we can turn on the light, we can build a fire. We can cultivate a life of virtue.

This Lenten season, here at Saint Thomas, we're going to talk about virtues. In the sermons at Evensong on Sunday evenings we will focus in particular on the Seven virtues that, since the Middle Ages, have been contrasted with and opposed to the famous Seven Deadly Sins. Upstairs in the Rector's office there are two sets of windows on two opposite sides of the room depicting these virtues and these sins. Sloth on one side and diligence on the other, lust on one side and purity on the other. Christian teaching on the Seven Deadly Sins has often emphasized not merely an obsession with the sins themselves but with cultivating the Seven Virtues that oppose and correct them. Training ourselves in the habits of goodness to break our attachment to the easy inertia of sin. Because it takes effort to keep the lamps lit and the fires burning. It's far easier to let them die.

So where to start? C.S. Lewis wrote that, "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice." So we begin there with the sin of pride. And the opposing virtue of humility. They are gateways, both of them, pride and humility. Pride leads into "every other vice", and humility leads us into further virtue, into deeper holiness.

A compliment you sometimes hear about someone is that they're "down to earth." The word humility comes from the Latin word *humus* which means earth or soil. Humility isn't about being less than you are, about beating yourself down into a downward-gazing silent person. It is, instead, all about being grounded in reality; in the facts of our lives as they really are. In gardening parlance, *humus* is also that dark rich part of the soil that is full of all the organic matter that helps things grow. And humility, as the gateway to all virtue, is the good soil in which goodness grows. Think of the parable of the sower. The good soil in which the Word of God grows well. Moral problems are problems of the heart. And humility deals with the disposition of the heart - pointing it towards what's **real**. Humility, as I understand it anyway, is a kind of twofold reality. Involving a certain approach to the self and a certain approach to reality beyond the self.

Humility is about, first of all, knowing yourself with a brutal and deep honesty, as clear and bracing as the icy waters of a mountain stream, and with a precision like a scalpel parting your flesh to get down into the inner workings. To practice humility is to seek to know your weaknesses, your darkness and your brokenness. And also to know your talents, your goodness, those singular gifts that you bring, that unique perspective and those accumulated experiences that only you have to offer this world. Knowing all of that. The good and the bad and the ugly. Accurately. Because it is a great defense against delusion. Against becoming the kind of cocky arrogant jerk who makes this world worse and who makes the lives of others insufferable. Because that's what Pride does. It makes us gateways for further sin and evil to enter this world. But if we know our weaknesses, we can correct for them. And if we know our strengths, we can nurture them.

However, we humans are masters of self-deception. Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes that: "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. ... My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love — outside of **reality** and outside of life. And such a life cannot help but be an illusion." Merton says that, "All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered." This is pride. The assumption that my false self, the self-born of my egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life. Seeing myself untruthfully, inaccurately but in a way that feeds my ego, that makes me feel good or safe or secure or strong or right. And then ordering the universe, how things *should be*, around that series of deceptions. Coming to believe that the world revolves around me. Exists to serve me. Exists only in relation to me. That the universe and everyone else in it have no independent life outside of my opinions, needs and desires.

There's a story about me that is in no way flattering but which I think illustrates all of this. It happened pretty early on in my time as a hospital chaplain. I was visiting a woman in the wee hours of the night. She had gotten a bad diagnosis and couldn't sleep - reflecting on her life and on her regrets. She regretted how

her relationships with certain people, all now dead, had been so bad. She felt like God would judge her for that. Me, being both profoundly uncomfortable at the intensity of her feelings and full of the kind of arrogant theological self-confidence that only a second year seminarian can have, felt like I had just the answer. So I said some very solemn and very intellectual and very unhelpful thing to her about God's existing outside of time. Which is absolutely true and yet utterly tone deaf and unrelated to this woman's issue. She didn't give a hoot about God's timelessness. She was feeling the depths of regret when faced with her mortality. But I didn't see that. I didn't see her. I couldn't sit there with her in that. In my discomfort, I sought a solution. In my prideful theological arrogance, I saw an intellectual problem to solve. She promptly, harshly, wonderfully, told me off and kicked me out of her room. And she was right to do so. I'd sinned. I'd missed the mark. And it was because I didn't approach her with humility; with a proper self-awareness about my discomfort with her pain and, more, without a proper reverence towards her and the complexity and difficulty and reality of her situation. So pride goeth before a fall and also before a misplaced theological lecture.

Humility, on the other hand, gives me an accurate knowledge of myself that helps to set me in proper relation with God and the world. In a position of love towards others rather than mere self-centered pragmatism. In a position of awe and wonder and gratitude for the world, rather than an instrumental domination of it to serve my purposes. By getting down to actual earthly realities about who I am and who God is and what everything else is, I clear away the weeds of ego and delusion and become good soil for God's grace and for the growth in me of further virtues.

This is why I don't have much time for the street preacher's approach. Because it misses the real object of the moral life. The point isn't to tell *others* how sinful they are. The point is to be humble, myself. To take the log out of my own eye before worrying about the splinter in someone else's. To be responsible for tending to the garden of goodness, the fire of virtue in my own life. To look inwardly at myself with honesty and courage and outwardly at God and the world with love and awe. To see ourselves as God sees us - as loved sinners, as works in progress - and to see the world as it is - as complex mystery and precious gift.

As the poet Mary Oliver wrote,  
Let me keep my distance, always, from those  
who think they have the answers.  
Let me keep company, always, with those who say  
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.