

**“NEW AND IMPROVED – Seven Deadly Sins” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely  
Unitarian Church of Edmonton, May 3, 2009**

**Reading:** “Wrath, Lust and Littering?” ABC News  
<http://abcnews.go.com/nightline/story?id=4424390>

As Popes go, Gregory the First (590-604) was a busy guy. He worked hard for the title ‘the Great’ that history has given him. He led a simple life even as Pope. He converted England and Northern Europe. He designed a structured system for the distribution of alms, and revised the Mass. He is also mistakenly credited for inventing the Gregorian Chant (it came a couple of hundred years later). He pretty much invented Purgatory...temporary punishment before heaven.

And Gregory produced the Seven Deadly Sins, based on Greek philosophy. It is a *diplomatic* list. For example, killing is not on it. In a world of war, the church had long recognized that “Thou shalt not kill” was a little too black and white...that in some cases it was morally defensible. That was true of a few of the other Commandments as well, so Gregory established a new series of sign posts to warn people to change their ways or else risk their immortal souls to the fires of Hell.

(20 years in the UU ministry and I finally get to work, “Risk their immortal souls to the fires of Hell” into a sermon!)

The Seven Deadly Sins make a great list . It lends itself to the visual and poetic imagination. Breughel and Bosch drew them... even *America’s Next Top Model* did a photo shoot about them. A Google Image search managed 375,000 hits – although I suspect about 300,000 are depictions of Lust.... In poetry Dante began a trend when he built his Inferno to depict the Seven Deadly Sins. The proof of their value is that we still hear about them 1400 years later.

So what are the sins?

**Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride**

Gregory shows wisdom, for these sins do not point to any specific act condemning it with a Thou Shalt Not! Instead the list asks us to examine our state of mind, or soul. As with our seven UU Principles, they are movable and debatable. When does working for a living and wanting a better life become greed? When does feasting

become gluttony? The very existence of the list begs us to examine our lives critically. Sure, others can accuse us out of spite or jealousy, but in the end we have to decide if we are guilty. Of course some believe that God is watching, so one had better have a care for HIS interpretation.

Well, whether or not we believe in Hell or eternal punishment, I think most of us would agree that too much of any of the seven cardinal sins as they are sometimes called, is bad for us. But is the list long enough? Every now and then someone decides that Gregory missed a few things.

Mohandas Gandhi, for example, devised his own powerful list of Deadly Social Sins. Now his approach was different from Gregory's. Gregory created a list about personal and private sins, sins that tended to get committed on a one-to-one basis, sins against God. Gandhi created a list of how people might sin not against God, but against society.

- Wealth without Work.
- Pleasure without Conscience.
- Science without Humanity.
- Knowledge without Character.
- Politics without Principle.
- Commerce without Morality.
- Worship without Sacrifice.

Gandhi's sins are all about imbalance and disharmony, or to use the language of our Principles, inequity. None of those things, wealth, science or knowledge is inherently bad. They only become destructive when they are not balanced by humane qualities like character, principle and morality.

And his sins are larger than Gregory's in that they concern our relation with large groups of people, even the world. First Nation peoples who honour ancestors and elder wisdom, lift up the need for us to act like the ancestors we will become. Their traditions ask that we ponder what impact our choices will have seven generations from now, a concept our society has lost.

It is an expansion of consciousness that was unthinkable in Gregory's time. Only empire building kings and upper nobility could think in terms of generations, and even they knew that everything rested on fragile political alliances and the vagaries of war.

Last Easter the Roman Catholic Church decided that an expansion of the Seven Deadly Sins was in order. The world in which we live is more complex than Gregory's. Individual humans now have the capability of causing much greater and more widespread harm with global economies and technologies. Pope Benedict promulgated a new list, not to replace the old, but to add a new level of awareness. He did so through Archbishop Girotti head of Apostolic Penitentiary. The archbishop revealed the list at the end of a week-long seminar for priests aimed at encouraging a revival of confession, a habit that has fallen out of favour of late.

Though more specific and targeted than Gandhi's list, it displays some of the same sensibilities. It, too, is about relations in society more than about individual peccadilloes. And in keeping with Pope Benedict it is doctrinally conservative. What's on it?

Environmental pollution and ecological sin

Drug trafficking and consumption

Accumulating Excessive wealth (Greed still makes it!)

Genetic manipulation

Morally debateable experiments

Violation of fundamental rights of human nature (abortion)

Paedophilia

The purpose of this new list is expand the understanding of sin, to better meet today's moral challenges. Let's look at them a little:

Environmental Irresponsibility: Well, thank goodness they added that one! Since much of our human excess can be attributed to the belief that God made Nature subservient to Adam, it's a joy to see the Church coming out with a serious limiting amendment to that principle. Better late than never, and raising it to the level of mortal sin isn't a bad idea.

Drug Trafficking and Consumption: Making both the use and trafficking of drugs a major crime is problematic. No one is going to weep over the condemnation of the top level 'traffickers'. But as we are learning in Afghanistan, you can't wipe out the drug trade until you give the bottom level farmers protection and another way to feed their families. Until there is real global fairness in the world economy, there will be illegal trade in 'sinful' things. At the other end, condemning addicted drug users to Hell is a little like blaming people for getting cancer. Certainly we want to discourage the drug abuse, but calling people caught on that path 'sinners' might cause them more harm than it inspires good.

To the church's credit they recognize that and condemn the accumulation of Excessive Wealth. Whether it's drugs or oil or any other commodities, those who accumulate ridiculous fortunes cannot hide behind the 'we're just creating jobs' argument. If that were true, these good Samaritans would only be rich, not obscenely wealthy. That money comes from someone else's suffering.

Genetic Manipulation: I applaud the church for taking this on, but I disagree strongly with where they draw the line. Their first goal is to stop stem cell research because the cells come from abortion, still number one on the church's capital crimes list. And so the decision is to condemn all genetic manipulation as 'playing God'. This lamentably renews the longstanding feud between church and science, a war that has seen the church lose battle after battle ever since Gallileo.

And yet I share deep concerns about genetic research. Few of us here would oppose breakthroughs in the treatment of cancers, diabetes and other gene based diseases. But I worry about the potential for 'breeding out' more than disease. Hitler's scientists tried to breed a master race just 70 years ago. There are cultures where female foetuses are aborted as being less valuable, and there is a very long ethical discussion to be had about the quality of life of those born...or who might be born with some kind of physical or mental challenge.

The ethical challenges arising from genetic research are great. But I am not sure that a loud "NO!" is the answer. The horse has already left the barn. Slamming the door won't help much. We need open discussion and guidelines, not outright bans.

Morally Debatable Experiments: Again, I want to agree with this one. There are some experiments that perhaps we should not undertake. I would be very happy to see an end to weapons research, especially of the biological, chemical or nuclear kind. But the church names the sin with no guidelines. I have the pleasure of serving on an ethical review Board for St. Stephen's College. We vet research proposals for their counselling program. I doubt we will ever encounter anything the Vatican would condemn, but the point is that research on living beings should not go forward without some outside ethical oversight. But asking someone to add safeguards is a long way from condemning it as sinful. This pronouncement needs far more explanation than I have seen.

Violation of Fundamental Human Rights: On the face of it, this seems okay. The problem is that for the Vatican, the number one right is the right to life. This reaffirms their stands against abortion and choice in dying, although it includes their more laudable stands against capital punishment and warfare. Despite the vague wording, this 'sin' suffers from an unwillingness to understand the complexities of life. Like the belief that God gave Adam the world, it is predicated on an idea that life is a gift from God and that no one can interfere with it. But of course medicine interferes with life and death all the time. Apparently that's okay, because if God wants us dead, no technology will save us. The technology only works because God allows it. It is a weak argument.

No one advocates for abortion or choice in dying out of desire to kill. They – we, for I include myself here- do so out of a deep compassion for human suffering. Life should be measured by its quality, not its quantity, and by quality I do not mean a person's accomplishments, but rather their ability to enjoy, savour and be productive in life. And whether or not life has quality must remain a personal decision.

Finally the archbishop tacked on Paedophilia claiming rightly that all such acts are evil. I agree. Of course he also claimed that the recent negative publicity of paedophilia in the church was over blown in order to attack the church. That was an unfortunate statement. The church has a lot to answer for in not addressing the issue as soon as they learned of it...decades before the media uncovered it, and then issuing a long series of denials once it was revealed.

All in all, I have to applaud the church for trying to update the Seven Deadly Sins, but I am disappointed in the dogmatic and self-serving way they chose to do so.

However, it would be disingenuous of me to only criticize without some kind of constructive rebuttal.

So this week I sat down and looked to our UU history...with our aversion to the word 'sin' much less the concept of Hell. We tend to be more positive. That said, I worked through our seven Principles and realized that turned around, they could suggest a list of Seven Deadly UU sins herewith offered for your consideration:

### **Seven Deadly UU sins:**

The opposite of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of others is disrespect, the kind that leads to the abuse of basic rights and exploitation for profit or personal power.

The opposite of seeking justice, equity and compassion is the perpetuation injustice, inequity and a compassionless society. This could also be a sin of omission for those who stand idly by as injustices and inequities are perpetuated.

Opposing the acceptance of others and encouragement to spiritual growth are attempts to build isolating walls to keep those who think differently out. Limiting debate and insisting on only one acceptable religious or political view would slot in here, too.

Over against a free and responsible search for truth and meaning stands irresponsibility and an unexamined life. For me, irresponsibility for our thoughts words and deeds may be the greatest and most basic sin of all. Human unwillingness to explore our own culpability is the soil in which all human evil grows.

The opponents of the democratic process are despotism, dictatorship and anarchy. All of these put the love of power above the needs of others.

The goal of a world community and peace is undermined by those who seek the selfish safety of isolationism and who will make war instead of sharing wealth and resource.

And finally, the interdependent web of all existence is being stretched and torn by our own human ignorance and selfish disregard for Nature.

And you know, when you look at the cause of that, you arrive back pretty much back where we started, with Pope Gregory's original and still useful list. We are all obligated to reflect on our lives and to use some standard by which we conduct an honest moral inventory. That is the only way to avoid sinful or evil or whatever you want to call bad behaviour. And when looking for a good place to start: Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride, Gregory's list is as good as any.

