



# CHRIST CHURCH

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The Rev. Matthew Hoxsie Mead, Rector

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*Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

*Collect of the Day for Ash Wednesday*

Dear Friends in Christ,

In January of this year I travelled to Madrid, Spain, with my wife, parents, and sister. My mother was being made an honorary Canon of the Cathedral in Madrid. On our trip we visited the Prado, the museum of art in the heart of Madrid. The Prado is two hundred years old and has one of the world's most famous collections of art. Among its artistic treasures is the *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* by Hieronymus Bosch.

Bosch's treatment of the Seven Deadly Sins is the center circle of five circles on the *Table*. The other circles link these sins to the themes of Death, the Last Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Bosch (c. 1450 – 1516) lived two centuries after Dante (c. 1265 – 1321), but the themes and the imagery of the painting remind me of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The people, angels, devils, and actions pictured by Bosch are quite vivid. What strikes me most is that they are also so ordinary. For example, Pride is shown by a person looking into a mirror, Anger is portrayed as a fight, the Envy panel depicts two people admiring a man's pet falcon and two dogs fighting over a bone, etc. Such sins seem more dull than deadly.

I invite you to take a detour (now) and view the *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* online. Follow this link for a high definition scan and some useful information on this fascinating masterpiece: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/table-of-the-seven-deadly-sins/3fc0a84e-d77d-4217-b960-8a34b8873b70>

## “WHAT IS SIN?”

When I was much younger, I memorized the Seven Deadly Sins with the two-word anagram G-A-S E-L-A-P: Gluttony, Anger, Sloth, Envy, Lust, Avarice (aka Greed), Pride.

I think I was first told about the Seven Deadly Sins in high school – I attended a Roman Catholic, Benedictine, Boarding School called Portsmouth Abbey School, and we had Christian Doctrine class Freshman year. A year earlier when I was in Confirmation Class at the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Boston, I memorized and learned about the Ten Commandments.

- I. Hear the commandments of God to his people: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.
- II. You shall not make for yourself any idol.
- III. You shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God.
- IV. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- V. Honor your father and your mother.
- VI. You shall not commit murder.
- VII. You shall not commit adultery.
- VIII. You shall not steal.
- IX. You shall not be a false witness.
- X. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

I think it is fair to say that many Episcopalians think of the Seven Deadly Sins as a “Roman Catholic thing”, and my guess is that is because of the overt connection to the Roman Catholic understanding that certain sins are believed to be “deadly” in that they fully separate you from God unless you repent. Episcopalians tend not to define things in the same way, so forgive me for not weighing in one way or another on the teaching of another denomination. All that said, I think the Seven Deadly Sins, like the Ten Commandments, can be very helpful for understanding sin.

What is sin? The *Catechism* of our *Book of Common Prayer 1979* defines sin in the following way: “Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.”

When I think of sin, I find the definition from the *Catechism* to be quite helpful. I can take a list like the Seven Deadly Sins and try to think about the ways that my relationship with God, other people, or creation is distorted by Sloth, Gluttony, Anger, etc. I can also examine those same relationships through each of the Ten Commandments. I tend to view each Commandment or each Deadly Sin as a topic or broad category of sins.

### **EXAMINE AND REEXAMINE, AGAIN AND AGAIN**

Back to Bosch for a moment. I have seen several of Bosch’s masterpieces in person, but with the aid of modern technology I can go online and revisit these paintings in high definition detail. There is nothing like seeing a piece of art in person, but it is a gift that technology now allows us to reexamine such things again and again. After I got back from Spain I did just that, and I discovered many details about these works of art that I had not

seen when I viewed them in person. For example, I learned through additional research and carefully viewing high definition images that Bosch often hides owls in his paintings. Revisit the link above to the high definition image of the [\*Table of the Seven Deadly Sins\*](#). If you look closely at the Gluttony panel (upside down at the top of the *Table*), you can see an owl hidden in the dark crevice near the ceiling. It isn't clear exactly what Bosch meant when he hid owls in many of his paintings. Some think the owl is a symbol of evil, others think it is a symbol of how nothing is truly invisible, even in the darkest places. It is only after returning again and again that I truly begin to explore the depth and meaning of any such work of art. It is only after taking time to focus that I really start to understand what I am seeing. It is perfectly fine to stroll through a museum and take a few seconds in front of a few dozen masterpieces – if nothing else you can say that you saw them in person – but it is far more rewarding to take additional time to explore the details of fewer paintings and learn some of the background of the art and artists.

I think the same thing can be said about self-examination. Self-examination – like viewing a work of art – can be quick, superficial, and ultimately not all that fulfilling, or it can be careful, deep, and lifechanging. Our General Confession – you know the one we say nearly every Sunday – sometimes feels to me like the penitential version of strolling through a museum. That I am making a General Confession is a good thing because I am forced to recognize that there are things that are distorting my relationship with God or other people. But what are the details of those distortions? Who are the characters in the story of my sin? Without taking time to do some serious self-examination those questions remain unanswered and often fade quickly away.

When did you last take time for any thorough self-examination? Do you even know where to begin? I start with the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins. I take one commandment or sin and examine my relationship with God, other people, and creation through that specific lens of sin. I lead Confirmation Class for teens each year, and this is exactly how I teach them to think about sin and self-examination. For example, I ask the teens to tell me what it looks like when someone breaks the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “You shall not steal”. Invariably the Confirmation Class cites armed robbery or shoplifting as typical examples. There's no doubt those count as stealing. What about plagiarism? What about not giving credit for someone else's good idea? What about pirated movies? As we get older the questions keep coming... What about dishonestly in business or fudging tax returns? What are the euphemisms we use to help us forget that something is stealing?

It can be humbling to go deeper into any of the Seven Deadly Sins or the Ten Commandments. Like the owls in Bosch's paintings that lurk just out of sight we all have sins that may not be obvious at first... whether they are obvious is not the point; are they distorting our relationship with God or other people?

I encourage you to take this Lent as a season to do some real self-examination. Sometimes people give up things for Lent. Other times people take up some practice. Self-examination allows you to do both. You can take up a spiritual practice of looking again and again at the

Ten Commandments or Seven Deadly Sins with the hope and intent that your self-examination will lead to repentance and repair of a distorted relationship you might have with God, another person, other people, or creation.

### **THE SACRAMENTAL RITE OF RECONCILIATION &**

As I noted above, our prayer book includes a General Confession, and in Lent this is usually offered as part of a Penitential Rite at the start of the Holy Eucharist. If you have done some self-examination, you will probably be surprised at how much more meaningful the General Confession can be. Our prayer book also offers a more in depth, one-on-one-with-a-priest, Rite of Reconciliation (commonly called Sacramental Confession).

Canon Susan and I are available to hear your Confession by appointment. We are also sitting for Confessions in Lent on several occasions. On Sunday, March 10, Canon Susan and I will hear Confessions in the Church at 4:15 p.m. At 5:00 p.m. on March 10 we will offer a Healing Eucharist. We will also sit for Confessions before and after the Good Friday Liturgy on April 19.

If you want to learn a bit more about sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation in a less formal setting Canon Susan and I are offering two Adult Christian Learning programs in Lent. The first will be offered on Tuesday, March 19, at 7:30 p.m., by Susan and will explore the theme of forgiveness. The second will be offered on Tuesday, March 26, at 7:30 p.m., by me and will explore some of the practical and historical questions you might have around Sacramental Confession, in particular the prayer book Rite of Reconciliation.

For those who want to learn more about art and music this Lent, our Adult Christian Learning committee is also offering a program on Wednesday, March 13, at 7:30 p.m., led by Dr. Kim de Beaumont exploring the etchings of Rembrandt focused on subjects from the Old and New Testaments, and a program on Wednesday, April 3, at 7:30 p.m., led by Organist & Choir Director Jeffrey Hoffman exploring the music of penitence, forgiveness, and restoration by Allegri, Bach, and others.

Take this Lenten season as an opportunity to go deeper. Learn about your faith and the resources provided by the Church, do some real self-examination, and strengthen your relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Hoxsie Mead". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

The Reverend Matthew Hoxsie Mead, Rector