

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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Eight Bad Thoughts

First Sunday of Lent

James 4:1-10; Matthew 5:1-8

An era of change and great uncertainty. Tremendous economic uncertainty. Tremendous economic stress and declining prosperity. A once-proud world power, unrivaled in its global reach, stumbles badly. Non-state militant groups threaten stability and ultimately make a bold attack upon the seat of power. In response to these challenges, economic and social life increasingly fall under the control of the state. High taxes to support a military which is spread too thin cause hardship for rich and poor alike. Many members of society are brought to bankruptcy by financial obligations they cannot meet.

I am not talking about 2009. Rather, I am reading from actual descriptions of life in the Roman Empire from the late fourth century and the early fifth centuries. The Empire had become Christian by this point, a process that began when the Emperor Constantine, preparing to fight armies loyal to his brother-in-law had a vision of Christ. He was instructed to place the letters Chi and Rho, symbolizing the name of Christ, upon banners which his troops would carry into battle, including also the words he had heard in his vision, "*In hoc signo vinces*," "in this

sign you shall conquer.” Constantine did conquer, ushering in a whole new relationship between church and state. A generation later, in 380, the Emperor Theodosius, an ardent Christian, declared that Christianity was the official religion of Rome.

However, at this point, the empire itself was beginning to fall apart. The east was split from the west, and waves of barbarian invaders—Visigoths, Vandals, and Germanic tribes—first sacked Rome in 410 and deposed the last Roman emperor in 476, and finally plunged western Europe into a long period known as the Dark Ages.

How would the church respond to such upheaval? First of all, it must be said that the transition from a status of first being the outsider and even a persecuted minority, then to become the officially and accepted endorsed religion of the empire was not a simple process. Since the empire adopted the faith, it also meant that the emperor had a role in regularizing the faith, establishing orthodoxy, even making standard the worship and rituals of the church. Many Christians did not like having the state tell them how to worship and what to believe. There were many non-conformists. Some of these set out to form alternative communities, seeking to practice the faith in distinctive ways.

Among these was a notable movement toward severe and austere expressions of the faith, men (and later women) who lived in solitude, practiced

celibacy, and devoted themselves to a life of prayer. As the political and economic situation of a declining empire deteriorated even more, such movements gained in popularity. Many Christians wished to escape from the turmoil around them. In a life of discipline, they could attain a peace that the world could never offer.

Two important figures in the early development of these monastic practices were named Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian. Evagrius was a highly educated man who first made his mark in the church under the tutelage of the Bishop of Constantinople and as a participant in the Second Ecumenical Conference which addressed the Arian heresy. Then, Evagrius fell in love. Unfortunately, the person with whom he was infatuated was already married, and to a high government official.

Evagrius decided to flee to Jerusalem and from there was encouraged to join with monks in the Egyptian desert who believed that they could live the life Jesus commends through the adoption of a rigorous spiritual discipline including the renunciation of property, meat, wine and even baths.

Evagrius himself helped to ground these practices in an overarching theological schema. He felt that contemplation was the highest human activity, one that brings us into union with God. The ascetical life strips away the things that are not necessary and that prevent us from having this union with God. Through discipline, one conquers vice and acquires virtue; still these practices must be

understood as a means to an end, and not as an end in themselves. Evagrius himself wrote,

A wandering mind is strengthened by reading and prayer. Passion is dampened down by hunger and work and solitude. Anger is repressed by psalmody, and long-suffering, and mercy. But all these should be at the proper times and in due measure.¹

John Cassian was a disciple of Evagrius who took the monastic pattern from the East and introduced it to the Western church, adding structural elements to govern the common life and work of monks. Both he and Evagrius dealt at length with what might be called the barriers or the challenges to monastic life which can plague the individual and disrupt or destroy a community. Obviously, in such a context actions matter a great deal, but actions are grounded in thought. “Cassian believed that thoughts come into the mind from God, from the devil and from ourselves, and we must decide which of these to accept.”² In other words, there are good thoughts and bad thoughts. Evagrius wrote: “It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these (bad) thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.”³

In particular, Evagrius warned of Eight Bad Thoughts that are powerfully tempting: gluttony, sexual immorality, the love of money, sadness, anger, acedia,

vainglory, and pride. These are the eight bad thoughts that can lead us from the path of Christ.

We are going to be using Evagrius' schema as a topic for preaching in this season of Lent, and to draw upon Evagrius's basic notion that thoughts matter. Our inner life has consequence. What goes on in our mind or our heart shapes our words and our actions and affects those around us. We are not victims of our thoughts. We bear responsibility for them.

In researching Evagrius and Cassian, I find it so interesting that their basic insight finds expression in an effective, modern method of psychotherapy, one that's brought relief to many people, called the Cognitive Behavioral approach. It was developed as a reaction against Freudian methods that seek answers for the present by digging into the past. There's nothing wrong with looking at the past, but the more important issue is how to live right now with thoughts, emotions, and behaviors which may seem out of control. In the 1950's, Alfred Adler stated, "I am convinced that a person's behavior springs from his ideas." That's hardly a novel thought, since Evagrius or Cassian came up with basically the same notion 1600 years earlier.

Modern-day therapists have discovered, apart from some astounding advances in pharmacology, that if depressed people, for one example, can replace bad thoughts about themselves with good thoughts, they really do improve. It's a

simple idea expressed by the Desert Fathers, too. As we are able to concentrate on good thoughts rather than bad thoughts, we make progress in the Christian life.

Now, to many of you, my interest in Evagrius and Cassian — not household names, I know — may seem strange. After all, among Protestants, there has long been a healthy amount of suspicion regarding the monastic tradition. It posits a kind of Christian perfectionism, and can separate the vocation of ordinary individuals from a spiritual elite who claim to be on the true path to Christ. We believe that all Christians can be on that path. I can be just as faithful as a father and a husband, interacting with others on a daily basis, as a monk or nun in their cell, contemplating the mysteries of the universe. At its worst, monasticism tends towards works righteousness, the idea that we can earn God's favor by working harder and harder at being holy.

However, we Presbyterians understand that holiness is a gift. Our life with God is a blessing, not something we can pay for or earn through extraordinary feats of renunciation. Nevertheless, this gift is something we need to exercise. All Christians are called to holiness, and to act with charity toward neighbors, to pray without ceasing, and to worship God in all that we do. Clearly, there are challenges that lie in front of us. And it's the Desert Fathers who are particularly alert to the dangers to our spiritual health.

Among later Catholic thinkers, the Eight Bad Thoughts became the Seven Deadly Sins: impulses and temptations we need to be aware of and to resist. It was true in 400 A.D., and it's still true today: our thoughts matter.

In an age of worry about the entanglements of church and state; in a time of economic loss; in an era of uncertainty as the prestige of an old empire slipped away; a powerful movement was born, focused on the inner life.

We may be living in a similar time in which the goals and the aims of a former period of unprecedented prosperity now seem selfish and shallow. Collectively, we are reassessing our priorities. We, too, feel that the world, society, the empire (call it what you might), these have let us down. We are rethinking our values. We are searching within for a relationship with God to find answers that satisfy our deeper longings.

What the monks were up to in the early fifth century may have seemed like a denial of the world, but ultimately it was world-affirming.

The monasteries of Europe with their emphasis upon the development of mind and spirit, became the great repositories of scholarship and learning in the Middle Ages. With their emphasis upon life in community, they provided a great model for mutual support in an age in which social structures had fractured. With their focus upon care for orphans and the sick and their identification with the poor, they offered much healing to hurting people. The monasteries were the major

institution for rebuilding Europe after the barbarian invasions ended. My former teacher Rowan Greer offers this up as a paradox, “In seeking to attain the Kingdom of God,” he writes, “they contributed to the rebuilding of earthly kingdoms.”⁴

Actually, that is the way it must happen. Always, before the rebuilding of kingdoms, the inner work must be done. There is a much rebuilding that needs to happen in our lives, in our nation, and in our world. May the inner work begin, here and now.

Amen.

¹ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 93.

² Rowan A. Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common life in the Early Church* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) p. 178.

³ Ward, p. 93.

⁴ Greer, p. 183.