

**Somebody's Daughter**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
*Matthew 5:21-37*

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman [in order to lust with her] has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

A few years ago I preached a sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins, even though I knew that eventually I would get to one of the sins mentioned in today's Gospel lesson: Lust. I did it, but I think I blushed the entire time. Lust is not an easy sin to talk about, and not only because it's embarrassing. It's also because lust is considered one of the warm-hearted sins, along with anger and gluttony, while envy, greed, sloth, and pride are considered cold-hearted sins. C. S. Lewis believed that the cold-hearted sins were more deadly, since they affected the spirit, while the warm-hearted sins affected only the body.<sup>i</sup>

And that led me down an interesting path.

Years ago I did some research on the anatomy of the human brain and this is what I learned: that our one brain is made up of three layers. The first layer is the **brain stem**, which emerges from the spinal column at the base of the skull. Surrounding that stem is the second layer of the brain known as the **limbic system**. And surrounding that layer is the **neocortex**, which makes up two thirds of the human brain. What is fascinating about these three brains is their various functions:

1. The **brain stem** is also known as the “reptilian” brain, and it is responsible for instinctive behavior. It’s what keeps your heart beating even when you are asleep. It is programmed for survival.
2. The **limbic system** is also known as the “mammalian” brain, and is responsible for emotional behavior. It’s what makes you cry when you see something sad on television.
3. The **neocortex** is the “human” brain, and it is responsible for all of the higher cognitive functions. It’s the part of your brain you need to do taxes or write poetry.

So, three brains—reptilian, mammalian, and human—with three functions. And while it was thought at one time that the rational “human” brain dominated the other two layers, we now know that the three brains operate independently. As neurologist Paul MacLean put it, they work like “three interconnected biological computers, [each] with its own special intelligence, its own subjectivity, its own sense of time and space, and its own memory.”<sup>ii</sup>

What that means is that the rational, human brain can’t tell the other two brains what to do, and there are those times when the function of one of the “lower” brains overrides the function of the “higher” brain. For example: If you are walking down a dark alley late at night and someone jumps out and grabs you, you will respond at the most primitive level imaginable. Your “reptilian” brain will react instinctively, before you have time to think. By the same token, when someone says he “acted from his heart

and not his head,” he is saying that his decision was sub-cognitive, made by the emotional “mammalian” limbic system rather than the rational neocortex.

The problem here, in a very literal sense, is that the “reptilian” brain has a mind of its own. And so does the “mammalian.” And both of these minds are “sub-human.” The reptilian brain is especially troublesome, because it functions at such a primitive level. Programmed for survival it thinks about things like what it can eat, and how not to get eaten, and because its survival depends ultimately on sexual reproduction, it thinks about sex...a lot. It is a lusting, leering, lip-smacking part of the brain, and as I said, it has a mind of its own.

When I was in my early teens my family owned a pair of Clydesdale horses and Clydesdales (if you’ve seen the Budweiser commercials) are *huge!* They are draft horses bred to pull heavy loads. These two, Dick and Bess, pulled loads of heavy logs off a mountainside in West Virginia when my dad was trying to help an old lumberjack get back on his feet, but that’s another story. This story is about the time I poured a bucket of oats into Dick’s feed box and then tried to lead him to water. Dick didn’t want to go. He wanted to eat those oats. But I dragged him out of the barn and along the quarter-mile path that led to the watering hole. When we got there he dropped his head and began to drink. He was so calm and quiet that I climbed up onto his back, thinking I would let him take me back to the barn at his usual slow and plodding pace. But this time when he finished drinking he wheeled around and started back to the barn at a full gallop—he wanted those oats! I was terrified. I didn’t have saddle, bits, or bridle. I squeezed his massive body between my knees and held on tight to his mane as he

thundered along that narrow path. I kept my head down as he galloped under low-hanging branches. But when he got to the barn he took a sharp left turn and I bounced off the open barn door before dropping to the muddy ground, gasping for breath but mostly just grateful to be alive.

That experience was a good analogy for what was going on in the rest of my life. In early adolescence I went through puberty, just like everyone else, but I had never done it before and nobody told me it was normal. I was embarrassed by what was happening to my body and ashamed of what was happening in my head. I was having thoughts I had never had before, thoughts a good Christian boy shouldn't have. In fact, I didn't see how I could be a good Christian and have some of the thoughts I was having. We didn't have pornography in those days, at least none that I could get hold of. The closest I came was the ladies lingerie section of the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, which featured black and white photographs of women wearing industrial-strength undergarments. Still, that was all it took to send the wild stallion of my lust galloping down dark and dangerous paths, with me hanging on to its back for dear life.

I can only imagine what it's like for young people these days, when pornography is everywhere on the Internet and so easily accessible. Sometimes it pops up even when you don't want it to. You do a Google search for something that seems perfectly innocent and suddenly there you are, shocked by images that would have never made it to the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. I've read studies about it, studies that say all that pornography can do lasting damage to the human brain, that teenage boys, for instance, can see so many images on the screen that they become numb to their effects. They

begin to look for something more, like drug users who need more and more of the same substance to get “high.” They go to darker places, search for more shocking images. They drop the reins and let the wild stallion of their lust gallop along those never-ending paths until it is completely exhausted, lathered in sweat, gasping for breath. And then how are they supposed to have a normal relationship with that cute girl who sits down beside them on the school bus?

Is there any cure for lust?

In the big, green Living Bible my parents had given me for Christmas when I was thirteen I underlined this passage from Romans 7, a passage I could have written myself:

I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.

It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will so far as my new nature is concerned; but there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. In my mind I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself still enslaved to sin....

Does it sound to you as if Paul is wrestling with the unbridled lusts of the reptilian brain?

At the end of the chapter he writes: “Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature?” And then, in the very next verse, he writes, “Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

I have to admit that when I was a teenager that wasn't a very satisfying solution to my problem. I wanted Jesus to remove my capacity for lust, and he didn't, but he did help me deal with the consequences. And that's a good thing, because lust doesn't only

affect teenage boys: it affects grown men and women as well. Jesus can't stop you from lusting, but he can forgive your sin. And let me just say that if you have been a victim of lust, if it has had you in its "evil grasp" for too long now, it's still not too late. That's the good news. No matter how bad it is, no matter how long it's gone on, the Bible says "if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

But there is *something* we can do.

I'm reminded of that verse from the Book of James that says, "If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies" (James 3:3). Lust may seem like a wild stallion, but if we can just hold onto the reins we can control it. And here is one of the best ways I've found to do that: by remembering that the object of your lust is a human being. I've shared this story with my congregation before, but it's the one I always seem to turn to when this subject comes up. It's from a book called *Run with the Horsemen*, by Ferrol Sams. This scene takes place in a barbershop in a small Southern town. It starts like this:

Once Mr. Sam Percy was waiting his turn on a Saturday morning for a haircut and shave. He was making detailed anatomical comments about each and every female who walked down the street or across the courthouse square. Finally one young girl hove into view, and Mr. Sam was silent. Mr. Lum Thornton loudly remarked, 'Now there's a fine one!' and went on to describe the virtues of her anatomy in graphic detail. "[Doggone it], Lum,' complained Mr. Sam Percy, 'Watch your mouth. That's my daughter.' Mr. Isaac Harte flipped his brush around the neck of the current customer, creating a cloud of talcum powder. 'Sam,' he said softly, 'ever one of them girls was somebody's daughter.'"<sup>iii</sup>

And that's just the truth, isn't it? Every woman is somebody's daughter, somebody's mother, somebody's wife, and if you can remember that it will help you think of her in a

different way. When you lust after someone—male or female—you turn that person into a thing, into an object of lust, but you can also do the opposite: you can turn a thing into a person, into a child of the Heavenly Father. I read somewhere recently that we lust after strangers and pictures, not family and friends. And that’s true. The more you think of others as friends or family members, the harder it will be to think of them as objects of lust.

When I preached that sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins I was trying to also offer the cure for each one, and someone on our staff asked, “What *is* the cure for lust?” I gave them some version of what I just told you and then, Allen, the guy who runs our TV ministry, shrugged his shoulders and said, “Maybe the cure for lust is love.” It sounded almost too simple, but maybe simple in the way the truest things are. Because if you really love someone you are not going to allow that person to be turned into an object, not by you or anyone else. In fact, you are going to do just the opposite: you are going to do whatever you can to humanize that person, to lift them up, to give them their dignity. I think that’s what Jesus was doing at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount when he looked around at that crowd of poor, ragged people on a hillside in Galilee and said, “Blessed are you, and you, and you...

“For you shall be called the children of God.”

—*Jim Somerville © 2023*

---

<sup>i</sup> Janice Brown, “Spiritual Sins Are Worse” at [www.cslewis.com](http://www.cslewis.com)

<sup>ii</sup> “The Triune Brain,” Wikipedia

<sup>iii</sup> Ferrol Sams, *Run with the Horsemen* (Penguin Books, 1984), p. 77