

THE SEVEN DEADLY NEEDS

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“Need” “1. A condition requiring supply or relief; urgent exigency. 2. The lack of anything requisite, desired, or useful. 3. Want; poverty. 4. Anything needed or felt to be needed.”

On the surface, the word ‘need’ seems benign enough, and fairly straightforward to understand. We speak often of ‘those in need.’ We describe ‘basic needs.’ We speak of ‘physical needs,’ of psychological needs,’ of ‘spiritual needs.’ Caring about the needs of others, the needs of the larger community and creation, and about our own needs is seen as a good and moral thing to do.

It never really occurred to me that there could be a dark side to need. At a recent Clergy Spiritual Renewal Retreat, The Rev. Larry J. Peacock guided a group of weary pastor in reflection about spiritual leadership in an age of anxiety. As we were considering those things that are ‘life-draining’ in ministry, he introduced us to ‘the seven deadly needs.’ The response was palpable.

The list comes from a book by the same name: “The Seven Deadly Needs,” by Edward Bear. Here is the list:

- The need to know
- The need to be right
- The need to get even
- The need to look good
- The need to judge
- The need to keep score
- The need to control

On the surface the need to know is a good thing. Willful ignorance can be a destructive attitude. To know is beneficial, but when we use our knowledge to diminish others, it can be harmful. Likewise the need to be right - it may be useful to be in the right or do the right thing, but there is a larger context, and we must beware of using ‘our right’ to prove others wrong. The need to get even is toxic. We are reminded, ‘vengeance is mine says the Lord.’ An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, leaves the world blind and toothless! The need to look good, especially when it is at another’s expense, leaves everyone looking bad. The need to judge sets up arbitrary standards and creates an ‘us versus them’ environment that undermines community. The need to keep score creates winners and losers and a competition that is not healthy for human relationships. The need to control is the most deadly of all, as it quickly turns into self-idolatry by which we set ourselves over others and attempt to exercise inappropriate power over them.

The bottom line is that we must beware of meeting our needs at the expense of others. When our needs become an excuse to use others, to abuse others, to disregard the sacred worth of others, it is nothing more than a narcissistic idolatry. When we abandon others in their needs, so that we can get our needs met, then our needs have become deadly!

Ultimately, we all have needs: basic physical needs, the need for love and belonging, the need to feel valued, and the need to reach our fuller potential. From a spiritual perspective it means acknowledging and claiming the ‘imago dei,’ the image of God implanted within us from the dawn of creation. From the

prophetic perspective it is doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God. From the perspective of Jesus it means acknowledging and claiming that childlike grace which is the mark of greatness. When these needs are met, they are life giving and enduring.