

Luke 18: 18-23

The Seven deadly Sins: Sloth

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The second of the 7 deadly sins we are talking about is sloth. It's a great word, isn't it? It just rolls off the tongue, without even taking much effort, "Sloth." Saying it almost makes me want to sit down; the mere word draining every bit of energy right from me.

When we think of sloth we might think of that furry mammal that hangs upside down from tree limbs. It rarely moves, and when it moves, it moves very slowly. Actually the animal is so lethargic that its fur is often host to small moths, beetles and even algae. My front deck has some algae on it and it never moves. Because of its very poor diet - leaves, twigs, and the occasional piece of fruit which has to be in reaching distance, the sloth is left with very little energy, a low metabolism, and low body temperature. It simply cannot move any faster, even if it wanted to.

But we are not talking about the mammal. Sloth is one of the deadly/mortal 7 sins. The others are: pride - Susan preached about it last week -, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, and greed. You won't find this delightful list of sins in the Bible like the 10 Commandments. This list was finalized in the sixth century by Pope Gregory I as things to watch out for in the life of monastic communities but also in life outside of these tightly controlled environments. They are deadly because the monks learned that these sins could not only kill the soul but they would certainly kill the monastery. Deadly sins destroy community and relationship. Interestingly some people have deemed sloth to be the deadliest of all.

So, let's talk about sloth! There are many synonyms and ways to explain sloth: it can be understood as laziness or lack of effort. It is the sin of omission, the sin of neglect. It is a basic unwillingness to work (you find many references to that understanding in the Hebrew Scriptures). And if unwillingness to work is the working definition we are going to go with, I feel somewhat silly preaching about it because as I look around this room, none of you could be accused of that. You are not lazy,

neglectful people. Not when it comes to your jobs. I see hard-working, responsible, industrious, dutiful people. Even those of you who are retired keep yourselves gainfully occupied.

Vocationally, there is not much room to talk about sloth, not in this congregation. In fact, I could easily preach to some of you on your tendency to work too much. You are not committing the sin of sloth but are breaking the commandment of the Sabbath. In light of that we need to understand that the Sabbath is not an invitation to laziness and slothfulness has nothing to do with restfulness.

Sloth goes beyond a person's unwillingness to work or just being plain laziness. **Sloth wears many faces.** Frederick Buechner says that sloth is a person who just goes through the motions; he or she flies on automatic pilot. Slothful people let things run their course, and their life's focus is on just getting through life. Sloth is not laziness as much as it is indifference. Slothful people have no commitment, no focus, no worthwhile ambition. When people tell you that they have no energy, that they are not sure it's worth the effort, that they don't care, or tell you that it was never done this way, sloth has crept in.

Sometimes sloth wears the face of "passing the buck". We live in a day and age where everything is somebody else's fault. This is as old as the Bible story of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve would not take responsibility for their disobedience. Adam blamed Eve; Eve blamed the snake; and people have been "passing the buck" ever since. It is so much easier to blame others for our own bad choices and our irresponsible acts than to take a serious look at ourselves.

Sloth also creeps into our relationships. The late M. Scott Peck, the Christian psychiatrist and author "Of the Road Less Traveled" views sloth as the main reason Americans are failing at human relationships. We are simply not putting forth the effort required to enter into and maintain our relationships with other people. You know the saying, "it takes two to tango!" To make a marriage, a partnership, a friendship work, it takes two parties to work on it. If one or even both show signs of complacency or indifference, a "whatever" attitude, that relationship will go nowhere and eventually die.

When it comes to our deeper and more intimate relationships, sloth shows up in many ways as well. It might show up as a comfortable arrangement that has complacency following in its tracks. We are getting used to what we have and do. We might let slip the things that make the other person happy. We get lazy, we cease caring, we become indifferent, apathetic, even neglectful. We don't really mean to, it just sort of happens over time. That's why we wind up saying, "Whatever." This kind of sloth will suck the life right out of even the strongest and deepest and most secure relationship over time.

Our spiritual life is not immune from sloth. We love spiritual shortcuts, don't we? We love worship or religious events that inspire us and make us feel good but we are not willing to put in the hard work of thinking, confessing, studying the Bible, praying regularly, attending classes, or having our lives challenged by the gospel. In my years as a minister, I had a number of people tell me of their spiritual doubts. They don't know if God exists, or they do not feel God's presence, and so on. More often than not, they want me to answer their questions or make their doubt disappear which I can't. They have to do the work because living the Christian life, the life of faith, is not so much about holding certain beliefs as it is actively responding to God and being willing to be formed and transformed by God's work in us. It is about daily prayer and daily Scripture reading and every day forgiving someone and being forgiven. Being a Christian is being involved with God and it is being involved with people. That means work. And it takes time. There are no shortcuts here.

The young rich ruler in our scripture passage this morning suffers from a case of spiritual sloth. All his life he has been a good boy – adhering to the commandments. He seems to have been a good and faithful man but in his heart he wanted more. He wanted to go deeper, getting closer to God, even considering becoming a disciple. So he asks Jesus what he needed to do. And Jesus tells him, "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and then come and follow me." And when the young ruler heard this his heart sank (other translations say, he went away sad, turned away sorrowful). The Bible says he went away sad because he had so much riches to loose. He just could not do it. He did not so much walk away from Jesus. Maybe he was sad that he knew he did not have what it took to move toward Jesus. He could not bring himself to step toward the God that had moved toward him. It would change and challenge his life too much for he loved his status quo.

Sloth creeps into our moral/public lives. We look at our world and all its problems and we resign ourselves to the "Whatever." Or we might bring our soapbox and tell everyone our opinion but in the end we refuse to get involved because we don't really care enough. This kind of sloth is most frequently expressed in some form of prejudice. Someone once said that "prejudice is a great labor-saving device for it enables a person to advance opinions without the trouble to get the facts."

And probably the worst kind of sloth is when it wears the numb face of indifference to pain and suffering in the world around us. Sloth is at its most ugly when we lose our compassion, when someone else's pain does not touch our hearts anymore. The trouble is that when we lose our compassion, we lose an essential part of our humanity. Sloth kills compassion, because we just don't care anymore.

The discouraging news is that no one is immune to sloth. We all can catch it. We all have places in our lives that at one time or another we care a little less or not at all about. We can't pay equal attention to every thing – every issue, every situation – at all times. We would die I think of exhaustion.

So what can we do about not getting too deeply caught in this deadly sin of sloth? If it's always lurking around the corner trying to infiltrate us at a weak moment, how can we protect ourselves from it?

The best thing I could come up with is self-examination; self-examination in light of who God wants us to be, of how Christ wants us to live our lives. The ancient philosopher Socrates (some think it was Plato) said, "The unexamined life is not worth living!" He is right. Examining our life reveals patterns of behavior. Deeper contemplation yields understanding of the subconscious programming, the powerful mental software that runs our life. Unless we become aware of these patterns, much of our life is unconscious repetition. Many of our non-so great behaviors stem from un-examination. But the

good news is that it is never too late to take a look at our lives, and to tackle the changes that are necessary to show sloth the door.

It is never too late to recommit to our faith and to find the places where our God-given gifts are the most useful in the Christly work for a better world. I know that sloth is being dealt with when someone comes into my office and says, "I got time. What do you want me to do;" or the couple that e-mails me and asks "if I know of any places that do marriage renewal work; we need a little tune up"; or our outreach committee taking on the year-long theme of hunger; or when I don't have to twist arms for people to serve as confirmation mentors, or to join the parish care ministry team. God in Christ calls us to be involved, somehow, somewhere. God has given us this great creation and gifts and people to share life with. It is our task to get to work for them and with them.

Toward the end of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Albus Dumbledore, warns Harry that the time is rapidly coming when people will have to choose between doing what is right and doing what is easy. Sloth is the easy way.

We can choose to live a "whatever" life, or we can choose to live a "Whatever it takes" life in the name of Christ. The choice is ours to make. Amen.