

Throughout Lent we are studying the Seven Deadly Sins. We have covered pride, envy, and anger. This week we are tackling sloth. When I started preparing this sermon I did anything a normal person studying sloth would do. I took a nap.

When I think of sloth, and I would venture to guess most of you also think the same thing, I think of a cute, furry creature with long claws that moves at a snail's pace. If you google the word "sloth", you will find picture after picture of sloths doing sloth-like things: laying around and taking naps. The slow moving, snail's pace nature of the sloth leads to the question, **"is laziness really a sin?"**

Is it really sinful to sit on the couch all Sunday afternoon watching football with a pile of chicken wings on your left, a six pack of your favorite beverage to your right, and a permanent imprint of your derriere on the couch cushions? If football doesn't tickle your fancy, you can substitute any other sport, T.V. series binge, or newly released video game.

Is it really sinful to overly enjoy laying in bed with a good book or napping in a hammock all weekend long? I understand that in a society where the American dream is based on working hard, that laziness would be a bad thing. But is slothful behavior so severe that it should rank as one of the seven deadly sins?

This evening's scripture reading from Mark's Gospel may not seem to be a story of sloth. On the surface it is a story of a rich young man who does not want to give up his possessions and wealth, something I bet a lot of us can relate to. In order to understand how this story aligns itself with sloth, we will need to do some digging.

Defining Sloth & Manifestations

The 4th century theologian Cassian's definition of sloth varies slightly from our 21st century American definition. According to Cassian, sloth is a spiritual vice that causes a person to forget their religious commitments. Sloth is what keeps us from responding to or even simply keeping the commitments that come with professing to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In 4th century monastic communities, spiritual, as well as physical, disciplines were required to ensure the well-being of the community was maintained. For the 4th century monastic community sloth was viewed as an external, as well as internal, sin. Sloth threatened to undermine the lifelong commitment a monk was not only making to the spiritual community, but also eroded one's ability to develop a lifelong relationship with God. We see this referenced in Psalm 119, where the psalmist is someone who has devoted himself to studying God's Word but now finds himself weary and overcome by the oppression preventing him from his daily meditations. What the early church fathers, like Cassian, are alluding to is that sloth is not simply laziness. It is a lack of love and lack of caring.

Thomas Aquinas made the observation that sloth reflects a lack of love that manifests itself through laziness or restless busyness. He called this, "an aversion to the divine good in us." Yes, sloth can manifest itself in our couch-potato state of withdrawal. According to Dr. Will Willimon, former United Methodist Bishop and current professor at Duke Divinity, sloth allows the "creative human made in the image of God to become indistinguishable from the slug."

But what about the busy sloth, what about the person who devotes themselves so hard to their professional work or social status that they create a false sense of rest or experience a state of permanent restlessness?. Henry Ford said, “work is our sanity, our self-respect, our salvation. Through work, and work alone, may health, wealth, and happiness be secured.” For that person, the deadly sin manifests itself as a barricade they surround themselves with. The idea of health and wealth being created through viewing work as salvation enables them to separate themselves from the demand to love others. This leads to indifference and apathy.

If sloth is what enables us to build a wall around ourselves, separating us from the outstretched hand offering us grace, we can begin to see the apathy of the rich young ruler. Jesus said, “you shall not murder.” The rich young man replied, “check!”. Jesus said, “you shall not commit adultery.” The rich young ruler responded, “no problem.” Jesus said, “you shall not steal.” That was not an issue for the rich young ruler. Jesus continues, “you shall not bear false witness.” “Check!” again from the rich young ruler. “You shall not defraud”, Jesus said. The rich young ruler thought to himself, “I’ve got this one covered too!” Finally Jesus told the young man, “honor your father and mother.” “Done, check, I’m way ahead of you Jesus”, is what the rich young ruler might have been thinking.

Jesus then reminds the young man that he lacks one thing. We can all probably recite this line by heart: “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” Jesus is referring to the poor man, the outstretched hand, that the rich young ruler defrauded to attain his wealth. Jesus is calling the young ruler out for NOT keeping all of the commandments.

In order for the rich young man to inherit eternal life he must be willing to remove the veil of apathy and dismantle the system which established his wealth - which is why the young man grieves for having “many possessions”. During this time, land was the basis of someone’s wealth. Acquiring land was primarily done through debt-default of small farmers. The possessions acquired by the young ruler were obtained by violating the very commandment the young ruler said that he has kept since his youth.

Causes of Sloth and Apathy

In the book, Sinning Like a Christian, by Dr. Will Willimon we are able to find three possible causes to explain why we today enter into an apathetic, sloth-like state.

Lack of Courage

Sloth and apathy are found throughout the gospels. Listen now to the writing of Saint Mark.

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. - Mark 3.1-4

This story from the third chapter of Mark’s gospel provides us with our first possible cause of sloth. There is a difference between seeing a homeless woman outside of a Metro station and ignoring her, and seeing the same woman and responding. There is a difference between knowing that there are people throughout the world who do not have access to clean water or sanitation and doing nothing, and knowing the plight of those

people and responding. There is a difference between seeing a man whose hand is outstretched and deformed and ignoring him, and seeing the same man and reaching towards him. The difference is courage, being able to stand up for what is right or to boldly respond to God's prompting, takes the courage to place our own priorities and needs to the side, and open ourselves to the ways God wants to work through you. Being filled with apathy, despair, and sloth results in our inability to respond to God's call and initiation with courage. Sloth creates a lack of courage that enables us to swat away the outstretched hand, reaching to us for a warm meal or a clean glass of water.

Sadness

Let's look again at this evening's scripture passage.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' " ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

In the case of the rich young ruler, apathy takes shape in the form of sadness. In verse twenty-two of this evening's scripture reading it tells us that, "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving..." Grieving and sad.

The rich young ruler was filled with sorrow that he was unable to respond to God's prompting. If we look closely he was so filled with grief that he did not even stick around long enough to hear the rest of Jesus' response to his question. When we fail to respond to God's prompting, the outstretching of opportunities to share God's grace and mercy, we can become so filled with sadness that we begin to view ourselves as the victim. We take the plight that we see, place it on ourselves, and become filled with malice and spite.

And if you think that the rich young ruler is the only one who's sloth has been grown out sadness, you're wrong. This cause of sloth, sadness occurs for most us when we sit down to relax with a bowl of popcorn. Whether is it Sara McLaughlin holding an emaciated dog or a video of African toddlers with bloated bellies, many of us, myself included, will immediately change the channel. When confronted face-to-face by the poor, many times we simply change the channel.

Desensitized

The third cause of sloth is directly correlated to the second. The sadness we see around us, the Sara McLaughlin ASPCA commercials, the homeless family living under the bridge we drive by everyday on our way to the office, or the children down the street who live in an abusive home, can quickly change from sadness and or belief that we are unable to respond, to our inability to see that the need even exists. We are so inundated by need, especially those who have ever signed into any form of social media, that we have become

desensitized. We can become so numb to the world around us that our eyes glaze over and we blankly wander through our daily routine.

The outstretched hand, or the commandment to sell everything and give the money to poor, becomes something that we are no longer able to see. And as a result we throw ourselves into our own little world of corporate monotony, which prohibits us from being able to see the opportunities to participate in the transformative work of God's grace.

Dangers of Sloth

Apathy and sloth are enablers. They veil our view of the world, with the possibility of creating a sense of self-pity and self-centeredness. We are enabled to turn the tables on the outstretched hand and respond with blaming and judgement. Sloth enables us to walk out of the Verizon Center, Nationals Park, or a Metro station and walk past a human being seeking help, and without even for a second, feeling a sense of empathy or sadness. Sloth enables us to blind ourselves to the opportunity to accept the invitation of grace and love from God through another human being.

Apathy and sloth create a sense of depression - just like the rich young man who became sad and grieved as he walked away from Jesus; grieving so much that he was not even able to stick around for the rest of Jesus' explanation. Our apathy causes us to despairingly resign from the world around us. We feel a sense of inner tension, feeling trapped within ourselves. We cannot escape our truth, that we have fallen short of the spiritual tasks calling to us from God, yet at the same time we can also refuse to even face that calling.

There is an inward unwillingness to move and an outward sluggishness that reflects the state of our heart. Our religious identity and vocation are at risk when our apathy is allowed to consume us. Sloth turns our spiritual calling into an unbearable burden that we rather “run away (or retreat) and be free from”. Thomas Aquinas said that sloth is “a sort of depression which stops us doing anything, a weariness with work, a torpor spirit which delays getting down to doing anything good.”

So What Am I Supposed To Do?

Love Requires Submission

Responding to God’s love, as it manifests through others, requires us to submit. We must give up the preconceived notions of our own identity and vocation to fully submit to God. In order to remove the laziness, lack of courage, sadness, and desensitization, we must open ourselves to the expectation that God’s love will manifest itself not only through a risen Savior, but possibly through the love that extends through two outstretched arms meeting in service to one another. Just as the love in a marriage is able to grow and become fruitful as spouses submit to one another, so to must we submit ourselves before God. That is exactly what Jesus is telling Peter in verses twenty-nine and thirty.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

Joining the family of Christ allows disciples of Jesus to enter into a family of faith where laziness, lack of courage, sadness, and desensitization are replaced by faith, hope, and love. Those who join in the love of God enter into a new family, submitting to one another and to God. And unlike the rich young man, we must be willing to give up this life so that we might inherit eternal life.