

Text: Matthew 5.6
St Stephen's

Feb 25, 2008
Ash Wednesday

Sloth vs Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Welcome to Lent! This year in Lent we are offering a series on the virtues and vices of the Christian life, focusing on the **7 deadly sins** so well known in Christian history, and so widely loved by modern people.

Each week we are going to take one of the deadly sins (though we will only get through 6 of them, leaving you lots of room to have a field day with the 7th) and put it next to one of the **classical Christian virtues** framed by the words of Jesus in the **beatitudes**. The point/counterpoint between the virtues and the vices will give us lot of room for reflection and thought.

Tonight to get us started, we are going to do a **short introduction** to one of each, just to show you how it works. I get to start with the deadly sin of **sloth**, and its corresponding virtue of "**hunger and thirst for righteousness**". It is a great introduction to Lent.

Most of us think of **sloth** as **laziness**. A long time ago the NYT did a series on the 7 Deadly Sins and titled their article on sloth, *'Nearer My Couch to Thee'*. But it is far more than the love affair I have with my couch! It is not just indolence, and it is certainly not relaxing.

Sloth is fundamentally **spiritual in its nature – an indifference toward God and spiritual realities**. It is a **listlessness** of life that can show up as burnout, exhaustion, disconnection, and an incapacity to engage life with any passion at all.

Often it **masquerades** as virtue, particularly under the banner of **tolerance** and open-mindedness.

It has a language of its own **among young people**: "I'm bored", "Whatever!" But its most dangerous impact comes upon people who are

navigating the **middle season of life** where incessant **demands** and lengthy years of **exhaustion** in the pursuit of elusive secular gods have drained and replaced all spiritual vitality, and the real God himself seems distant and unreal. In that day **indifference, emptiness, and a low-grade background of despair** becomes the deadly matrix of life.

The **believer** loses all enthusiasm, all passion for God. In the face of approaching eternity, he is indifferent.

The **doubter** no longer seeks, and no longer even cares if there might be a god. Sloth is a deadly matrix, a **slow moving spiritual suicide**.

In some ways, **sloth is the fabric of the modern world**.

In 1978 **Aleksandr Soltzhenitsyn** talked about sloth in this culture in his famous Harvard Commencement address. He said,

"In the United States the difficulties are ...not imprisonment, hard labor, death, government harassment and censorship – but cupidity, boredom, sloppiness, indifference. Not the acts of a mighty, all-pervading, repressive government but the failure of a listless public to make use of the freedom that is it's birthright."

Dorothy Sayers, the brilliant English writer and apologist of the last century gave a famous talk called "The Other Six Deadly Sins" in which **she described sloth** with these words,

In the world, it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair... It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. We have known it far too well for many years. The only thing perhaps that we have not known about it is that it is mortal sin...

In that context, listen to the words of **Proverbs** as it warns the **sluggard**:

The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing. Prov 20.4

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? Prov 6.9

Good question. Soltzhenitsyn and Sayers meant to **wake us, shake us** from this listlessness, this sloth, this deadly creeping indifference to God and goodness and life. Their words fell on deaf ears for the most part. But I wonder if God might not use **a louder alarm clock** to wake us up.

God does have his alarm clocks... His best alarm clocks are most often the **hard places of life.**

- It can be the frightening report from a series of medical tests.
- Or the difficulties of a lost job.
- Or the setback in a career.
- Or the loss of a marriage.
- Or the ravages of an addiction.

I wonder if the approaching difficulties of **the recession**, if the hardships coming upon us might not be **God's alarm clock** to an indifferent, bored, listless people.

Did you notice the **cardboard testimonies** last weekend? They were quite remarkable, one of the most moving services I have ever attended. We have had dozens of calls and comments and cards this week from you all. Here is one I especially liked:

I have been attending this church for 22 years and this was special - everyone has a story and everyone is broken; praise Jesus for His promise to accept us and love us.

Here is another:

What a blessing Sunday was us... we wept, along with the whole church, as we saw in very concrete ways, the difference that Jesus makes in our lives. The part I liked best was that it was a very, very strong reminder that all of us have burdens and heartbreaks, that everyone has a story, and that God turns those weak, broken hearted places in our lives into places of strength. Also, I loved the

look on the testimonial's faces as they flipped over their cards...it was like their faces started to shine...their smiles were so powerful...

It is **the alarm clocks that wake us up**, shake us from our slumber.

The corresponding **beatitude** that matches up with sloth is **not really a virtue**. It is actually **the lack of a virtue**, an 'anti-virtue' of sorts.

It is **the lack of having anything to offer**, and strangely enough, that **becomes the place of blessing**. This is true of the **first three beatitudes**, where Jesus blesses the poor in spirit and the meek and those who mourn. These are not really virtues. These are anti-virtues. These are people who are **spiritually empty or heartbroken or intimidated by life**. These are the people that the world again and again says are **hopeless, lost, useless**.

But **not so, says Jesus**. Instead he says, 'I say to you, **blessed**. Yours is the Kingdom. You shall inherit the earth. You shall be filled and comforted and satisfied.'

We have to think about this, it is so contrary. **Jesus takes those the world declares hopeless**, and says **you are not beyond my reach**. No one is beyond my reach. Actually **you who are hopeless are in the place I reach best**.

Then he comes to the **fourth beatitude**,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

It is the **anti-virtue again**. They hunger and thirst **for what they do not have**. Because **they know they do not have it**.

There is something quite remarkable about fallen human beings – across every culture and time you will find this is true. **We have this capacity to see**. We can see beyond the brokenness of life to **the way things are supposed to be**. Every culture has its **dreams and visions** of a perfect world. Every one knows that that world is not this world – not yet

anyway. This is the stuff of political campaigns and songs and poems, of blockbuster movies and cultural revolutions and utopian dreams. From Plato's Republic to Isaiah's prophecies to the Communist Manifesto: everyone can see something of what Jesus calls '**righteousness**'. **The way the way life is supposed to be.**

And we **look in a mirror** and don't see it there. We look **down the street** and we don't see it there. And we look **around our land** and we don't see it there. And we pray, '*Let thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*' **Everyone prays those words.** Because everyone knows this is not the way it is supposed to be.

In **her book *Amazing Grace***, Kathleen Norris tells the story of teaching children how to write poetry using the Psalms as a model. One little boy **wrote a poem** entitled "*The Monster Who Was Sorry.*" He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response (in the poem) is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "*Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'*"

I love his phrase, '**My messy house.**' and his sobering discovery that he is all too human, and that humans can really make a mess of things.

And I love his title, "**The Monster Who Was Sorry**". Here is a young boy who is learning to find words, deeply honest words to express his sin. No mincing words here. No excusing it. No minimizing it. And he is sorry for it. He knows this is not the way it is supposed to be. The young boy is well on his way to repentance. He hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

The invitation of Jesus for 'Monsters who are sorry' is to **come to him**. 'Blessed' he says to us. Come on right in to my kingdom. Just come right in, just like you are. Ask and seek and knock – and "You shall be satisfied."

Here is how **John Donne** prayed it in his 'Holy Sonnet' some 400 years ago:

*'Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend
Your force to break, blowe, burn and make me new...'*

Hungry, thirsty, he pens a courageous prayer. No mincing words here. No excusing it. No minimizing it. And he is sorry for it. He knows he is not the way he is supposed to be. He hungers and thirsts for righteousness. **"You, too, shall be satisfied."**

For many of us, the opportunities of a special season like Lent are reduced to the question: **"What are you giving up for Lent?"** This question won't take us far. The **real questions** of Lent **orbit about the ever present sin of sloth:**

What has happened to my passion for Christ?
Where in my life have I gotten away from God?
How can I wake from this sleep?

And the opportunities of Lent **respond** to us: Would it not be good to have a season of **repentance**, a season of **prayer**, a season of **self-examination** that will enable me to return to God with all my heart?

Tonight most of us will receive the **imposition of ashes** on our foreheads with the words "you are dust and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:19). This is the language of the **anti-virtue**, the language of **emptiness**, the language of those who **hunger and thirst** for the way things ought to be, the language of **'monsters who are sorry'**.

So come. And as you come, do not miss **the words of Jesus** spoken in this place tonight:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.