

**Sermon: The Sloth in All of Us****Scripture: Luke 13:6-9****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 24, 2019**

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I feel like a Netflix series - Previously on... "Worship at First Church" - Our 7 Deadly Sins Lenten series has covered greed, gluttony, and anger and we've seen how fundamentally good desires can become distorted within us and cause all sorts of trouble for ourselves and others and ultimately separate us from our loving God. This list of the fundamental sins of our human nature which are deadly and number, 7, comes from the desert fathers and mothers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and were not developed as a cudgel for shaming and convincing us of how bad we are, but rather as a tool for self-examination and spiritual growth and pursuing the truth about ourselves so we might do that most difficult of things - change.

As the writer Kathleen Norris explains "as the disciple spurns her selfish and egotistical self in favor of her true self, she comes to know better a selflessly loving God." And that's what we are working towards here, to know better our loving God. So we locate those lonely places where we are "curved in on ourselves", as Augustine put it, and then we see better our path towards needed change that will deepen and enrich our relationship with God and one another. The list is so powerful and insightful an account of the struggle of being human, that if you use it as a lense to look honestly and faithfully at yourself you'll notice that none of us are free of the shadows of each of these sins - greed, gluttony, anger, sloth, envy, lust and pride but what makes that tolerable to

contemplate is the knowledge that none of us are without the image of God within us either, which is deeper and truer than any of the sins. Our hope is that this consideration of the 7 Deadly Sins will offer insight that might bear fruit and a pathway forward to the virtues of generosity, temperance, patience, humility, right-action, chastity and love.

Speaking of bearing fruit, the scripture given for today of Jesus' parable of the fruitless fig tree, is a perfect stepping off point for our deadly sin du jour which is SLOTH, because one of the end results of this sin is often fruitlessness. Jesus' parable, although it is not always interpreted this way, has the vineyard owner as a representative of humanity and the gardener pleading for more time and more mercy as God. The human being is quick to judge and exact punishment for fruitlessness, but "God's compassions never fail," as Lamentations puts it, "and God's mercies are new every morning." This is so important to remember and proclaim as we consider how the sins mar our own spirits, that God is full of mercy and compassion. Jesus doesn't reject us and push us away because of our sin, but meets us in our sin and is patient with us in our failings, knowing that we can come around and change our course and be renewed.

And there are few of us who don't in fact need to be renewed from the sin of sloth. On one hand it might seem odd that laziness would be placed on the same list as greed or gluttony, envy or wrath. But it is. Some of the desert fathers even claimed that it was the most dangerous of the deadly sins. On the other hand, with our roots in Puritanism and the Protestant work ethic, you might think, "I get it, slothfulness should be a deadly sin, laziness is a blight in our culture that prizes hard and

dedicated work!” But again, you wouldn’t be putting your finger quite on the point of why sloth is on the list of the 7 deadly sins, cause while it can manifest as outward laziness in work it might often and more insidiously manifest as outward busy-ness. For you see sloth becomes a distorting sin of the human spirit not necessarily when we become lazy about the demands of work, but when we become lazy about the demands of love.

To say we all have the capacity for slothfulness in our lives is to say that all of us at some time or another experience the formidable demands of love and truth and goodness that require growth, change, sacrifice and we choose an easier path. The sin of sloth can show up in the intimacy of a spousal relationship where instead of dealing with a difficult conflict head on and facing the tough road of coming back into relationship by acknowledging our own part, by saying “I’m sorry”, by facing our own shortcomings, we do whatever we tend to do to avoid where we really should go – like staying in our room and doing nothing but smoking as the choir anthem sang or staying at the office for an extra couple of hours or coming home and getting right into a TV show or get busy doing something else... actually anything else. Rebecca DeYoung in her book “Glittering Vices” says “loving another person requires a thousand little deaths of our old individual selfish nature and this is the ‘work’ that the slothful one resists.” p. 89 Sloth in relationships can manifest in such thoughts as - “I’m fine, she’s the one that needs to change” or “this is not my problem” or “I don’t have time for this” or a myriad of other excuses for not doing the hard work that honest relationship requires.

The way God made us as human beings is to be turned outward and self-donating towards others whether that is in our spousal relationship, a parent-child relationship, friendships and as we know from Jesus that circle continues to extend outward even to the stranger and the enemy. Sin turns us inward to protect what we've got and the sin of sloth turns us inward by convincing us that the only thing that matters is in here and what I need and want. The famous preacher Fred Craddock speaks of the sin of sloth in this way... "Sloth is the ability to look at a starving child with a swollen stomach and say 'well, it's not my child'. Or to see an old man sitting alone among the pigeons in the park and say 'well, that's not my dad.' It is the capacity of the human spirit to look out upon the world and everything God made and say 'I don't care.'" P. 115 of "Acedia and Me" by Kathleen Norris The Human being is made to care. The human being turned in on itself doesn't care... or doesn't care enough to take the time and make the sacrifice for what's right.

I thought I had gotten out of this sin. Sloth was the sin that Rev. Judy was going to preach on and then she had to go and slip on the ice so she's lying in bed somewhere right now. I guess God was like "no, Will, I think you will preach on sloth and realize more fully this sin in your own life." So I told Judy I would cover for her on Sloth Sunday and that there was still envy, lust and pride she could choose from depending on when she recovers. But we talked in the hospital this past week and I asked her what she had been thinking about sloth before her accident and she said she was going to tell you about one time when she went up to her family's camp in New Hampshire and had this good and generous impulse to wash the old dirty kitchen floor. But once she had

sudsed-up the floor and done a fair amount of scrubbing she realized the job was a whole lot bigger than she'd imagined. What was initially a lovely expression of care for her family and their camp that made her glow with her own benevolence quickly became a big drag. So she had an idea for a short-cut - she opened the kitchen door up to the backyard and hauled in the hose, she said she was very pleased with herself and thought "I don't know why no one has ever thought of this before!" And she proceeds to spray the kitchen floor with the hose, intending to simply spray all the suds and dirt right out the back of the house! However it wasn't long before she realized it wasn't going to work that way and in fact she was filling up the kitchen with sudsy dirty water and her couple of hours of necessary work to accomplish the task for her family became an ordeal of many many more hours to correct the damage done by her corner cutting.

That's a great metaphor for the path that sloth insidiously invites us down. It'll convince us that there is an easier way that involves less work on our part but the "easier" way is often a superficial fix that lets us off the hook for the moment from the deeper, harder, more diligent work that is required for the sake of what is good and right. Sloth is a deadly sin, truly deadly, because we suffocate the life and love that lies at a deeper level and that requires more of us for an immediate fix that is easier in the here and now. Again, from Rebecca DeYoung - "The slothful person is one who resists the effort of doing day after day after day whatever it takes to keep the bonds of love strong and living and healthy, whether he or she feels particularly inspired about doing it or not." P. 87

Can you find your place in this sin or its place in your life yet? You see how the busiest person among us could in fact be the most slothful? Do you see how slippery these sins can be and how much easier it is simply turn these on the people around us rather than locate them in our lives? It's easier to see the greed of the 1% or the gluttony of the obese or the anger of violent people or the laziness of the poor than it is to turn the light of these deadly sins on our own lives to see what they reveal? That very dynamic of blaming and shaming others and letting ourselves off the hook for these sins – trying to remove the speck in our brothers eye and not even seeing the log in our own - is nothing less than the sin of sloth run amok!

As I've mentioned before, each sin is rooted in what the desert fathers and mothers determined was the root of all the deadly sins – pride. For the sin of sloth is ultimately about a willful unwillingness to surrender ourselves to God, to love, to goodness – so note, it's different from depression or grief – it's a willful refusal to surrender oneself to God, to Love, and instead deciding that we'll manage our lives better ourselves – thank you very much! We think we know what is required for us to live fully so we'll take it from here - but we too often deceive ourselves and we can even enlist some of the virtues to support our sin of sloth. The pastor and writer John Buchanan warns: “sloth means not living up to the full potential of our humanity,” and this can often happen by “playing it safe, entrusting nothing, being cautious, prudent,” or in other words “digging a hole and burying our treasure in it.” If we are not careful, the virtue of prudence, for instance, can be used as an excuse for avoiding the risks that God demands of us as Jesus' disciples.

The countervailing virtues of sloth are diligence, long-suffering, and compassion. The red flags that can warn us of the work of sloth within us can be - whenever we are feeling like jumping ship due to the tediousness of a relationship or bailing on our daily discipline of prayer with God or opting for the easier of two paths or seeing the problem as out there beyond us instead of within. It's then worth stopping and asking if this could be the sin of sloth lurking at our door and instead press in one more time, take one more tack to do the right thing and maintain the relationship and act on love even when and especially when we do not feel like it. That's the way through sloth to the other side of transformation in God. Risk for love. Persevere for love. Sacrifice for love. Risk for truth, Persevere for truth. Sacrifice for truth. Risk for the good. Persevere for the good. Sacrifice for the good. As the gardener asked for more time for the fruitless tree, we can be assured that God will give us more time if we diligently put in the needed work for change in our lives and Jesus will meet us there at the place of our sin and stuck-ness and nurture us towards change and who knows what fruit might be born of such faithfulness!