

## **“The Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth”**

**Luke 6: 27-36. Revelation 3: 14 – 19**

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### **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Bulletin Cover quote: “The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way.”

- William James

It’s winter. It’s cold. It’s dark. It’s gray. It was a struggle to drive here in the snow. What a great day to talk about sin. That’s not something you hear often in Presbyterian Churches.

A long time ago in the theological history of the church, they came up with a list of sins called the seven deadly sins. The basic idea is that these particular sins spread seeds of all sorts of other sins. So it is important to talk about them.

In ethics, historically, the idea that human beings practice habits. Ways of living every day. We practice these habits enough, it become who we are.

Our habits cluster together to form our character. Character perpetuates itself: you don’t choose everyday: you choose long ago, and have been practicing it ever since. It’s who you have become. It’s who you are.

Of all the writers on the Seven Deadly Sins, the person who wrote with the most depth and disturbing insight, was born 754 years ago, the Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. Dante wrote this series of poems, about hell, purgatory, and heaven.

A lot of theologians, when they talk about the Seven Deadly Sins, start with pride. But not Dante. Dante starts with sloth. So let’s start there. We have to clean the slate a bit first. And talk about what sloth is not. Sloth is not taking a nap. Sloth is not taking the day off. Sloth is not taking a vacation. Remember, it was God who established Sunday as a day of rest, And the Jubilee Year as a year of rest.

I have this chair. It is a big, comfortable, overstuffed chair. I call it the hand of God. I go there to pray. I get comfortable, relax, close my eyes, and enter an attitude of prayer. About 45 minutes later, I wake up. I don’t feel guilty about that at all. God knows we need our rest.

Dante helps us to see sloth in a different light. As Dante writes, as you are about to enter the gates of Hell, there is a sign above the gates that reads:

“Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.”

But as (Virgil) Dante is looking at the sign, He notices out on the plain in front of the gates of hell what looks like a dust storm. But on closer examination, you can see it is not a dust storm; it is a whirlwind of souls. They are all clustered together, constantly moving, and then you see, they are following a flag. The flag is moving in very random directions, first this way, then that, then another. And whatever way the flag moves, the whirlwind of souls must follow.

They must follow because they are being goaded on, as they constantly are being stung by swarms of hornets and wasps. Stinging the souls, goading them on eternally, as they run through filth of their own making.

What is going on? Dante thinks of judgement in terms of divine retribution. These soul-stung, perpetual flag followers, who never rest, have already had their rest. They lived lives of sloth. Lives that did not matter. Lives where they constantly took the easy way out.

Why the wasps and hornets? Because their conscience never stung them in life. So now they will be stung eternally. In life, they just took the easy way out, never stood for anything, just followed the flag of popular opinion. So now they must be stung by the retribution for living a life that did not matter.

They were so uncommitted to anything in life, that now, in death, nobody will have them. Heaven won't touch them. Hell won't open its gates to them.

Sounds like that passage in the book of Revelation. John in his dream, hears the Spirit say to the church at Laodicea, “If you were either cold or hot, but you were luke-warm: so I vomit you out!” That's the literal translation.

Dante's image is devastating: Because these souls would not really live, Now they cannot really die. “No rest for the wicked” for Dante means literally no rest for the slothful.

Dante writes: These are the nearly soulless, whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.” And most biting: “No word of them survives their living season.” No one remembers them when they are gone, because they did not stand for anything when they were living.

That is sloth. TO live a life that does not matter.

How do people get there? How often have we heard someone faced with an important decision, who declines real participation with the mantra of sloth? “Whatever.”

Sloth can take a number of different forms. For some, it means doing very little with their lives. Picture Seinfeld. A show about nothing in a culture that stands for nothing. For others, they may do a lot, but what they do does not mean much. They spend their life majoring in minors. In the thick of

thin things. For some, they can't be bothered to learn. They do not take the time to learn about what is going on in the world.

For others, they don't want to open up any can of worms. They don't want to get their hands dirty. They don't want to have anyone get angry or upset with them for the offense of having an opinion.

We teach our children not to talk about religion and politics, and then wonder why people battle over religion and politics. We should be teaching our children about HOW to talk about religion and politics in ways that model civility and understanding.

Dante talked about that very thing 700 years ago. Among the stung souls in the dust storm outside of the gates, He sees Pope Celestine the 5<sup>th</sup>. (I'm sure you remember Celestine the 5<sup>th</sup>). He was the Pope whose friend Boniface

Convinced him that if he became involved in worldly affairs (religion and politics) that he would do something corrupt, and that this would put his immortal soul in danger. So Celestine renounced his role of Pope and withdrew from worldly affairs. What happened then was: Boniface became Pope, An extremely corrupt pope, who allowed all sorts of evils to infect the church. Celestine's personal form of sloth: He tried to keep his hands clean. And in so doing, he allowed evil to reign.

The church today is tempted to do the same thing: to not talk about religion and politics: Sloth. When we should be learning HOW to talk about what is going on in the world.

So, if the attitude and practice of sloth is deadly to our humanity, what Virtuous attitudes can we practice, to shape our souls, and our world in virtuous ways?

Harvey Cox says Sloth is the abdication of our responsible use of power. So we have to take the risk of using our power, and do so in responsible ways. Tillich called the courage to be. Courage rooted in our trust of God.

Jesus talks about loving our enemy: it presumes we have some enemies. How did we get enemies? We stood up for something important. Jesus encourages us to find ways to love our enemies. It does not just happen. It's difficult. It requires sacrifice. It requires courage. It has the potential, sometimes, to turn enemies into friends. It takes sacrifice. Love is an act of the will. We need to mobilize our will. Victor Frankel, "What is to give light must endure burning."

I worked with a man I considered to be courageous. People liked him, but he was willing to be misunderstood, and willing to disagree with people. He took risks, and sometimes he paid the price. I asked him how he did it. He said, "Andrew, it's a horrible death to be bored to death." You know you're overcoming sloth when

If we trust in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ who endured the cross, The courage of faith needs to mobilize our will to give us the vitality to stand up for love, hope, peace, grace, justice.

Remember the old story of the bank robber, Willie Sutton, when a reporter asked him “Willie, why do you rob banks?” Willie said, “Because that’s where the money is.” Why do Christians make all these sacrifices, take all these risks? Because that’s where the life is.

Paul says, “While we were sinners, Christ died for us.” Not after we were perfect. While we were sinners. So that means we have to get our hands dirty.

In an imperfect world, with imperfect ways, but nevertheless to be hot or cold and to stand for something that we believe embodies the love of Jesus Christ. Courage is saying “Yes” to an imperfect world.

One of my favorite stories of the kid of courage that counters sloth, comes from Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. Huck and the escaped slave, Jim, and going down the Mississippi. The two runaways have become close friends, but there comes a point where Huck knows that legally he should turn Jim in to the authorities.

Huck knows that an escaped slave is wrong. Not only is he breaking the law In harboring this fugitive slave, but Huck knows that the Bible says he will go to hell for this wrong-doing. Huck has to paddle into a nearby town to get some supplies. In so doing, he has to leave Jim on the island in the river. Huck is paddling off, convinced that he needs to do the right thing and turn Jim in. As he paddles off, Jim calls to him and says, “Good old Huck. The only friend I got.”

What should Huck do? His choices are messy in a messy world. Should he do what is legal and right, and betray his friend? Or should he be loyal to his friend, break the law, and go to hell? Huck agonizes. He agonizes. Then finally Huck decides. He says, “All right then. I’ll go to hell.”

Mark Twain captures the move from sloth to courage right there. And in that act where he decides, Huck not only saves his friend, by risking his soul, he saves his soul. It is a call to Life. A call to divine courage. That a lukewarm, stand-for-nothing life is a danger to our humanity, to our soul.

Tom Robbins, in his quirky, classic book, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, says it best:

“How can one person be more real than any other? Well, some people do hide and others seek. Maybe those who are in hiding – escaping encounters, avoiding surprises, protecting their property, ignoring their fantasies, restricting their feelings, sitting out the pan pipe hootchy-kootch of experience... some folks hide, and some folk's seek, and seeking, when it's mindless, neurotic, desperate, or pusillanimous can be a form of hiding. But there are folks who want to know and aren't afraid to look and won't turn tail should they find it – and if they never do, they'll have a good time anyway because nothing, neither the terrible truth nor the absence of it, is going to cheat them out of one honest breath of Earth's sweet gas.”

Friends, that is what theologian Paul Tillich would call, the Courage to BE. And practicing that kind of being is the antidote to sloth. In the Cross of Jesus Christ is the key to life: a life lived with passion, meaning, faith, hope, love, forgiveness, and grace. Jesus is a call to life – an invitation away from a meaningless sloth, and into the passion of living. May we hear Christ’s invitation – and follow!

Amen.

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