

Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Sloth & Joy

Ecclesiastes 11:1-11; 2 Peter 1:3-7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Part One: Sloth

I thought about beginning a sermon on the sin of sloth with a bad joke about how I didn't get around to writing a sermon this week because I just couldn't be bothered, but... 😊

I'm not sure what your first reaction is to the word "sloth." It's not a word that you hear very often these days.

"Greed," "pride," "envy"—these words are part of everyday parlance. But "sloth?" Not so much.

For many of us, it occupies a category in our heads with words like "avarice" or "cupidity"—words that we dimly recognize and are reasonably convinced aren't compliments but seem somehow to belong to a different age.

Maybe your first thoughts go to the unfortunate mammal that shares a name with the sin. Maybe you think of these slow-moving creatures whose entire existence seems oriented around expending as little effort as possible.

Maybe you think of sloth as a synonym for "laziness." My guess is that this is the most common option, particularly among Mennonites raised with a sense of duty and a conviction that holiness bears a strong resemblance to work ethic.

We are a doing, giving, serving pragmatic people, after all. If Mennonites had been there at the beginning when the seven deadly sins were finalized, we might have been inclined to make "laziness" one of them.

But sloth is about much more than slowness or inefficiency or laziness. I think these things can all fit under the umbrella of sloth, but they are only symptoms of a much bigger and potentially more destructive issue.

The word "sloth" is a translation of the Latin term *acedia* and literally means "without care."

Sloth can manifest itself in a straightforward lack of endeavour, but beneath this is the much deeper issue of a failure to care.

Failure to care about others. Other people can be inconvenient, needy, messy. It's easier just to not get involved.

Failure to care about ourselves. Sloth can be expressed in plain old boredom, in many ways a luxury of having an historically unprecedented amount of discretionary time on our hands and not having to work as hard as previous generations did for daily bread.

We can refuse to steward our bodies well, just eating and drinking whatever we want, not really exercising or bothering much with the signals our bodies might be giving us that change is necessary.

It can also manifest in a kind of despair at the apparently futility of life. Franz Kafka was a famous twentieth-century writer in the early twentieth century. An entry from his diary dated May 3, 1915 gives an apt summary of what sloth feels and sounds like:

Completely indifferent and apathetic. A well gone dry, water at an unattainable depth and no certainty is there. Nothing, nothing... What is there to tie me to a past or future? The present is a phantom state for me; I don't sit at the table but hover round it. Nothing, nothing. Emptiness, boredom. No, not boredom, merely emptiness, meaninglessness, weakness.¹

Failure to care about the world. Sloth can show itself in compassion fatigue, fueled by the reach of media and the sheer volume of stuff we're aware of. We look at the scope of the problems out there in the world, whether it's the looming threat of climate change, or the grim reality of endless violence, or the never ending stream of bad news served up to us in real time on our phones, TVs and computers, or the wearisome polarization of our cultural discourse...

¹ Quoted in Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writers Life* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 304.

and we think, “Well, the problems are just too big and who can really do anything? I’m sure someone else will take care of it.” And we just kind of shrug our shoulders, slump into the couch and reach for the potato chips.

About God. Indifference toward God is common in our time. It can express itself in a petulant attitude that imagines that God really should have arranged things better in the world. There should be less suffering, more justice, and so we kind of pout in the corner and blame God for the state of the world or for the state of our lives.

Or, we just simply can’t be *bothered* with God. God hasn’t made himself very obvious, we think, so we don’t trouble ourselves with too much effort in spiritual matters. Things seem to go along the same for us whether we spend much energy in things like prayer, worship, and the cultivation of virtue or not. So, we choose “not.”

In each case, sloth is characterized by a kind of weary resignation and apathy toward things that deserve and require our attention.

The core reality of the sin of sloth is an unwillingness to care properly. It’s when we just can’t be bothered.

We get a hint of this in our text from Ecclesiastes this morning. I imagine the Teacher (the writer of this book) as going through something like a midlife crisis. He’s lived a little while, he’s seen how things go, he’s experienced the ups and downs of life, and he’s well aware that his time is limited.

And he has a word for the whole show: “meaningless.” *Everything is meaningless!*

You work your whole life... for what? You don’t gain anything. You just die like everyone else and are forgotten before long. People come and people go, the sun rises and sets, nature keeps on doing what nature does.

Everything seems “wearisome” to him. There’s nothing new under the sun—nothing to fire the imagination or excite the energy. He sounds kind of like Franz Kafka: *nothing, nothing. Meaningless.*

This isn’t *all* the Teacher will have to say in Ecclesiastes. He will go on to advocate proper worship and to describe wisdom as a “shelter.” He will end the book by urging his readers to “remember your Creator,” to “fear God and keep his commandments.”

But the overall tenor of the book is pretty bleak. It's a resigned and weary look at the world and the human predicament. The Teacher sees life not as a delight or an adventure, but as an unfair burden that God has laid on the human race.

If he was living in the twenty-first century, I can imagine him lying on his pajamas eating junk food and binge-watching Netflix for days on end or mindlessly grazing on social media while the dishes pile up in the sink.

Why bother pursuing anything meaningful when life itself is meaningless? Why put in the effort to care for your neighbour when people are ungrateful and entitled? Why pursue justice, truth, and mercy when there is no fairness to be found? Why invest in the good when the bad always seems to win in the end?

Why speak up for the weak when the powerful always get their way in the end? Why pray when it just seems like you're throwing words to the wind? Why trust when you think you've been let down so many times in the past?

Why hope for something new when everything just seems to be the same as it always has been?

Perhaps you have found yourselves asking questions like this at some point in your life. Perhaps you're feeling like this right now. Perhaps you know from personal experience that it's very easy for questions like these to kind of send you into a downward spiral of idle despair.

I want to be clear to separate sloth from things like depression and anxiety. The latter are very real things that should be treated with whatever combination of therapy and medication is appropriate to the specific situation.

But I think we must also be honest with ourselves and accurately name the sin of sloth when appropriate.

Sometimes we are unable to care. That might be depression. Sometimes we are unwilling. That's a sin.

This is who we are. These are the selves that we bring to confession this morning.

Part Two: Joy

Perhaps you might be thinking that “joy” is not the most obvious virtue to contrast with “sloth.” Maybe “industry” or “initiative” or something like that.

I confess that I didn’t initially think of “joy” as the obvious virtue to pair with the sin of sloth either. But the more I thought about, the more I came to agree.

The novelist Evelyn Waugh puts it really well:

The malice of Sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty... but in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair.²

I think this is true. Sloth *is* the refusal of joy.

It sometimes seems to me that it’s not particularly cool or popular to be joyful.

It's easy to be cynical about the world. Nothing is easier than this. Some days when open my Facebook account, it seems like a steady and unrelenting stream of negativity and despair. This morning, someone I know posted a beautiful collection of images from their morning walk around a lake. Someone responded with, “I guess the world survived for another day. We shouldn’t take this for granted.” The image of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh came to mind.

For some people, even Christian people, the sky is always falling. Their emotional temperature seems to be dictated by Donald Trump’s Twitter account or the never-ending stream of bad news that leaks out from our various media sources.

(And it’s worth remembering that bad news has always been more profitable than good news...)

Now, I’m not arguing that Christians should be naïve optimists. We have a responsibility to look at the world honestly, to pursue justice, to pay attention to crises that require action.

² Quoted in Norris, 308.

I'm not saying that we should pretend the world, or the human predicament is better than it is. It's important to look at the world through the lens of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes from time to time, even if the picture we see isn't pretty.

But this isn't the *only* lens we should look at the world through. We can also look through the lens of faith, hope, and love. And of joy!

There is a kind of stubborn joy that that the persists, even though all the facts have been considered, to borrow from Wendell Berry.

As Christians, our joy is anchored in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in the bedrock conviction that God *so loved* the world that he sent his Son to reclaim and redeem it and to usher in the kingdom of peace.

Because of this, no apparent futility has the final word. Because of this, joy is the appropriate Christian response, not a lazy and indifferent yawn or a whiny complaint, or a sky-is-falling attitude that imagines that the fate of the world is entirely on our shoulders.

Joy, not despair, is what we were created *in* and *for*. Because of this, Peter urges the early church to,

make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

That's quite a list. I don't think Peter is offering a step by step formula here. *Once you've figured out goodness, then add a bit of knowledge, and then a dash of self-control... and then, when you've put all the right ingredients into the Christian life, the icing on the cake is love.*

No, I think Peter is saying that a life of virtue is a response to the God who gives good gifts.

The gift of creation with all its staggering beauty.

The gift of human community, friendship, family.

The gift of being human—of the incredible capacity we have to reflect our creator in art, music, in our ability to create, to engineer, to solve problems, to tend wounds and pursue peace

And ultimately, the gift of salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation—of a hope for new creation that stretches out beyond the times when it might seem like there is no hope, when things seem futile or meaningless, and transforms the present.

The virtue of joy is desperately necessary in our cultural moment which is often characterized by indifference ingratitude and inactivity.

Joy reengages. Joy decides that life is worth giving our best care to because it is a gift from God.

A defiant and determined joy does not give up.

Joy is not the same thing as happiness just as hope is not the same thing as optimism. Happiness and optimism are circumstance dependent. They are more passive. We feel happy and optimistic when things are going well for us.

Joy and hope are decisions and dispositions that persist even when things aren't going well for us, when things are hard, when the future doesn't look bright.

They are expressions of trust in God, even when things get difficult or appear bleak.

This is true of all virtue.

I'm not sure if you noticed this trend by now, on our sixth Sunday on sin and virtue, but each of the deadly sins locates the self at the center of our experience. And each of the virtues reorients the self in relationship to God.

Disoriented love can only think about the self and what it wants. Reoriented love lifts our gaze to God and God's purposes for the world.

I want to close with the words of Gordon Smith, one of my former professors at Regent College and current president of Ambrose Seminary in Calgary:

It is not that the church does not see the brokenness of the world and the pain that intersects so much of human life. It is not that the church is naive and does not care about this pain; the Christian community sees and feels keenly the brokenness of the world. But... the church declares that in the midst of all that is wrong, God is the ruler yet, and God is good. The church believes that something bigger and more ultimate stands at the centre of the mess. As Chesterton often insisted, we take joy in the deep

things, those things that matter most. Yes, we grieve. But we know that those things will one day pass. When we take the larger view, when we think cosmically, the centre of the universe is a throne, and on the throne sits the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This, more than anything, establishes us as people of joy.

Amen.

