

Lent Series '17
Fifth Sunday of Lent
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Seven Deadly Sins: Acedia
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Pride, envy, avarice, gluttony, lust, and wrath – I'm worn out after all that, don't want to think anymore, and there's still one more? Who cares?

April's Fool!

In fact, I just described number seven, sloth-- a disinclination to exert one, indolence, laziness.

Though not everything that looks like laziness is. Chess players may look like they fell asleep at the board, but they are more intently focused than most of us usually are. Martha implied that Mary was ducking work by sitting next to Jesus listening to him, but Jesus said she had chosen the better part. Apparently contemplation is a worthy activity, even more valuable than getting dinner on.

So, not everything that looks like sloth is, but actually the spiritual authors had a more precise term for the seventh deadly sin. They called it “acedia”, which means spiritual sloth, religious indifference. As early as the fourth century it was recognized as a kind of occupational hazard for monks. Frequent fasts and long prayers could weary the soul, become routine, and make someone who had entered the monastery with great love of God become gradually indifferent. Familiarity breeds contempt, they say. Devotion can get mechanical, and “Jesus Christ” become just some words you say with a nod of the head without a thought of Jesus Christ, the person to whom you were once devoted. This is acedia-- a deficit of desire, a loss of interest in God.

So, is this a problem? The one who has given up doesn't think so. Well, driving can get routine. You go years without an accident and gradually forget how quickly something can happen. You fiddle with the radio, respond to a text, and comb your hair in the rear view mirror. Suddenly a kid on a bike is in front of you. This is a problem.

Marriage can get routine. You settle into your respective roles, conversation becomes business-like and perfunctory communications, you start to take each other for granted, and one morning you wake up to a note that says, “I don't love you any more.” This is a problem

Life can get routine. You finish your education, land a decent job, buy a house, everything seems to have fallen into place. The years roll by, the retirement fund grows fatter, you

begin to think about how someday ... and then one day something knocks you out of this life into the next. You meet the Lord and say, "Who are you?" He looks at you and says, "I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was sick and you did not visit me. I was lonely, confused, afraid, and you were too busy to notice." This is a problem.

Not because God gets mad if we ignore Him, but because when we forget Who God is, we forget who we are and why we are here, and that causes all kinds of problems. We get arrogant in our pride, eaten up with envy, hateful in our avarice, bloated in our gluttony, selfish in our lust, dangerous in our wrath. Yes, some very energetic people suffer from acedia, spiritual sloth, and you don't want to be around them when they get going.

Now all of this may sound simply false to a sincere atheist, because he has met Christian believers who are arrogant, hateful, and selfish. The atheist thinks religion is the source of trouble in the world, and of much unhappiness. My response would be that the atheist is rejecting the false god that believers settle for when they get tired of seeking the true God and sink into acedia. But the solution to human misery is not to sink into acedia yourself by believing there is no God. The solution is to seek the true God. Faulty, lazy ideas about God have led Christians to do evil things, but atheism in the 20th century alone, by means of communism and fascism, murdered far more people than all the crusades and inquisitions combined.

Acedia is deadly. What is the antidote? Well, seeking the true God. And since an acedic Christian is a practical atheist, we all need to build, or rebuild, from the ground up.

Start by acknowledging the obvious fact that you are not God. You did not cause yourself to be, much less the universe. But something did, or it would not be. The universe is a question seeking an answer.

Once you acknowledge that you are not God you can start to free yourself from pride, envy, lust, and all the rest of the deadly sins. They are huge obstacles to seeking and finding the true God.

Now, onward, O seeker of truth! This God who must exist, what is He like? If you thought that you were fully initiated when you were confirmed at age fourteen and had nothing more to learn about ultimate reality, think again. Would you settle for a middle school knowledge about anything important? Decide that the question being asked by the universe is important. Seek answers. Some are more true than others, so there must be a most true. Seek the true God.

At some point you will realize that the Creator and Sustainer of the universe must be more than an impersonal force, more than a something, but a someone who has spoken to us and can be spoken to. Listen to what He has revealed about Himself, and speak to Him in reply.

There are so many forms of Christian prayer that one of them will be helpful to you. But all prayer is simply a conscious communion with God, so you can always just talk to Him. He's aware of you, and He's listening.

Put your growing faith into action. Volunteer to help people in need. Stop in church for a few minutes to present yourself bodily before the Almighty, who has made himself present bodily in the Blessed Sacrament. Attend a faith formation event and interact with fellow believers. Do all these things and more, because nothing makes faith real like putting it into action.

What all this is leading up to is love. Love the Lord your God with all your soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love-- a sincere, intentional devotion to the other-- is the total opposite of acedia -- spiritual sloth, indifference. Love runs through today's Gospel.

“I am glad that I was not there, that you may believe”, Jesus said.

“Let us also go to die with him”, said Thomas.

“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died, yet even now ...” said Martha, and then Mary, when she finally got there.

“Lazarus, come out!” said Jesus.

In each instance it was love speaking, love seeking. Human love reaching out to God, God's great saving love seeking them and calling them out of their tombs of unbelief, indifference, and despair.