

“Sloth - Resistance to the Demands of Love”

The vice of Sloth is perhaps one of the more unassuming and nefarious vice's that we'll study, and it really is a bit of a breath of fresh air after last week's vice.

When we think of Sloth, I'm sure you imagine either the hairy, long clawed, slow moving mammal, or, the large, sedentary, sofa bound, television-observing, potato chip-eating mammal (or in other words, me, as I was before children, and before getting married, Sunday afternoon). In our popular understanding, we've equated Sloth to simply meaning laziness. If someone is inordinately lazy we're quick to label them slothful.

In Harper's 1987 spoof of the deadly sins, the caption of the ad for sloth read, “If sloth had been the original sin,” as opposed to pride, “then we'd all still be in paradise.” From scholarly to popular accounts of the vice, contemporary culture seems often to equate sloth with laziness, inactivity, and inertia.

But I want to suggest that Sloth is different from laziness. I want to suggest that while sloth might appear as laziness, it's much more than that. I want to suggest that at its core, Sloth, is indifference - indifference towards our selves, our neighbours, our world, or our God. Which is why I've paired the scripture story of Jesus and Pilate with this particular vice.

Pilate

Usually on this Sunday we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In the past we've celebrated this with a processional, the waving of Palm branches, and loud chorus of Hosanna. This year, we did not. In some ways, we've embodied slothful vice of this week. I'd even go so far as to say that Jim embodied this so well earlier. I want to say that was by design, but truthfully it wasn't, it just works out well that way.

Other churches and traditions sometimes choose to set aside this Sunday to remember the Passion story instead of the Triumphal Entry. The rationale here is that not everyone can make

it to a Maundy Thursday or a Good Friday service, and so by remembering the Passion story this week, they still have an opportunity to hear the whole story.

What's significant for me, and applicable to us, is that within the Passion story we have this interaction between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, and it's Pilate's actions where I see sloth shining.

We know the story well. Following Jesus' arrest, he is brought before Pilate because the Pharisees cannot condemn a man to death, they need a Roman to do that for them. So they bring Jesus before Pilate. Pilate takes Jesus aside, and seeks out his testimony, trying to ascertain the truthfulness of the charges. Jesus offers few words to his defence.

Pilate and Jesus return to the crowd, where Pilate declares that he sees no wrong. But the crowd, the mob is insistent. Jesus deserves punishment. Pilate sends Jesus off to be whipped. A suitable punishment, but when Jesus returns, it's not enough for the bloodthirsty mob.

And this is where I see Pilate's apathy beginning to seep into the story.

Wanting to squirm his way out of a riot, Pilate offers to release one of two Jesus', Jesus of Nazareth, the innocent, or Jesus Barabbas, the terrorist. The mob uncharacteristically demands the the terrorist be released.

And so, in an act of cowardice, an act that I think is apathetic, an act that I think shirks of responsibility, Pilate symbolically washes his hands and tells that crowd that they can do what they please, that he won't get in the way. Pilate stays clear of taking any action which will neither condemn nor defend Jesus.

This is, in my opinion, the epitome of slothfulness: when given the opportunity to act on behalf of love, slothfulness is doing nothing.

Sloth

And so if the Seven Deadly Sins are about misdirected love, where's Sloth's love? Well, Sloth's love is deficient, quite simply sloth does not love. Sloth does not care one way or the other. In the face of injustice, sloth chooses not to get involved. It is disengagement from reality. It

does not invest itself, it does not take responsibility, it has no conscience, nor does it have any passion. Sloth is passionless. Sloth is indifference embodied.

In his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, “Dante wisely places Sloth in the middle of his Purgatory, halfway up the mountain, or halfway down, depending on how you read it. It is in the middle of the day, the middle of life, that dangerous middle point when we have been on our way, and are halfway there, but not nearly there yet, when Sloth gets to us. Sloth is that sin that is midway between all the things that drag us down in human life and all our attempts to pull ourselves out.” (Willimon, pg. 80)

Sloth Today

Perhaps now, more than ever, we struggle with sloth, not because we have nothing to care about, but rather, because we have too much to care about. With a 24 hour news cycle, we hear of countless injustices in the world around us. There is no shortage of causes to align ourselves with. And with the hurt of the world laid out before us in beautiful 4K Ultra High Definition technicolour, or broadcast to the ubiquitous smartphone that resides in each of our pockets, it's easy to become overwhelmed. And in the face of this overwhelming suffering, in the face of the overwhelming injustices, and in the avalanche of social media updates, whether it's X, TikTok, Meta, or Truth Social, it's easy to become disconnected, disengaged, apathetic to the plight of the world. Sometimes it's easier to do nothing, in the face of it all, it's easier to give into slothfulness, than it is to become passionate, to risk being hurt. Sloth, after all, prefers the easy way out.

Sloth may not be the most flamboyant of the Seven Cardinal Vices, it's surely not the one that draws the most attention, however, it is the one that, because it's unassuming, can grab a hold of us, and it can weigh itself down upon us. And thus, because of its apathetic weight, Sloth slowly separates us from the rest of humanity, and as it separates us from humanity, it separates us from God. And thus by separating us from everything that is other than us, Sloth separates us from what is essentially us, by doing nothing, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, telling nothing, and loving nothing.

“Engagement - Love that Participates”

And as bitter a pill as Sloth may be, there is something about our Mennonite sensibilities which push against Sloth. If you're at all like me you might have grown up with either a parent, grandparent, or maybe even yourself, reciting the familiar phrase, “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a person, healthy, wealthy, and wise.” And if not that, then surely we must live by the adage the “early bird gets the worm.”

Recently my brother and I were reflecting on our experiences with our father. We were reflecting on a question Dad asked often in our University years, “What did you accomplish today?” The implicit value behind the question was that each day needed to have an accomplishment, you needed to have ‘done’ something that day. The virtue of good, hard, and honest work, has been expounded on abundantly. And if we've simplified Sloth to laziness, then the natural force in opposition to laziness, is working; being productive; accomplishing something. But, again, I'm not so sure.

No where in Scripture does Jesus expound on the virtues of working harder. In fact, while visiting with Mary and Martha, Jesus chastises Martha for her busyness, suggesting that Mary made the wiser decision by sitting and visiting rather than working hard to be a good hostess.

If Sloth is, as I suggest, a general apathy to the world, to one another, to God, and to love, then what is its opposite? I'd like to suggest Joy, Passion and Engagement are the opposites of Sloth. By cultivating any and all of these in our lives, we'll surely resist the temptations of Sloth.

Joy

Joy at its most simplest is pure and utter delight. Joy arises from a confrontation with the beauty of things, theologian William Willimon suggests. A critique that I've heard is that in so many of our hymns, we have the word joy; but rarely do we fully embody or express that word. We sing *Joy to the World*, but have we lost the feeling? When we sing *Joy to the World* can we, do we, are we able to so fully express the wonder and astonishment of the in-breaking of God into the world? When was the last time you found yourself in full, pure delight? When did you last feel a rush of joy?

When we're filled with joy, we are most fully present in the moment, we are soaking in all that life has to offer us, we're open to, and sometimes, experiencing the fullness of God in that very

moment. Joy eliminates all distractions and focus' our energy in what God is doing at a particular time, with particular people, at a particular place.

And so, if Sloth is a feeling of apathy, a feeling of disconnectedness, then Joy is a dramatic connection to God and to others.

Passion

And this sense of connection can lead us to Passion. Passion is just as emotive as joy, but there's also a strength that comes along with passion. When I imagine passion, I'm not imagining the romantic sort, I am, instead, imagining a passion which gives us purpose and meaning. When I think of passion I think of something that consumes us, it empowers us, it gives us courage. Passion invests our whole selves; our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole body, our whole spirit. A question that I'm sometimes asked, and a question that I sometimes ask people, is what are your passions? What is your great interest? What, when you think about it, gets you excited? What gets you out of bed in the morning? What drives your thinking, your living, your doing? What consumes and energizes you?

If Sloth is a lack of love, then passion, is a deep embodied love. Passion is a love that gives our lives purpose and meaning. People who are passionate, are willing to give their very best to a cause. People who are passionate about something, live what they speak, you can see an integrity and a honesty in what they do. A passionate person has a love which drives them. A passionate person is fully engaged,

Engagement

And when we have both joy and passion in our lives it's hard to not be engaged. If we're passionate about a cause, or an issue, it's difficult to not be engaged; it's difficult to not do something about it. I think that this is an area where Mennonites excel. The Mennonite Church is involved in a number of programs, whether it's through the work of MCC, or local organizations, we're engaged with loving God, loving our neighbour and loving the world.

Engagement is best summed up in our Micah scripture, scripture that has become famous in it's own right. As Christians we are called to be engaged in our world, not slothfully allowing it to pass by. Christ's call to love God, our neighbour and ourselves, stands in direct opposition to the apathetic pull of sloth-fullness.

Jesus' Triumphal Entry

If Sloth is Pilate washing his hands of Jesus' fate, then Engagement, I think, is the disciples participating in the Triumphal entry. The disciples, and Jesus too, are actively engaged in the coming of the Kingdom of God to Jerusalem on that day. The exuberance, the joy, the passion, and the engagement, are anything but slothful. And this is the other piece, Joy, Passion and Engagement are contagious. It's not just the disciples who are wound up about Jesus' arrival, but the Joy, Passion and Engagement have infected others, so much so, that a great parade spontaneously takes place. With that much energy, it's hard to be slothful.

Dante correctly called Sloth a failure to love God with all our heart, mind, body and soul. Joy, Passion and Engagement on the other hand, all are expressions of our love of God, a love that consumes our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits, a love of our neighbour, and a love of ourselves.

Overcoming slothful tendencies requires us to re-engage with God and the world around us. And we do this by redirecting our love. We do this by participating in God's loving work in the world. The love that we're called to, flourishes with regular engagement and with commitment, and sloth flourishes when there is a convenient, easy, escape. As one prayerful petitioner put it, "Forgive me God, for letting love die when it demands action in order to live." May each of us, resist the call of slothfulness by re-engaging with God's loving work in the world.

Amen