

EXTREME SPIRITUAL MAKEOVER

“From Laziness to Passion”

Psalm 51:1-12

Revelation 3:14-22

Dr. J. Howard Olds

March 1, 2006

Ash Wednesday

In Leo Tolstoy’s novel War and Peace, which I did not read in preparation for this sermon, the main character, Pierre, is forced to face himself and make an honest analysis of his life. What he concludes is something I hear often from reluctant confessors. “Yes, Lord, I have sinned, but I have several excellent excuses.”

I plan to focus our attention this Lenten Season to something the Church calls “The Seven Deadly Sins” — Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. Even a casual listener will likely react by asking, what’s so deadly about these seven? Compared to murder, rape, and theft, anger, lust, and greed seem rather tame. Tell me one war that has been pursued out of sloth! The seven deadly sins are not listed for rogues; they are warnings for the righteous—church people who, if they admit to sin at all, usually have several excuses.

G.K. Chesterton was asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject “What is Wrong with the World?” Chesterton’s response was contained in two sentences. “What is wrong with the world? Me!”

Bishop Will Willimon says “It is the nature of evil to hide among the good.” So we begin these forty days of Lent talking about the seven deadly sins and the antidotes that we might find that our lives may be set free. So, if by some chance in our snug sanctuary there might be a possibility that we, too, could use an “extreme spiritual makeover” instead of a little churchy touch up, let us consider together the sins of Christians. The one I want to tackle tonight is ACEDIA.

ACEDIA IS SLOTH, APATHY, LAZINESS.

There is a mammal about two feet long that we call a sloth. It hangs on trees upside down. It sleeps about 15 hours a day. It seldom leaves the camouflage of its own security. The Ty Company made a Beanie Baby out of it. They called it “Slowpoke the Sloth.” Sin of sloth is like that. “It’s the sluggishness of the mind

which neglects to begin good,” said St. Thomas Aquinas.

A number of years ago, the Upper Room produced a wooden nickel with the words “round to it” on the surface. It was meant to be a spiritual reminder to get around to the things that we plan to do, if we ever get around to it—

- We need to pray, but we need to get around to it.
- We need to study scriptures, but we need to get around to it.
- We need to do deeds of goodness and mercy, but you know how it is, you’ve got to get around to it.
- We ought to perform acts of kindness, random acts of kindness, but we’ve got to get around to it.

Sometimes we need to be reminded to get around to things that we know we’d be better, if we got around to them. We need to be reminded.

Sloth says never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.

Sloth says never start something that has the risk of failure.

Sloth says let George do it.

Sloth says just don’t get involved in it.

Acedia is apathy, the sin of not caring.

So the angel of the Lord says to the Church of Laodicea *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”*

Not hot enough to be for it. Not cold enough to be against it. Just lukewarm—wallowing in your own riches like you don’t have a care in the world, ignorant to the fact that you are spiritually poor, blind, and naked. So be earnest and repent. Strong words, convicting words for people who never did anything wrong, but never bothered to do anything right. The problem is they haven’t done much of anything except to rejoice in what they have and live their isolated lives.

Apathy, I see it all around. You don’t have to look far to see it. I see it at preachers’ meetings where eyes are glazed over in pastors who are just going through the motions week after week. These called people of God who no longer shake with the sword of the Scriptures or shiver in their shoes when asked to proclaim the Gospel. They no longer get nervous to stand in the pulpit. They’re just doing their job.

I see it in employees who quit investing a long time ago and are simply putting in their time until retirement. I see it in teenagers who slump down in the pews on Sunday morning announcing by their body language that they are not going to be moved by worship today. I'm just not going to care about anything you say.

We complain about it among voters. Voter apathy we call it. The great freedom of America and we don't even care enough to go to the polls and exercise our freedom to vote. History has called it a deadly sin.

Acedia, sloth, is laziness.

Jesus told a story about a man who had one talent. Among the three men he was a one-talent man. He was not the brightest, the richest, or the most capable of the clan. But he did have one talent. He had something. Because he was afraid, insecure, and threatened by the authority of the boss, he hid his talent in the ground. When called to accountability he tried to blame his lack of interest on the harshness of the master. But the master will have none of his excuses. The master calls him a wicked, lazy servant as he snatches what little the servant has out of his hands. *Give it to the one who has ten.* Harsh. Acedia, sloth, apathy, laziness is a sin. It is primarily a sin against God. It calls for an extreme spiritual makeover. It calls for an infusion of spiritual passion.

GOD REPLACES ACEDIA WITH PASSION.

Passionate people have fervor, fire, and zeal. They are excited, focused, enthusiastically devoted to a cause. You can see it in their eyes and notice it in their steps. They are still doing what they were called to do.

Moses is 120 years old, standing on Mt. Nebo, realizing that he will never personally reach the Promised Land toward which he led the children of Israel for 40 years. But the Bible says (Deuteronomy 34:7) *His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not been abated.* I like that phrase, his vigor had not been abated. He still had a spring in his step.

I've made a discovery the last few years. My inbox will not be empty when I check out of this world. My e-mails won't all be answered. I'm not going to get everything done on earth that I want to do. So I'm not striving for completion. I'm striving for faithfulness. I want to finish well. I want to still be in the game at the final buzzer, not quit living before I die.

Or, as the old Negro spiritual puts it:

There's a King and Captain high,

And He's coming by and by,

And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

He'll be crowned by saints and angels,

They'll be shouting out Hosanna!

And I'll kneel among my cotton when He comes.

My father used to say "People rust out long before they wear out!" Are you still in the game, the game of life?

There is another definition of passion. Passion is from the Latin "passio," meaning 'suffering' or 'to suffer with'. I handle sloth by learning to suffer with another. Think about that for a moment.

So we call the sufferings of Jesus in the period following the Lord's Supper through the crucifixion "The Passion of Christ." Martin Luther said "The passion of Christ should not be acted out in words and plays. It should be embodied in real life."

The writer of Revelation says "*Behold! Christ stands at the door and knocks.*" Dare I have the nerve to open the door to this Christ of Lent? To this Christ who says "Take up your cross and get in line behind me?" To this Christ who dares to say, when James and John want a promotion in the system, 'How about it guys? Are you able to drink from the cup that I am about to drink?' When we wonder about how people are treating him, the Christ who dares to hang on a cross and say to those around him "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Are you going to open the door to a Christ like that for Lent? *Behold! He stands at the door and knocks.*

Passion is to suffer with, to walk the road alongside. It is obedience more than excitement, loyalty more than lightheartedness, devotion more than delight. It is willingness to watch with Christ in prayer through the night!

Have thine own way Lord,

Have thine own way.

Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.

Are you willing to pray that kind of prayer on Ash Wednesday? It will put a passion in your soul if you do. Amen.