

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 22, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

**The Seven Deadly Sins:
Part 6 ~ Sloth**

Unfasten your seat belt, kiddo, because the Sloth Plan will, for the first time in your life, allow you to hang loose. Forget about all the shoulds in your life. I should work harder, I should believe in God, I should make more money, I should ... fit into a size four, I should have four children at Yale. The Sloth Plan says have the courage to look should in the face and say, "Go to hell! I'm not getting up for you!" And the energy you'll save by lying around and not fulfilling anyone's expectations, even your own, will make you feel years younger.ⁱ

I promise you the sloth approach is the most successful life-maintenance program. So many of us waste our time being angry at our bosses, our families, our president, even our God. The Sloth Plan, on the other hand, helps us to accept that there is no real hope for change. Power is in the hands of an elite, entitled few, and there is no reason to waste our time howling in the wilderness. In other words, we can become insane wolves, or very happy, sleepy sheep... No matter how hard you try, it will never be an even playing field. I say, put that sloth button on your chest and proudly go to bed instead.ⁱⁱ

That's comic playwright Wendy Wasserstein in her volume on the topic which is our focus this week.

We are taking seven Sundays to consider the Seven Deadly Sins. These seven, worked out by the church over centuries of tradition, represent seven ways that we separate ourselves from one another and from God. Not misbehavior but alienation and separation from God – this is what sin is all about. In the past five weeks we have considered Anger, Envy, Greed, Lust, and Gluttony. Next week we wrap it all up with Pride. If you don't already know all this, that means you have not been in church for six weeks, and therefore you risk being nominated for this week's sin: Sloth!

We may think of sloth as only an old-fashioned term for laziness. But sloth is something much more than that. Equating laziness with sloth is something like equating the common cold with pneumonia. Sloth is the neglect of our responsibilities, a lack of caring. At its root, the sin of sloth is a negation of the self. It is a failure to live up to what we are; a failure to use the capacities and gifts that God has given us.

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew: *Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. [Mt 21:18-22]*

Weird little story, huh? What, Jesus is having a bad day? Has a temper tantrum? What did a fig tree ever do to Jesus? The incident, surely, is all about potential and purpose. A fig tree is given roots and branches, leaves to soak up God's gift of sunshine, seasonal rain, and the attention of the vinedresser. Having been given all that, the fig tree is expected to produce figs. That is its part in the order of things. Jesus didn't curse the fig tree just because the tree was bare

when he was feeling a little peckish. The story is a message about each member of creation living up to its potential, or, as the cliché goes, about “blooming where you’re planted.”

As human beings, each one of us is given a unique combination of gifts, abilities, opportunities, and responsibilities. God expects us to do something with those. When we don’t, we have fallen under the power of this sin called sloth. Sloth is a rejection of living fully, and therefore, a rejection of God.

There are a variety of forms of sloth. Let’s look at three.

The National Enquirer announced the winner of their contest for the King of Spuds, or top Couch Potato in the United States, culled from about a thousand entries. “All I do is watch television and work,” admits the 35-year-old bachelor, who keeps three TV sets blaring 24 hours a day at his Fridley, MN, home and watches a fourth set on the job. “There’s nothing I like more than sitting around with a six-pack of beer, some chips and a remote control... The TV station even featured me in a town parade. They went into my house, got my couch and put it on a float. I sat on the couch in my bathrobe and rode in the parade!”ⁱⁱⁱ

I said earlier that not all sloth is simply laziness, but **laziness** is one type of sloth. This character on his couch. The refusal of a family member to chip in with chores around the house. The neighbor who never rakes, so all his leaves blow over into your yard. Benjamin Franklin had no patience for such idleness when he wrote in his famous almanac, “O Lazy-bones! Dost think God would have given thee arms and legs if he had not designed thou shouldst use them?”^{iv} The problem with laziness is not so much that it is a waste of time. Sometimes God wants us to “waste time” – it is called sabbath rest, and it is necessary for renewal of our strength and our soul. No, true laziness is a pulling back from the demands that come from living with others, in family or in community. It is a failure to do our part in the common tasks of life.

From there, sloth goes deeper as we **turn down opportunities for growth and service.**^v Occasions for pitching in present themselves to us every day, and we may pass them by. Sloth never volunteers for a morning at the Habitat for Humanity site, or an evening serving dinner at Loaves and Fishes. Sloth spends no time talking with a lonesome relative who may be a total bore but is family nonetheless. Sloth always prefers the *New York Times* to the Sunday morning Bible Study on Handel’s *Messiah*, always finds the Wednesday night line-up of *Scrubs*, *Survivor*, and *American Idol*, preferable to the Wednesday evening Lenten programs.

The Gallup poll regularly finds that virtually every Episcopalian believes that daily prayer and frequent Bible study are “good things,” but very few actually undertake them. In the church and elsewhere in our lives we pass up chances to learn or grow or serve. As William Stafford writes, “God comes near, offering to open doors to deeper understanding and expanded life, (but we) disable the doorbell and go back to bed.”^{vi} It is just so much easier not to respond.

We must then recognize another deep and very different form of sloth, which is **self-abdication, the negating of your self completely.** Most often this has been an affliction for women, who historically were exhorted not just to sacrifice but to self-effacement. I referred a couple of weeks ago to a published study which found that, in Roman Catholic sacramental confession, the most frequent sin acknowledged by women was pride.^{vii} One has to ask whether women are actually more prone than men to pride, or whether they are simply more conditioned to think of it as sinful. Recent voices in the church suggest that for some people, especially women, the sin of pride is a lesser danger than the sin of total self negation. Think of all the gifts

and capabilities given by God to women over the centuries, wasted because of the imposed burden of self-abdication and low self-esteem.

Now, to label this self negation as the sin of sloth may seem a cruel twist of blaming the victim. So let me say this. Sometimes to make nothing of myself is a self-chosen path, a way I seek refuge from risk and challenge. In such a case the burden of this sin is surely my own. Other times, to fail to use my gifts is a limitation imposed by people or structures outside myself. In such a case, it is still a sin – because sin is something that separates me from God, and this does just that. But in this case, the burden of this sin called sloth falls largely on those who have imposed the limitation.

In any case – whether through laziness, or the bypassed opportunities for growth or service, or the negation of self – in all three cases, we are speaking of the failure to apply God-given gifts to the world around us. We are speaking of sloth.

Psychologist Solomon Schimmel suggests that sloth is “the most explicitly religious of the seven deadly sins.”^{viii} Schimmel says that all of the others may be defined and described in secular terms as vices or personality defects, without any reference to God. But sloth, he maintains, has a religious essence. It is defined by human “resistance to divinely imposed obligations.”^{ix}

What are these divine expectations of man? We are to love God and worship him, through prayer and other means. We should be grateful for the gift of life. We should have compassion for fellow humans and extend our hand to those in need... This religious conception of man as primarily responsible to others differs radically from a modern secular view of him as a being whose main and legitimate interest is self-preservation and fulfillment....^x

Certainly, as we understand them in the church, all of the seven sins are explicitly theological in concept, but Dr. Schimmel’s observations are nonetheless helpful. Surprisingly, his chapter on sloth dwells most of all on the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Cotton Mather, New England moralist and ancestor to the Mather industrialists and charitable benefactors of Cleveland. Here are some of Cotton Mather’s injunctions, prescriptions from a 17th-century Calvinist preacher, passed along to us by a 21st-century Jewish psychologist.^{xi}

- Mather says that doing good is self-rewarding. We should be grateful for opportunities to engage in benevolent acts, since it is through them that we become most like God.
- Mather urges us to spend as much time, thought, and energy in doing good as we do in our appropriate enjoyment of life’s pleasures and our efforts at worldly success. Balance the efforts.
- Mather says that slothful indifference to charity and good works must be countered by specific strategies for living righteously and helping others. As we would say nowadays, be intentional about it. He proposes that we set aside a specific time regularly to ask ourselves the question, “What is there that I may do, for the service of the Glorious Lord, and for the welfare of those, for whom I ought to be concerned?” He says we should periodically review our notes to see if we have implemented what we resolved to do. (Here one might almost think that Cotton Mather was the forerunner to modern McKinsey consultants: “Evaluate, assess, strategize!” But why not? After all, he has urged us to use the same level of energy and expertise in matters of faith as we do in our secular life.)

Laziness. Bypassed opportunities. Self negation. Three ways that the sin of sloth besets us, leads us away from God. Doubtless there are others as well – other ways that we fail to use what God has given us. Ways that we fail to live fully into who we are meant to be. Today we are half way through Lent, half way through the season which calls us to self-examination and repentance. So this week, examine yourself for sloth.

Do you find laziness? If so, confess it, and get to work, shouldering your fair share of responsibility for home, family, and community.

Or do you find bypassed opportunity for growth and service? If so, remember that new opportunities never stop presenting themselves, this side of the grave. There is yet time to bear the fruit for which you were created.

Or do you find self negation? Know that we were not delivered from slavery to become enslaved again, but rather to use all of our strength and spirit in serving freely the One who loves us most truly.

Today's Epistle [Eph 2:1-10] and Gospel [John 3:13-21] lessons both remind us that it is God's love and God's love alone which promises us eternal life: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.* [Eph 2:8] But both readings also affirm the active quality of our response to that gift. *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.* [Eph 2:10] The Gospel reading concludes with the reminder that, knowing ourselves to be walking in the light of God's love, the grateful response of our deeds should be clearly seen. [John 3:21]

So, as Jesus elsewhere (almost) said, Get off the couch and "let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." [Matthew 5:16]

ⁱ Wendy Wasserstein, *Sloth*, in *The Seven Deadly Sins Series*, Elda Rotor, editor (Oxford: NY Public Library and OUP, 2005), p. 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted by Thomas Pynchon, "Sloth," in *Deadly Sins* (NY: Wm. Morrow & Co., Inc., 1993), p. 21.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 16.

^v William S. Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), p. 114.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 115.

^{vii} As heard on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition," Feb. 21, 2009.

^{viii} Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 197.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 198.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 198.

^{xi} Highlights from Schimmel's treatment of Mather, *Ibid.*, pp. 212-215.