

When we first visited the sin of sloth a couple of months ago, we discussed sloth as an avoidance of effort. The slothful man does not want to work; yet he still needs to eat and to have a place to sleep. There are a couple of attitudes behind this behavior. First, there is a pride: the slothful person is fine being a consumer without being a contributor. He is fine letting others provide for his necessities. This readily devolves into a sense of entitlement—that he deserves to have his necessities provided by others.

The second attitude or emotion that we see behind sloth is that of fear. Work is hard and we desire to avoid it. Sloth therefore can manifest itself as procrastination. We may eventually get to the work, but it takes us a little time to mentally prepare to tackle the job. In the worst cases, fears may prevent the slothful from ever beginning a task.

Today, as we wrap up the Illumination cycle of this series on the seven deadly sins, allow me to suggest that the virtue we need to pursue if we tend toward slothfulness is Prudence. Prudence is one of the cardinal virtues, and if you recall, this means that it is one of the virtues that the ancient pagans recognized as important for a free individual to possess. These are the strengths of character, the virtues, that a free person needs in order to remain free, to have a well-lived life. We get the word “cardinal” from the Latin word for “hinge” which is *cardo*. In other words, whether or not a person lives a good life pivots around whether or not he embodies the cardinal virtues of Temperance, Prudence, Courage, and Justice.

For completeness, let us briefly summarize what each of these virtues are. Temperance is controlling one’s physical impulses, not doing what we naturally want to do. Courage is doing what one must do when it is difficult or perhaps even dangerous. Justice is acting

rightly, giving to each person or task what one should give, making fair decisions, honoring one's commitments, and rightly allocating one's resources. Prudence is embodied wisdom, not only knowing what one should and should not do, but then also acting in accordance to wisdom. All of these virtues have a both an internal, rational, component, but also an embodied or enacted component. The slothful man may know what he should do, but for reasons of pride or fear, hesitates or refuses to act. This is our challenge today, that we would both know what is good and right and honoring to God, and then that we would do in accordance to what we know.

Today's lesson from Ephesians calls the church in Ephesus to wake up and to take action. St. Paul does not focus upon actually physically doing things, but upon building a foundation of theological truth which becomes the basis for godly lives. He begins with "I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named..." Notice the action verbs here, "desire" and "bow." This whole passage is filled with similar verbs about building up faith. The apostle is still calling us to action. We are to put away our sloth, build up our faith, and take up the cause of Christ.

Now St. Paul acknowledges that he hasn't had an easy go of things. Because of his missionary activity, he has suffered for the cause of Christ. In fact, Ephesians is one of the prison epistles, which St. Paul wrote while under house arrest. He was enduring hardship directly related to his missionary activity. The Ephesian church, out of concern for the Apostle, probably mixed with not a little concern for themselves, seems to be encouraging St. Paul to slow down and take it easy for his own safety's sake. Yet Paul feels the urgency of his work to advance the cause of Christ. He tells this church that they should not be cowed by

the danger that he faces, that they should not be cowed by the danger that they too would certainly face. Do not let fear keep you from action. Tribulation reveals God's glory to us. Those who love God take action at a cost to themselves, and those outside the church take notice of this.

When he says "For this cause," he is referring to the earlier parts of this chapter in which he explains that in Christ, the mystery has been revealed to the world. This mystery is that all people are welcomed into the Church. Faith in Christ isn't just for the Jewish people, but it is for the Gentiles as well. This is the fact that has compelled the Apostle to spread the gospel throughout the world and to suffer. In Christ the world is redeemed and reordered. The curse has been turned back so all people are called to bow the knee, and to take action. Paul bows the knee because of the glorious work that Christ has done in uniting all people, in uniting all things, in Him. He calls to the Church to therefore follow his example and get to work.

What God has done in Christ is glorious indeed. According to the riches of this glory, St. Paul prays that the Ephesians would be inwardly and mightily strengthened by the Holy Spirit, that, through steadfast faith, Christ would make his home in them—and us— so that they would know His love fully – not in a passing way, giving intellectual assent only—but that the love that Christ has for us would be the core reality in our lives.

The love of God for us in Christ, communicated to us by the presence of the Holy Ghost, is the essence of existence. It is this love that must be the foundational reality of our being. It is this love that is the primary motivational energy of the people of God, that compels us every day to embrace the trials that come and to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is

Christ who makes all the difference.

One question that haunts me about our country is, Why is the Church so impotent?

According to 2023 Gallup polling, 33% of Americans identify as being Protestant, 22% as Roman Catholic, and 13% as other Christian or just "Christian." That means that 68%, a supermajority, of the American population still claim Christ in some sense, though this is down from a high of 98% in 1956. Why does Christianity, at 68% of the population, not make more of a difference in our society? Perhaps most of those who identify as Christian simply are not religious at all. It is a personal thing, inside, away from public life, where faith and belief are controlled and contained. You know the kind: "People like Christmas and Easter, so we might as well call ourselves Christian. But let's not get too crazy about Jesus, right?" For such people, the reality of Christ, of the love of Christ, that St. Paul talks about in this passage, has not displaced the pride of life and awakened them from their sloth.

Of course we all are this way until Christ takes hold of us. Many of us grew up in Christian homes, and we likely knew all of the right answers to the Sunday school questions. Yet as we grew older, our faith might have remained quiescent. However, through the trials and tests of life, Christ reached us and our faith came alive. We moved from being a slothful, lazy Christian to that of a faithful and devoted and pious Christian, a living member of the universal, the catholic. church.

Such is the case that we read about in the seventh chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke. Jesus and his disciples enter into a city called Nain where they meet a funeral procession. The only son of a widow had died and was being carried out of the city. The lesson says, not that Jesus had compassion upon the dead man, but upon the bereft woman, weeping for her lost husband

and son, and no longer having any means to support herself. Jesus had compassion upon her, and thus He said to the dead son, "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise." The lesson continues, "And he that was dead began to speak. And (Christ) he delivered him to his mother." Jesus Christ is all about resurrection.

We may see in this woman an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she too was a widow whose Son was taken from her by death and then returned to her, resurrected by a loving and gracious gift of God. We may also see this woman as a symbol of the Church for the resurrected Son of God became unto her a husband to love and cherish her and to provide for her and to bring her into the fullness of the joy of God.

Of course the son in this miracle prefigures the resurrection of Christ Himself. For the son is raised by the power of God in Christ as Christ also is raised by the power of God. But the son here is also a picture of us for we too are dead in sins until we have been called by Christ in divine love to arise in the newness of the life of God.

Yet not only in that sense may we see ourselves in this dead young man, but perhaps, even though we be already saved, we are not living out the full glory of our salvation. Perhaps our spiritual senses have become dulled to the love of God, and we too have become lazy in our spiritual life. For the most part, it is a pretty low bar to make it to church on Sunday – though I commend you all for doing so, especially you parents, who know that making it to church with the children reasonably well presented is no small feat!

So, the question for us today is, "Are we slothful, spiritually or in any other way in life? Are we hindered by fear? Are we unconcerned that others may be making up for our slack?" Let

this not be the case for any of us! We are the forgiven children of God! We should have no fear to attempt great things for God. Our failures and misguided steps have been covered by the love of Christ. Worse yet, let it not be said that we never attempted anything for the kingdom out of unconcern or apathy. Let us not remain in our comfort zone where little is demanded and little is given.

We know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But may I add that the love of God—first His love for us and then our love for Him—is the continuation of wisdom. If you are battling with slothfulness, then the time for change is now. Why remain as the dead man being carried out of the city on the bier? Listen to Christ calling to you, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise!” Then obey His call.

I suggest two exercises this week to remind us of the deep, deep love of God given for us in Christ. First, daily read over 1 Corinthians 13, the great ode of the Apostle Paul to divine love. Memorize it if you haven't. This is the love that God has for us, each and every one. Then read over our epistle lesson this morning, Ephesians 3:13-21. And then pray it, not only for yourselves, but pray it like the Apostle himself prayed it – for others. Pray it for one another in this parish, our family, with whom we daily worship, if not in person, than in spirit. We need to be a praying parish. We need to be a parish that is completely shaken from our sloth by the miraculous love of God.

Let us conclude this morning by beginning that exercise right here and now, reading this lesson once again:

I DESIRE that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.