

Sermon: “Ten-Toed Sloths”
Rev. Martha Hodges **April 11, 2010**

Like the other seven deadly sins, sloth does have its upside. Most of us probably think of physical laziness. The couch potato, the guy with the pizza boxes piled beside his lazy boy recliner, snoozing between innings. There is undoubtedly something to be said for this lifestyle. As sins go, this one is pretty benign. It’s relaxing. It’s low-stress and doesn’t hurt anyone except the sloth himself. But like the other so-called deadly sins, sloth isolates you from other people and from the comforts of full engagement with life. It severs your bonds with the interdependent web of being at the same time that it gives you a false sense of existing at its very center.

And like the other six deadly sins, sloth was named a sin back in the early days of Christianity because it distracted or prevented you from concentrating on God. Sins substituted an idol – money, sex, your own emotions or comfort – for the correct object of your desire, which was God. For those of us who understand God to be that interdependent web of life, there is some logic to this.

And like the other seven deadlies, identifying sloth as sinful was about social controls. Just as the church and the power elite could not thrive if everyone was indulging their anger, avarice, pride and lust, it could not afford to have the hoi polloi lying around in hammocks snacking on the medieval equivalent of chips and pizza. A functioning society depended on a healthy sense of sin. For that matter, it still does, though we call it something else now, like social responsibility and respect for the law and for other people.

And like all the deadly sins, sloth is one none of us has to look too deeply into ourselves to find. It is familiar ground, both comfortable and squeamishly uncomfortable at the same time. And like the others, anger, lust, pride...sloth can be a good thing – an excellent thing -- under the right circumstances and taken in reasonable doses.

Sloth is more than just lying around. Sloth is a mental, emotional and spiritual condition, as well. It was originally identified as acedia, apathy or sadness, the inability to take pleasure or joy in life – the refusal to appreciate God’s gifts. Acedia is what we would call today depression, and it seems heartless to count it among the sins. It was one to which monks and others who led isolated lives were prone. It left them unable to work or pray, and hence its evolution into the modern-day understanding of sloth as mere inactivity.

Sloth is the inability or unwillingness to engage with challenges of any kind, not just the physical. It’s the condition expressed by Charlie Brown’s little sister in a Peanuts comic of many years ago. Sally decided that instead of being flummoxed every time her teacher asked her a question she couldn’t answer, her new response was going to be, “How should I know?” and “Why should I care?” As someone whose job it supposedly is to think about the mysteries of life, I get quite a kick out of that answer when I’m feeling mentally overstretched. “How should I know?” is perversely comforting. It reminds us

that it's okay not to have all the answers, not to mention that it's impossible to do otherwise.

On the other hand, not having the answers can become a point of obstinacy and pride with some people. People who say, "You think too much," are being slothful. People who state opinions without bothering to gather facts to support them are slothful. People who condemn science and education as elitist, and people who tell us that certain questions are better left unasked are guilty of intellectual sloth.

Sloth can also take emotional forms. It can be the refusal to deal with a problem in a relationship, like a marriage that has grown stale and unsatisfying or even painful, but is easier to maintain than to work on or even leave behind. It can be the refusal to engage with a child who is acting out from unhappiness, or the decision to avoid a friend who has recently lost a loved one.

Sloth can take spiritual forms, too. It's hard work to think about the meaning and purpose of your life, or their absence. It's easier to adopt some authority's ready-made answers to these questions, or to accept the inerrancy of a religious text. To say, "It's true because the Bible says so," is a lot less work than to wholeheartedly and humbly sign up for the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And lest we religious liberals let ourselves off the hook too easily, it is equally slothful to close our minds to the value in other, more traditional answers. We can get too comfortable, too smug – and too lazy – in our convictions, just as surely as the fundamentalist.

Sloth can be a flight from social and political responsibility, as well. There are many reasons that those of us who are relatively privileged may turn our backs on the suffering world around us; it's painful to see; it makes us feel helpless; it may challenge our self-interest; and it's just too damn hard to think about, or feel about. It takes too much energy to look for solutions to injustice, and it's too frustrating when we can't make things better. There's too much to do, it's too overwhelming. So we pretend not to see it. This is a kind of sloth that may be necessary for maintaining our sanity and will to live, but sloth it is.

Denial is one expression of sloth taken to an extreme. The refusal to acknowledge the drugs in the child's backpack, the panhandler on the corner or the gnawing doubts in one's own mind.

The flip side of this kind of denial, the other side of sloth, is cynicism. We see these things but say, there's nothing I can do about it, so why care? It's all pointless in the long run and anyone who gets worked up about it is a fool, a sucker. This is a refusal to feel pain, an extreme form of self-anesthetization that is about more than simple laziness. Just as surely as in denial, cynicism is about fear. The risk of being hurt or looking foolish or naïve is always present if you allow yourself to doubt, to wonder, to feel, or to try. The cynic avoids these risks by boasting an indifference, a world-weary sophistication, that is an especially subtle form of our old friend sloth.

The French, as they often do, have a word for it: *ennui*. Ennui is more than simple boredom. It is a chronic condition of boredom with life that oppresses and robs us of joy as well as pain. It's an attitude of "seen-it-all and it's all so tedious." An existential state of dissatisfaction, disengagement and alienation. Ennui makes sloth look romantic and even tragic. Like cynicism, it is often a pose.

So I've been saying a lot of bad things about sloth. This, bear in mind, is coming from someone who can claim sloth as her very favorite sin.

Sloth – the kind of simple physical laziness that we often associate with it -- is the virtue of poets and mystics, lovers and visionaries. It is a courageous stand against the social pressure to be always doing, accomplishing, to be important. It says, "The world can manage without me for a minute, an hour, a day. Doing nothing requires my full attention." It says, "Being is a miracle that I will not shortchange or cover up with busyness." It says, "Let me stop and look and really see. Let me feel the world through all my senses. Let me just experience the goodness and wonder of being alive. Let me breathe. Let me feel. Let me be." It says, "Don't just do something. Stand there." Sloth, at its best, is a mental, emotional and spiritual discipline. Sloth is not for the fainthearted.

It takes discipline to slow down, to resist the pressure, external and internal, to prove yourself. You don't have to prove that you're worthy of life, and love. That is a given, a birthright. Yes, it matters what you do. But doing without a spiritual grounding in joy is mere drudgery, and you are entitled to more than that. And sloth – or to give it a less negative spin, rest – is an essential component of joy.

This is the wisdom of the Sabbath. The day of rest, or the hour, allows us to reconnect with what we love, with what we value and give our devotion to. In other words, for those of us who use this language, to reconnect with the holy, with god, wherever we may find it. It allows us to experience the sacred, to dwell on and dwell with the sacred. To remember that we are not only what we do; that we are also part of something larger and more wonderful than our mere selves, excellent though our selves may be.

So stop. Stop what you're doing and rest. Your taxes will wait. The IRS is not going to send your tax return back if they receive it a day late. I know because I have tested this theory and found it to be true. The dishes will wait. Let them soak; it's good for them. Read a novel. Take a nap. Or, if you must, take a walk – a slow, meandering walk. Rediscover the joys of solitaire or checkers. (Chess is too much like work.) Play with your kids, or your spouse. Rest and recreate. Recreate your simple sense of belonging in this world. Listen to the inner voice that you have hushed for so long, the one that is wiser than you remember. Listen to that voice of the sacred within you, always speaking and seldom heard.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that if you stop – stop what you're doing and rest – that you will find once again the connection you've been longing for? The connection to the sacred, to inspiration, to joy, to the web.

Let us indulge in a moment of creative slothfulness, together.