

Lent 4 – Sloth  
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My father was an industrious person. He came home from work and started on a project: mowing the lawn, planting trees, cultivating a garden. He enjoyed doing things. Whereas I enjoyed reading, watching movies, having a good conversation. As I began the study of sloth, I thought, “Well I am the perfect example. Unlike my dad, I seemed to enjoy not doing things.”

Actually, the ancient idea of sloth is a bit more complicated. In fact, the more I read, the more it seemed to unfold in varying directions. Sloth has been known as *acedia* or *akkedie*. At its root, *acedia* means “lack of care.” Evagrius called it the noonday demon.

Why? Because other demons attacked at night, but *acedia* was not afraid to attack in the full light of day. In her excellent book, *Acedia and Me*, Kathleen Norris points out that the early fathers did not use the language of seven deadly sins, but seven deadly thoughts. These thoughts weary us and can even entrap us. In one way or another, they lead us away from love.

Now back to the deadly thought of sloth or *acedia*. Listen to Evagrius’s description.

“The demon of *acedia*—also called the noonday demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight.”<sup>1</sup>

*Acedia* refers to thoughts that tempt the monk to leave behind his commitments: that is to abandon his prayers, to leave his cell. It begins with a weariness in the life he has chosen. We are not monks and we don’t live in cells, so how do these thoughts tempt us? They dampen our love for God and one another. They distract us from our commitments. They lead us away from love.

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<sup>1</sup> Evagrius Ponticus. *The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer* (Cistercian Studies Series) (pp. 130-131). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition.

Considers the distractions of our present age. On Facebook or some other social media platform. In just a few minutes, we may read a post about someone celebrating a birthday, followed by a post that makes us laugh followed by the news of a death followed by the latest update on some celebrity. These posts can desensitize us to real human suffering and real human joy. It's not just Facebook. In 30 minutes, our news is packed with stories of tragedy, stories about politics, and stories of human achievement. Back in the 1940s, Eugen Rosenstock Huessy wrote that the bombardments by bits of news slowly dehumanizes us.

This looks a bit like acedia, which literally means lack of care. We can hear about a tragedy, costing the lives of thousands of people on the other side of the globe and then immediately hear about the effects of a medication for diabetes. Additionally, we are distracted from the difficult commitment of real relationships by work that bleeds over into our family time, by binge-watching television shows or even by video games. I've known two different relationships to fail because the man was so addicted to playing video games that the woman felt abandoned.

Rebecca DeYoung offers a modern example of acedia from the film *Groundhog Day*. In the film, Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) is stuck in a time loop, waking up every day on February 2. At some point, he decides to try and get his producer Rita to go to bed with him. Day after day, he learns her likes, then he casually acts like he likes the same things. It is all a false front. He is unwilling to commit to a real relationship, so his little scheme is simply a way to win her over by appearing to care for the same things she does. She actually starts to feel drawn in, but then sees through the emptiness in his actions.

Phil's first response to her rejection is a series of failed suicide attempts. Then something odd happens. Phil changes. He takes piano lessons, learns French poetry, and tries to help people. He is no longer bored. "[Phil] no longer pretends to be but really becomes—through consistent habit and daily discipline—not just a poet, pianist, and philanthropist, but a person capable of unselfish love. Phil finds himself no longer solely motivated by the desire to produce sexual results in his relationship with Rita. Instead, he has learned to care about others and to genuinely care about what is right and good—for its own sake. In the end, his transformed character attracts not only the affection of all the townspeople but also the love of Rita herself."<sup>2</sup>

Like Phil in *Groundhog Day*, acedia includes escapism, restlessness, self-indulgence, boredom, apathy, and despair.<sup>3</sup> These careless thoughts lead us away from our lives from reality to some fantasy life.

DeYoung says that, "People with acedia... dream of being unconditionally loved without having to condition their own selfish desires in return. They prefer a perpetual honeymoon to fifty years of married faithfulness."<sup>4</sup> In our distracted age, we all face the temptation of sloth or acedia.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 102.

We may find it difficult to live into the challenges of our lives and wish for some other life. We may allow the constant distractions of television and social media to lead us away from focusing on what is most important. We may struggle in our daily commitments to God in prayer and meditation.

We may at times feel the pull of despair and discouragement. Dennis Okholm says that “ultimately, sloth is the vice opposed to the joy of love. It is, simply, running from God and all goodness. And that means it entails a degree of volition. We have a choice on the field of battle against the passions. At one end is a fundamental longing for God that unites us to him if we meditate on him and live as human creatures with feelings and yearnings that arise from this longing. But at the other end of the battlefield is forgetfulness of God and the accompanying personal disintegration—the origin of our sorrow and the thoughts that are directed toward anti-God objects and goals. “Every time we are overcome by these passionate wishes and desires, they overshadow the thoughts of God. We forget him and our inner life disintegrates. Our fundamental longing for God is weakened.”<sup>5</sup>

We experience this temptation that pull us away from love in our relation to God, to our spouses, and even to family and friends. Rowan Williams write that facing acedia involves living into our own desert calling. We may not be desert monks life in a cell, but we can learn rest in the very place where we are. He writes, “Grace returns us to the particular and local.”<sup>6</sup>

It is simply in the daily faithfulness of our lives where we learn to combat sloth. We learn the beauty of daily routines or daily rituals. Only instead of living as robots, we pay attention. We are learning what it means to be a Christian in our own skin. Rowan Williams says that while I learn from the Christians around me and who have preceded me, I must live my own life. He says, “I have to take my own steps and create a life that has never been lived before.”<sup>7</sup>

Every day you face the ordinariness of life. Wake up. Take a shower. Brush your teeth. Get dressed. Sometimes the monotony of daily repetition can seem meaningless. This is the temptation of acedia to make our life seem empty and hollow.

We also face daily stresses and struggles. It could be job related, it could be physical and health related, it could be emotional. The challenges you face are different than the challenges I face. In fact, these challenges change as our lives pass through different seasons. Acedia can look like the feeling of meaninglessness in our lives. It can come as the temptation to long for another life maybe an earlier time in life or maybe another life altogether.

For Kelly and I, it can come as the sadness or longing to return to our old house that burned down. Acedia is always drawing us away from living into our current life. It can even look like busyness or a workaholic. Some people so busy their lives with activity that they fail to care for their soul. Each of us must learn to meet God’s goodness and grace in the here and now. Some

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 152.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Rowan. *Where God Happens* (p. 115). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup>

people are tempted to be somewhere else. Some people are tempted to be someone else. Trust that God is present in who you are and where you are.

In this season, I am learning to live into the difficulty of dialysis. It is physically tiring and yet it keeps me alive. This is the place where I must learn to turn and face the grace of God, discovering His faithfulness. For you, the daily challenge, the difficulty is something else. The ancient desert monks saw their cell as the place of testing. They compared it to “the furnace in Babylon where the three young men found the Son of God. And it is like the pillar of cloud where God spoke to Moses.”<sup>8</sup>

As we think about our own lives: the places where we live and the persons that we are, we might ask, what is our monk’s cell. Where is the place you are being called to live faithfully even though it is uncomfortable, and you can think of a thousand other places you’d rather be. Even though it may seem difficult at times, turn toward the challenge. It is in your life, your home, your job where you learn to live into a faithfulness toward the Lord and others. It is where you learn to rest in God’s goodness.

Rowan says, “Where we are and who we are is the furnace where the Son of God walks.”<sup>9</sup> The very place where you live and walk is the place where you meet God’s grace. Commit yourself to God in prayer, to your family, to your church. In these relations, you learn the ancient monastic weapon against acedia, “stability of place.” Pay attention to where you are, to who you are, and the those you are called to love. Trust that the Lord is strengthening you.

Our life of faith is not divided from our life of work. As the Benedictine monks, we rehearse the way of “work and prayer.” Your job, your family, your community, your church are all part of the walk of faith.

We are learning the faithfulness of love. We trust that God in His mercy and grace is meeting us and caring for us. And some days we catch a glimpse of His glory and rejoice.

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, Rowan. Where God Happens (p. 122). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Rowan. Where God Happens (p. 122). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.