

Matthew 26:36-46
Stay Awake
First Presbyterian Church
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Most of the non-profit organizations in this country that depend on volunteer contributions of time and money are in trouble. In times of recession people have less discretionary money to use for charitable purposes. But the even greater problem is that the pool of volunteers is drying up. Today in the majority of families there are two bread winners working full time. In addition people are working longer hours, and commuting longer distances, and so have fewer hours to give to activities for which they do not get paid. Even if they retire at 60 or 65 many people do not turn to volunteer activities but to paid part time jobs for fulfillment. It all proves that the American people are a hard working, high achieving lot. Work is at the center of our lives and consumes most of our waking hours and the vast majority of our energy. And the work we do often defines who we are and our own sense of self-worth.

Given all of that it would seem that we could slip right on by the fourth of the seven deadly sins because it just doesn't apply to us. Our daytimers and Blackberries are crammed full of things we must do so how could we ever be accused of sloth? Sloth was a concern to the monks who first put together this list of vices because in the monastery it was important that every brother carry his share of the load. There was no tolerance for shirking of one's duty, or goofing off while others were hard at work or prayer. Hard work was part of the disciplined Christian life.

Sloth was often referred to as the "noonday demon". The monks would often eat their largest meal of the day at noon. And that meant that

the prayer time that followed was a time when brothers often fell asleep or let their minds wander from their task. A time when a nap was to be preferred over strenuous labor in the fields under a hot sun.

It is the sin which overtook Peter, James and John in our text for this morning. It had already been a long day when Jesus led the disciples from the upper room to the garden. Since the Passover started at sundown and usually took about three hours we can assume that it was 9 or 10 p.m. when they came to Gethsemane. Jesus is obviously troubled but the disciples are tired and the wine is beginning to have an effect. So as soon as he leaves them to have some private time in prayer they settle down next to a rock and promptly fall asleep. They are glad to wait for him, to be there if he needs them, to keep him company, but the “noonday demon” is hard at work and even harder to stand against. When Jesus needed his friends the most, when he needed them to be in prayer with him, when he needed them to hold him up they were asleep on the job.

We can't accuse the disciples of being lazy. We can't say they didn't care what happened to Jesus. But it does seem obvious that they didn't understand the gravity of the situation. They didn't pick up on the agitation that Jesus was feeling. And as a consequence they missed an opportunity to live up to the trust he had placed in them. At the most crucial moment of their relationship with him they fell asleep. At a point that might have proved pivotal to their faith they nodded off.

In the English language faith is a noun, something we either do or do not have; belief in a set of doctrines. But faith in the language of the New Testament was a verb, something you do; an active response to belief, an engagement with God, a co-operation with the work of the Spirit within you. Sloth is the opposite - it is inactivity. A failure to take the actions required

by your belief system. There are many threats to faith in the world today but perhaps the most deadly is the inactivity of Christians. We simply don't do those things we know we should do to keep our faith vital and alive. We're too tired to take time for prayer. Our calendars are too full to make room for service. We have no real interest in reading the Bible. Its too much effort to get up for church every week. Its too hard to discipline ourselves when it comes to conversation or spending on luxuries. We've learned that faith is a gift so we don't do much to keep it alive. Sloth will put the soul to sleep and extinguish the excitement and enthusiasm of faith.

In the little book of James a passage is hidden that applies to sloth. It says, "anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin". The couch potatoes of this world are not necessarily sinning. But those who know what it takes to keep their faith alive and cause it to grow and refuse to do it are sinning. Sloth is failing to focus on what really matters in life. It is failing to put your shoulder to the wheel of your faith.

In a museum in Madrid there is a painting from the early 1500's by a man named Bosch. Sloth is depicted as a man sitting comfortably in a cushioned chair before a warm fire, his dog curled up at his feet, the very image of Dutch, bourgeoisie contentment. A woman, seemingly a nun, holds out to him a rosary and a prayer book. But he contentedly sleeps.

Jesus invited the disciples to share the struggle of his soul. But they preferred to sleep. The needs of the flesh took precedence over the needs of the soul. Jesus said, "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak". The words are as applicable today as they were then. We want to be Christians, we want to have a strong faith, we want a relationship with God but its so much work and we are just too tired and too busy to make it a priority. We fall asleep on the job. We find a hundred excuses why we cannot do what Christ

asks of us, the simplest things like staying awake and praying.

Do we chase after the things of the flesh because it is easier to deal in trivialities than to move to the very center of life? In the gospel of Luke a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he has to do to be saved. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments but the man insists he has always done that. Then Jesus says, go sell what you have and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. At that Luke tells us the man's face fell. He simply couldn't do what was required of him. He would rather sleep than awaken to a new life. Willimon says, "he did not so much walk away from Jesus, rather he was sorry that he did not have what it took to move toward Jesus. He could not bring himself to step toward the God who had moved toward him".

The Westminster catechism says that the main point of life is to know God and enjoy God forever. In other words the purpose of life is to seek and enjoy communion with God. How much of what we do every day, how many of the activities on our crowded calendars really serve that purpose?

This morning, once again, we will be celebrating the Lord's supper or Communion. It is the visible sign of God's drawing close to us and inviting us into a closer relationship. And when we partake of the sacrament we are saying in effect I will stay awake to my spiritual life, I will pray with you, I will seek to be closer to you.

That night in the Garden of Gethsemane ended badly. Soon after Jesus had finished praying a crowd arrives behind Judas and Jesus is arrested. He is separated from the disciples and taken away to face accusation, condemnation and crucifixion. The disciples never had another chance to be in conversation with him. They missed their golden opportunity because they were too tired to seize it. And yet, even in his

agony Jesus does not turn away from them. He does not blame them for their failure. In love he continues to reach out to them.

Our relationship with God depends first and foremost on the action of God who always takes the necessary steps to close the chasm between us. But as with any relationship it requires that we be awake and responsive.

Let us pray.