

**“Choose to Stay
(The Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth)”**

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Yesterday was an auspicious day in my life,
and I hope in the life of our congregation.
This Saturday, August 15, was the beginning of my fourth year
serving as your minister.
This is a very joyful anniversary for me.
It's also a significant milestone for our congregation,
as our relationship is now the longest-lasting ministerial relationship
the church has experienced since 1996!
Those of you who have been around a while remember
there were about 10 years of transition when,
for one reason and another, ministers came and went.
When I came here, I felt the weight of that history,
and I know the whole congregation did too.
It felt very important that this relationship work
and succeed for the long haul.
And so far, so good!
I am very proud and grateful for what we've built together
over the last three years.
Now as we enter our fourth year together,
to me it feels like this church is doing great.
I hope you will savor this anniversary as I do.

Of course, any kind of long-term relationship
is not going to be without its growing pains,
whether it be between two people or a whole family
or an even larger group like a congregation or a workplace.
I was so struck by Kathleen Norris's description in today's reading
of the restlessness, the urge to seek something else,

something we imagine would be better,
more rewarding, more perfect,
which can strike even in our nearest and dearest relationships.
As we move forward together as a congregation,
this is one of the stumbling blocks
we would do well to watch out for.

Now, I'll say more about that in a bit,
but first, you might be wondering what this has to do
with what I said I was going to speak about today—
that delicious-sounding thing called *sloth* [*“slowth”*],
which is on the list of the Seven Deadly Sins
but carries a lot of connotations that are mighty lovely,
especially in this hot, slow-moving month of August.
You can say it like *sloth* [*“slawth”*] too,
but I like *“slowth”* because it sounds slow.
When you look up the etymology,
that's exactly where the word comes from—it means *slow*.
When I think of sloth,
I think of those beautiful animals that move so nice and slow.
I love to watch them.
They could teach us how to do moving meditation.

And when I think of sloth, really, I think of rest,
blessed rest,
taking a break, lying in a hammock
like that gorgeous hammock on the cover of your order of service,
maybe sipping a cool drink,
not worrying about anything,
just savoring the loveliness of being alive,
feeling the breeze on your skin and the warmth of the sun.
I *know* that is not a sin.
It is resting in the grace of the world,
as the poet Wendell Berry put it so beautifully.
So many of us need more rest in our lives, not less.

Rest is a blessing.

Yet words have a way of carrying many different meanings.

As we heard in the second reading, by Kathleen Norris,

sloth is the English word we use to translate

what the Greeks called *acedia*,

and actually it's a terrible translation.

To my ear, sloth carries with it the connotation

of rest, slowness, stillness—

those beautiful qualities that we so rightly crave in our lives.

But *acedia*, the word it's supposed to be translating,

is not such a good thing.

Literally, *acedia* means “not caring.”

The first people in the Christian tradition to describe this state

were the early monks who lived in the Middle Eastern desert.

Lots of them found it hard to live the contemplative life they had

chosen. Even though they believed in what they were doing,

they found themselves getting bored, dissatisfied, restless.

They called this feeling *acedia*. And it isn't fun.

It's like a pseudo-rest which is not restful.

Have you ever had the feeling where you just can't settle down
to what you're supposed to be doing?

Your mind starts to wander.

Almost without realizing it,

you drift away from what you meant to be doing.

If your work is on the computer, like mine,

you might start cruising around the internet,

visiting Facebook to see what your friends are up to,

adding a movie you heard about to your Netflix queue,

reading book reviews on Amazon.com,

catching up on world news at the New York Times online.

That's an especially good one because it sounds so virtuous!

You can spend hours goofing around with one thing and another,

and before you know it the day is half-gone,
you feel vaguely sick and irritated at yourself,
and you are not one step closer to doing what you meant to do.
Sure, it's kind of fun in the moment,
it's allowing you to avoid doing something
which is not bringing you immediate pleasure,
but when you realize what you're doing, it feels yucky.
You know it's unhealthy, but it's hard to stop.
That's what I mean by rest that isn't restful.
That's a part of this thing called *acedia*—
this tendency we all have at one time or another to get distracted,
to get bored with what we've set out to do,
to squander our precious time and energy
doing things we don't really want to do.

Of course you don't need a computer to get into this mood.
Over 1500 years ago, a monk named Evagrius described
what it felt like to be in the grip of *acedia*.
Imagine a monk...or perhaps a modern person...
trying to concentrate on a book:

[W]hen he reads...[he] yawns plenty and easily falls into sleep.
He rubs his eyes and stretches his arms.
His eyes wander from the book.
He stares at the wall and then goes back to his reading for a little.
He then wastes his time hanging on to the end of the words,
counts the pages, ascertains how the book is made,
finds fault with the writing and the design.
Finally he just shuts it and uses it as a pillow.
Then he falls into a sleep not too deep,
because hunger wakes his soul up
and he begins to concern himself with that.¹

¹ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos*, quoted in Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 5.

That's acedia too.

And sometimes the weight of it would get worse.

At its most intense, acedia as the monks described it would turn into an inability to take pleasure in anything, an inability to feel joy or, indeed, to feel much of anything.

In fact, acedia starts to sound an awful lot like what we call depression today.

And here I want to speak very carefully.

All of us here know depression is not a sin. It's an illness, and thank goodness we are learning more about how to treat it.

The early desert monks didn't see acedia as a sin, either.

They saw it simply as a thought pattern that got in their way, a very common challenge in their communities.

But depression is not exactly the same as acedia.

Kathleen Norris's book on acedia has some wonderful reflections on her personal struggle with both depression and acedia, and the differences between the two.

I commend her book to you if you'd like to learn more.

And let me take a moment to say:

For those who are struggling with depression, let us hold them in our hearts and wish them the healing and joy that we know they are seeking.

Acedia *is* different. For one thing, although many people will mercifully go through their whole lives without experiencing an episode of depression, just about everyone has dealt with this thing called acedia at one time or another. We are all vulnerable to getting into that state of edgy, dissatisfied distraction from what we mean to be doing. And we are surely all vulnerable to falling into that pattern Kathleen Norris described in today's reading—getting frustrated with the people we've chosen to be with,

the tasks we've taken on,
the commitments we've chosen to make,
and allowing ourselves to dream about *different* people,
people who are less annoying, more perfect, more fun,
people who love us and appreciate us
more than the people right in front of us.
In this state it is awfully tempting to walk away.
It's tempting to imagine our destiny is calling us somewhere else,
somewhere better where the grass really is greener.
And, you know, maybe it is...but maybe it isn't.

I'm not trying to say there are never reasons to leave a relationship
or a job or a city or a church.
That would be ridiculous.
Of course there are, sometimes.
Sometimes the wisest thing we can do
for our own health and our well-being
is to move on to something different.
But sometimes moving on looks a whole lot
like running away from ourselves.
And we all know that doesn't work so well.

The desert monastics were a wise bunch,
and they had advice for those times.
To their brothers and sisters who were suffering
from the temptation to leave and go somewhere else, anywhere else,
they would say simply: Stay. Stick it out. Stay here.
One of them, Abba Moses, said, "Go, sit in your cell,
and your cell will teach you everything."²
He knew it would not be easy,
but he also knew that on the other side of struggle
lies wisdom and joy.
Those ancient monks knew from experience
that even in that state of terrible restlessness,

² Quoted in Norris, p. 39.

when we stay where we have freely chosen to be,
and re-commit to our commitments,
eventually we will touch joy again.
We discover that if happiness is to be found anywhere,
it is to be found among *these* people, in *this* place.

I'm reminded of a hymn in our hymnal that tells us:

Seek not afar for beauty; lo, it glows
in dew-wet grasses all about your feet....
Go not abroad for happiness; behold,
it is a flower blooming at your door.³

For those of us who are in a relationship that is basically healthy,
with a spouse or partner, or perhaps a very dear friend,
it's so common to be troubled now and again by restlessness,
to dream of a partner or a best friend who understood you better,
or whose habits bugged you less.
That's only human, but it is so harmful to your relationship,
and to your capacity to experience those gifts of peace
and contentment that we are all seeking.

Let me encourage you: in a time like that,
when you are plagued with those restless thoughts,
dreaming of what it would be like to be with someone else,
remember the lovely words of that hymn:
Seek not afar for beauty.
Go not abroad for happiness; behold, it is a flower blooming at your door.
It's the face of your loved one smiling at you;
the memories you share; everything you have been through together;
the care they feel for the hidden, tender pieces of your heart
that nobody else gets to see.
Don't take these things for granted.
You chose the person who is dear to you for so many reasons.

³ *Singing the Living Tradition* #77.

Remember, recall, re-discover the beauty in them.
Rediscover the happiness they bring to you.
This person, in this place.

You know, the virtue that medieval Christians contrasted to acedia was *diligence*.

Now, diligence is one of those words
that tends to make me feel very tired.

To my ear, diligence sounds like you're laboring away at something,
being a good sport and cranking it out
when you'd rather be resting or having fun or doing *something else*.

But do you know what the original meaning of diligence is?

It means "valuing highly, loving, and choosing."

Valuing something...or someone...*loving* and *choosing*,
and *re-choosing*.

How about that?

What if we practiced diligence as the art of reminding ourselves
why we value those who are dear to us?

What if we practiced diligence as the art of re-committing
to the ones we have freely chosen out of love—
re-committing, re-choosing *these* people, in *this* place?

One of the many reasons I know I need to be a part of a religious
community is that we get to practice this all the time.

In a church community,
there's always the temptation to get restless
and dream about some congregation
that would have better programming,
more inspiring worship,
more comfortable chairs, whatever.

Here in this church, we are striving to be as good as we can be.

We want to have wonderful programs.

We want our worship to touch us deeply.

Heck, we hope our chairs are comfy!

But we are never going to be a perfect church.

For one thing, there's no such thing.
For another, there will always be some church
doing something that sounds cooler than what we've got.
And yet, here we are in *this* place, with *these* people,
doing our best to live as faithfully as we know how.

Though we are always free to leave and go somewhere else,
those of us who have freely chosen to join the congregation
have made a commitment to stay
and practice diligence with one another,
practice re-committing to what we have freely chosen out of love:
these people, in *this* place.
When new members join our congregation,
we always share a reading that begins:
"Blessed are those who yearn for deepening more than escape."⁴
That is the spirit we try to live by.

After three years and one day of this practice
of deepening commitment,
I can tell you: it is a beautiful thing to stay
and share in the profound and ordinary kindness of people
who hold each other up in sorrow and embrace one another in joy;
the steady devotion of those who care for the daily tasks of
community, day in and day out, taking out the trash, making coffee;
the holy discontent of those who see what we might be
and urge us to become more than we are;
the stunning beauty of every person who walks through these doors,
daring to hope they will find a welcome here.
Seek not afar for beauty.
Here it is: *these people, this place.*

So may it be.
Amen.

⁴ *Singing the Living Tradition* #728, by John Buehrens.