**Homily, Aug. 20, 2023**  **Prov. 26:13-15 and 2 Thess. 3.6 “You Were Raised Better Than That!”**

Loafers say, “Its dangerous out there! Tigers are prowling the streets!” and then pull the covers back over their heads. Just as a door turns on its hinges, so some lazybones turns back over in bed. A shiftless sluggard puts his fork in the pie, but is too lazy to lift it to his mouth.

Now here is a command, dear brothers, given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by his authority: Stay away from any Christian who spends his days in laziness and does not follow the ideal of diligent hard work we have taught you.

There is a holiday that is gaining momentum in our country called the National Day of Leisure. I first bumped into this holiday when I served down in Aptos, near the beach town of Santa Cruz. And I only heard about it because somehow, word did not get out, and it was not promoted or celebrated in Santa Cruz that year, and there was a steaming letter to the editor in the local paper, wailing about how unfair it was to have skipped this important and restorative holiday. There were many responses, all of them pretty much saying that when you live in Santa Cruz, *every day* is a day of leisure, so quit your whining! But it was a reminder to me that our appetite for non-exertion is considerable. We like to be at ease.

We now enter week six of our little series on the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Heavenly Virtues. We’ve traveled far, and looked into the mirror mostly unflinchingly. Our discussions have traversed pride and humility, greed and generosity, wrath and patience, envy and gratitude, and gluttony and moderation thus far, and all of those sins have something in common; they are considered sins of commission – that is, they are things one *actively does*. But today’s deadly sin is different; sloth is defined by what we do *not* do; it is our first sin of omission. Unlike the other deadly sins in which the sinner *commits* immoral acts, sloth is a sin of omission of desire and/or omission of performance. It is considered the most difficult sin to define, since it refers to a peculiar jumble of notions that include spiritual, mental, and physical states. But one useful definition is this: Sloth is a habitual disinclination to exertion.

The word "sloth" is a translation of the Latin word that means "without care". When we are slothful, we could care less! Spiritually, sloth first referred to an affliction affecting religious persons, especially monks, wherein they became indifferent to their duties and obligations to [God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God). Mentally, sloth has a number of distinctive components of which the most important is affectlessness, a lack of any feeling about self or other, a mind-state that gives rise to boredom, rancor, depression, apathy, and a passive, inert, or sluggish mentation. Physically, we are slothful through a cessation of motion and an indifference to work; it finds expression in [laziness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laziness), idleness, and indolence. Two commentators consider the most accurate translation of sloth to be "self-pity," for it "conveys both the melancholy of the condition and self-centeredness upon which it is founded." Yuck!

 William Wilberforce, a British political leader who overlapped the lifetime of John Wesley, was all too familiar with the same habits of the Church that rankled our founder. He writes: “A soft luxurious course of habitual indulgence is the practice of the bulk of modern Christians: and that constant moderation, that wholesome discipline of restraint and self-denial, which are requisite to prevent the unperceived encroachments of the inferior appetites, seem altogether disused, discarded as so much monkish superstition... But the persons of whom we are now speaking, forgetting alike the duties they owe to themselves and to their fellow-creatures, often act as though their condition were meant to be a state of uniform indulgence, and vacant, unprofitable sloth... To multiply the comforts of affluence, to provide for the gratification of appetite, to be luxurious without diseases, and indolent without lassitude, seems the chief study of their lives. Kind of a shame that he sugar-coats everything, right? Ouch!

Sloth is a multi-fanged beast. It sinks its teeth into our bodies, our minds, and our souls, but there is a deterrent, a remedy, a cure. The cure for sloth, naturally, is diligence. Diligence, in Christianity, is the consistent effort to do one's part, while still keeping faith and reliance in God. Diligence as one of seven heavenly virtues describes thoroughness, completeness and persistence of an action, particularly in matters of faith. We could rework our earlier definition of sloth into a definition of diligence: diligence is a habitual *inclination* to exertion. A body in motion tends to stay in motion…

But why is this stuff so uncomfortable to talk about? I think I know why. I have a theory with social implications about sloth and diligence, and it is simply this: that we, all of us, have inherited a strong cultural bias towards hard work that flows from the biblical underpinnings of our country. The Bible is pretty uniform in its praise of hard work and its loathing of laziness, and by now, even folks with no religious impulses whatever still usually feel this way; it has been part of our group thinking for dozens of decades. We value hard work and despise slothfulness. And the most obvious place this hinders our compassion is in our work with the poor. We know, intellectually at least, that there are many, many poor persons who work very, very, hard, we also know that there are considerable numbers of sloths and slackers, lazybones and layabouts. We are urged to follow our hearts, to treat everyone as a beloved child of God, but we end up following our brains, and those who are *not* contributing to the common good are looked down upon, despised, and scorned. We understand, at some level, that we really are *all in this together*, and that everyone has a role to play and a job to do and a service to offer. And those who cannot contribute are distastefully bundled in and swept aside with those who *will* not, or who *do* not, contribute to the common good.

I am not the only one with this idea, by a long shot. The apostle Paul certainly did not mince words when he prescribed appropriate conduct among the Christian slothful to the church in Thessaloniki: *Now here is a command, dear brothers, given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by his authority: Stay away from any Christian who spends his days in laziness and does not follow the ideal of diligent hard work we have taught you.* Jesus continually praises the industrious and critiques the unmotivated. Everywhere you turn, from ancient times till now, the hard work of building a society has been understood to be a *shared* vocation, and one that we all need to be part of. And we are suspect of those who do not participate, suspicious enough that we often do not ask or even care about their reasons for reneging on this rockbound social construct.

I have been sharing from a religious perspective, but this idea is hardly the property of religion alone; these are the words of the great inventor Thomas Edison: *“The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense.”*  The respected football coach [Vince Lombardi Jr.](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/9771155.Vince_Lombardi_Jr_) famously said, *“The dictionary is the only place that success comes before work. Work is the key to success, and hard work can help you accomplish anything.”* And the revered Michaelangelo himself wrote: *“If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all.”* I don’t know about the religious life of any of these great men, but they seem kinfolk enough in their rejection of sloth and their praise of diligence.

 Brothers and sisters in faith, I urge a contemplation of the wasted space sloth may have taken up in our lives. Whether it is diminishing us physically, mentally, or spiritually, the temptation to tolerate tepidness is all around us, all the time. The summer is hot, the news is overwhelming, and the light is not exactly shining brightly at the end of the tunnel. On the other hand, we were raised better than that, we know better than to cave in and lie down and give up. A local doctor that a friend of mine goes to challenged him to name the leading cause of death among people over the age of 65…and when he could not, the doctor loudly supplied the answer: the leading cause of death among people over 65 is the big fluffy chair! Choosing the big fluffy chair over an active life, choosing sloth over diligent hard work, choosing defeat over triumph, all of these are contrary to our Christian upbringing. We were raised better than that! And the world needs to see us act on those convictions. Amen.