

Living Water (Sloth)

Exodus 17:1 - 7, John 4:5 – 42

Today we have come to worship God. In the context of that worship the Heddle Bakers and their extended whanau have brought Olive for baptism. Just over 3 years ago Alistair, Olive's brother, was also baptised here. Baptism is the outward expression of the inward decision to be a Christ-follower. Infant baptism or christening used to be a tradition and it often happened because that is what you did. Today things are very different.

Richard Cory, written by Edward Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favoured, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning", and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king –
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

The people admired Cory because of all he possessed personally and financially. His suicide was a shock to them. There is no mention of any relationships in his life nor of any spiritual lack. The people struggled to put food on the table while Richard Cory seemed to have everything worth living for.

There are many people like Richard Cory. The tradition today is more about money making than it is about spiritual seeking or spiritual growth. Everything seems to conspire against anyone who thinks there must be more to life than money and pleasure and self-fulfilment. Today we are so busy. There is little time to search for a spiritual reality. And yet most of us are here today because we believe there is a spiritual reality. Most of us are here because we have experienced this reality and we want to experience more of it.

And that is possible. It is possible to be different from the norm; to live a life following Jesus Christ. We can know the mercy of a loving God and walk in the light of the Holy Spirit, every day – in the midst of our busyness we can do that.

Take a moment now to briefly reflect on your own life. How is it going for you? Do you struggle with busyness or perhaps with apathy? Would you like to experience more than you do now?

We've been considering the 7 deadly sins of which sloth is one.

When we talk about sloth, you probably picture that weird creature that hangs around in trees. What do you know about sloths?

Sloths have about a quarter as much muscle tissue as other animals of similar weight. Their hair grows from their hands and feet because they spend most of their time hanging from trees. They go to the ground once a week to wee and poo. They move only when necessary and even then very slowly. They can't run away fast if a predator chases them. They are so relaxed, that they rarely hurt themselves if they fall from their tree.

Sloth calls to mind laziness. In 1987 the 7 deadly sins were parodied in Harpers magazine. The caption for sloth read "If sloth had been the original sin, we'd all still be in paradise." But is sloth just laziness? Or is it something more?

One of the Christian virtues is diligence. Sloth can be the exact opposite of that virtue. The Latin root of the word for diligence means "to love". So sloth is about apathy, lack of care. It isn't just sin because it makes us lazy but because of the lack of love that lies behind it.

So what should we do? Well we better get busy hadn't we? We better stop slacking and get on with it, whatever "it" is. Really?

You may be surprised to find out that one of the symptoms of sloth is actually busyness. Laziness and overwork are both symptoms of sloth. At its core sloth is about anything that prevents us from pursuing the spiritual life, from pursuing and loving God; and from pursuing the destiny God has for us.

When describing sloth, it can be difficult to find the right balance between grace and discipline.¹ It is Holy Spirit who is at work in us, drawing us through Jesus, to the love of God the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who is at work in us transforming us into the complete human beings God has created us to be. We can't do that ourselves, by willpower or anything else. But we do have a part to play. That part is to respond. Responding takes discipline.

On 14th June 1975 Kevin and I got married. We made vows to each other. (I don't have a copy of those vows which is just as well because I probably promised to obey!) On that date we got married. On 6th December 2008, Simon and Kate got married. (They probably do have their vows still.) But being married is worked out on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes married life seems to just happen and all is well with the world. At other times being married takes a lot of effort. Sometimes in a

¹ Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies, by Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, 93

marriage, one or both of the partners, doesn't want to make the effort to be married. Then there is tension, angst, feelings of love seem absent. If the parties don't make some effort, do some work on their relationship, the marriage will likely die.

Spirituality; a relationship with God is a bit like a marriage. A relationship with God does take some discipline. Most of the effort is made by God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus became human so that we might have enjoy a life-giving relationship with God. But we do have to respond to what is offered

To shift illustrations, all life needs water. Remember the Bible was written in the Middle East where water is often scarce. The reading from Exodus begins with the nomadic Israelites grumbling for the want of water. That grumbling turned to outright anger and near violence as their thirst became stronger. The Israelites doubted that God would provide for them but he does. Exactly what happens to make the water come out of the rock isn't clear. The Bible rarely describes the "how". The point is that God did provide the water they needed.

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth about their ancestors. They were"all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,[a] that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 1 Cor 10:1 - 4 Paul wants the church to understand the availability of spiritual water; spiritual life.

The woman at the well was astounded because Jesus spoke with her, a woman from a despised race. (A Jewish man would never address a woman, nor would he address a Samaritan.) She was astounded because he spoke about the deep things of God – he did theology with her. She was astounded because he knew about her relationships. She was astounded because he offered her something totally outside her experience:

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Her response: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." John 4:13 - 15 Give me this water. I'm thirsty. I'm parched in fact. In her relationships she hadn't found what she was looking for. She desperately needed the spiritual water Jesus was offering.

Water is an amazing thing. It cleanses and brings life. Drinking from the spiritual rock is the only way to assuage our real thirst. In the last book of the Bible, Jesus again promises: To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Rev 21:6

The woman responded to Jesus' offer of water. She took the time to dialogue with him; to listen to him. To respond we have to hear the call. To hear the call requires listening. Listening takes time. God is sovereign and will often speak in our busyness or our slackness. But hearing God's voice happens best when we are deliberately taking time to listen.

Sloth is whatever distracts us from listening. It's a spiritual vice; not a physical one like gluttony. Sloth strikes when spirituality takes a back seat to bodily comfort. But the bodily comfort is not the sin but the symptom of the root. The root; lack of love or lack of desire for anything more than what we already have. Sloth pulls us away from the desire to have our spiritual thirst satisfied. It pulls us away from God.

In the newsletter are some reflection questions. I encourage you to use them later in the week to review what's happening in your life and to allow room for spiritual nourishment. If you'd like someone to talk to or to pray with you, just pop to the front of the church after the service. Someone will be there.

The question is this: will you allow sloth to pull you away from what really matters in life, either through spiritual slackness or through perpetual busy-ness? Will you be like Richard Cory, all together on the outside and in denial of what is happening on the inside? Or will you take a long, refreshing drink from the water of life?