

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church  
122 East 88<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10128  
Holy Wednesday, April 8, 2009  
Sloth. Also Judas

APOSTOLIC GREETING

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

*Sit*

FIRST LESSON ..... Genesis 3:17-19, KJV

<sup>17</sup>And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; <sup>18</sup>Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; <sup>19</sup>In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

SECOND LESSON ..... John 13:21-32, RSV

<sup>21</sup>When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." <sup>22</sup>The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. <sup>23</sup>One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; <sup>24</sup>so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." <sup>25</sup>So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" <sup>26</sup>Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. <sup>27</sup>Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." <sup>28</sup>Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. <sup>29</sup>Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. <sup>30</sup>So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. <sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; <sup>32</sup>if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

*Stand*

VERSE (*spoken, by all*)

Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.(Gal. 6:14)

THE HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 27:3-5, KJV

*Before the reading, spoken:*

P The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 27th Chapter.

C Glory to you, O Lord.

<sup>3</sup>Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, <sup>4</sup>Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. <sup>5</sup>And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

*After the reading, spoken:*

P The Gospel of the Lord.

C Praise to you, O Christ.

HYMN 439

*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*

CONVERSE

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>19</sup>In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17, KJV)

Our Maker has created us for activity. It is in our bones. Even before our ancestors fell into sin, we were made to be up and about, doing things. Adam and Eve were not built to lie around on the sofa all day, but were given the pleasant task of tending the garden. Gardens need tending, even in paradise. If the harvest is rich and easy, still, someone needs to gather it in. If the grapevines grow beautiful grapes, someone has to pick them, maybe even make them into wine. If the flowers grow in the field, still, someone needs to pick some for the vase in the dining room. Tending the garden probably took many forms of activity for Adam and Eve. It might have been satisfying work, but it was work nonetheless. No sleeping life away, not even in paradise.

Furthermore, Adam was given the task of naming the rest of the creatures. In the Bible, naming a thing requires that you get to know that thing. You have to linger with it, observe it, see its tendencies in various circumstances. You have to get to know the nature of the giraffe, for example, before you can declare to yon tall-necked creature, “You are a giraffe if I ever saw one!”

So, fresh from God’s hands, we human beings were made for activity. We were made for labor -- not for toil and sweat -- but certainly for work in this world.

Toil and sweat entered human reality because of sin. The ground became contrary with thorns and thistles, childbirth became painful and dangerous, and our labor became haunted by the shadow of death. But work on we must. “In the sweat of thy face *shalt* thou eat bread.” If before the Fall we were meant for activity, even more so are we meant for it afterwards.

And in the mercy of God, sometimes “toil” can shift back toward the more pleasant work of “tending the garden.” Many of us have noticed that our work becomes less toilsome the longer and the better we work at it. Through the development of good habits and strong disciplines, work can simply become part of life, like breathing, without much effort. Indeed, Martin Luther would urge us to value our daily labors as our “priestly vocation.” That is, Luther urged Christians to honor their daily jobs as locations and opportunities to practice love toward our neighbors. And I think that many of us do take satisfaction in our daily work for that reason. We feel that when we get up and go to work, we are doing some good in this world.

But the sluggard does not get up, go to work, do some good in this world. The sun rises, the farmer goes out to milk the cows, the bagel cook lights up his oven, the accountant sharpens her pencil, the parent bundles up the children and readies them for school, the policewoman walks her beat, but the sluggard remains asleep. Instead of getting a good night’s rest, he gets two or three good nights of rest each day. He finally rolls out of bed mid-afternoon, when other folks have already worked half a day. He is languid, flabby, slow of body, and slow of mind through the unnatural inactivity to which he has become accustomed.

Not just people, but even tools are best when they are active. My dear old fountain pen, for example, is shiny and well-functioning because I use it. But if it just sat around in my desk drawer, being a slothful pen, well, it would grow dusty and maybe even gather some rust.

Likewise with us. If we permit ourselves to be inactive, we develop rust, both in our bodies and in our souls. A medical doctor once told me that I have an intellectual profession, but a body meant for activity. And that is so. That’s why I lift some weights and ride my elliptical machine. My body is like my fountain pen. It is best when it is active.

Even more important is the soul, that it should not become rusted through sloth. In the moral thinking of the Church, sloth is a “cardinal vice.” That is, it is a vice that leads on to other vices. Laziness drags down the soul. It receives the good things of life from the hands of God, but does not have enough gumption to be grateful for them, nor even to say a prayer of thanksgiving for them. Sloth, then, leads on to ingratitude.

Likewise sloth leads to neglect of both tables of the Law, hindering both our love of God and of our neighbor. I mean, if we are sleeping in, it is hard to serve our neighbor through our job, through visiting the sick, through almsgiving to the poor, through giving words of encouragement to discouraged friends. Sloth is a habit that leaves us lonely and unfruitful.

That is bad, but there is something even worse: our *Enemy* is not slothful. Many criticisms can be laid upon the devil, but laziness is not one of them. And so it is that St. Peter gives this warning:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

How relentless Satan is in the conduct of his business! How tireless his spirit! How diligent he is prowling around, seeking souls to devour.

And in his marauding, Satan seems to have taken poor Judas captive. We have heard about the morsel of bread at the Last Supper. We have heard how Satan came into Judas:

<sup>27</sup>Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.”

From then on, Judas went downhill. In the end, the man hanged himself.

This is the other form of sloth. The first form of it is laziness:

“Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep”(Proverbs 6:10,KJV)

Now we come upon the more heartbreaking form of sloth, also called “acedia” in the moral tradition. I mean, sadness of soul. It is a particular form of inactivity. The body is inactive because the soul hardly cares any more.

Martin Luther used to say that we poor human beings are beset by temptations throughout all of life:

Youths, for example, are tempted chiefly by the flesh; older people are tempted by the world. Others, who are concerned with spiritual matters (that is, strong Christians) are tempted by the devil. (*Large Catechism*, on the Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer.)

And of these three temptations - lust, money, and despair - Luther feared the last one most. It really is quite cruel of Satan to tempt people toward despair. He does not even leave the elderly in peace along these lines. He is capable of driving any of us toward depression, inactivity, and giving up.

The great tragedy of Judas is that he forgot what a friend he had in Jesus. It is true that Judas fell into grievous sin, all the way to betraying his Lord, yet the thing about Jesus is that he proved never to be slothful when it comes to human salvation. Jesus received back Peter. He would have received back Judas too, only Judas succumbed to his sadness of soul.

Jesus himself faced that struggle: I mean his sorrows in the Garden of Gethsemane. I think that the wonder of that story is not so much that our Maker was in “agony of spirit” there in the Garden, but that he came through it. Jesus was frightened in that Garden, and the future looked very grim to him, and indeed, it was very grim to him. Yet, in faith Jesus came through his night of prayer and agony, and marched forward to the Cross and to our salvation.

In the midst of his spiritual distress, Jesus trusted his heavenly Father beyond what he, Jesus, could see. He trusted that somehow, there would be life for him, on the other side of his present troubles.

That is the our chief weapon against sadness of soul: It is the conviction that we are not in this alone, that God is on our side, that better days are ahead of us, and that though weeping endure for the night, joy comes in the morning.

If Judas had persevered in prayer, instead of hanging himself, he too could have met the risen Jesus along the shore of the sea, had breakfast with him, become reconciled with Jesus as did Peter, and gone on to the apostolic work for which he was appointed. If Judas had waited upon the Lord, he could have been accomplished good in the world and enjoyed good too. But he despaired. He permitted acedia to overcome him.

Sadness of soul is a sin against God's love.<sup>1</sup> It is a refusal of joy, a refusal to recognize present blessings, and a refusal to contemplate future ones. It is a cruelty toward ourselves, and therefore it breaks the heart of Jesus who loved us enough to die for us, who wants only our well-being, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), #2094.*