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“Giving Up Sloth”

John 5:1-9

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After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many ill, blind, lame, and paralyzed people. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

The ill man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me."

Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

John 5:1-9

Last week, we used our senior discounts to go see a movie for grownups. Carol and I were 40% of the audience. There was a couple 20 years older than we are.

The ticket taker apologized to them: "I'm so sorry. It's upstairs."

But this intelligent couple knew to get there 20 minutes early in case the movie's upstairs. Carol and I were right behind them. There was also a 12-year-old in the audience. I assume he came to see Cocaine Bear, but couldn't pass for 17.

Living has a 96 on Rotten Tomatoes, but only critics and seniors are going to see it. The movie stars Bill Nighy—not the science guy. He's Davy Jones from Pirates of the

Caribbean and Billy Mack from Love Actually.

Nighy is 74, but looks older. He plays, Mr. Williams, a humorless civil servant in London in 1953. His stiff upper lip is concrete.

The movie has its origins in Leo Tolstoy's short story from 1886 The Death of Ivan Ilych. Tolstoy describes the tragedy of a boring life: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore, most terrible." In 1952, the Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa, used Tolstoy's story for the film Ikiru.

Living, the British remake, is set in a county public works department, a world of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and politeness. Paper folders move slowly from one tray to another.

On Mr. Wakeling's first day in the frosty office, he says, "I hope to make a difference."

Williams' response is "We try not to have too much fun and laughter. It's rather like church."

A co-worker tells Wakeling not to let his pile of papers get too short or people will think he is unimportant.

Williams is trapped in his routine. He almost does not know it. His son refers to his father's shell of an existence. One colleague's nickname for Williams is Mr. Zombie.

We know this story. We know the sloth of accepting things as they are in return for a paycheck. There is a poem on the ceiling in the tunnel connecting the Port Authority and Times Square subway stops:

Overslept

So tired

If late

Get fired
Why bother?
Why the pain?
Just go home
Do it again

We have felt like cogs in the machine. We spend days without really seeing, hearing, or feeling anything. A familiar coat of apathy covers everything. The sin of sloth is sinfully easy. Talking to friends becomes checking our email. Reading a great novel becomes reading recipes on Facebook. The songs we used to sing become background music.

The casual way we welcome apathy is scary. Playing with our daughter becomes watching our daughter play. Listening becomes waiting for our turn to speak. Compassionate concern becomes pretending to be concerned.

The ways in which we give ourselves to apathy should frighten us. Worshipping God becomes critiquing worship. Praying becomes making a to-do list. Caring for the poor becomes being in favor of caring for the poor.

We choose apathy by filling our days with busyness. We have so many responsibilities. We have so much to do and so little time to do it all. The result is dull and ordinary.

Sloth deserves its spot on the list of seven deadly sins. Working for things that do not matter steals our passion. If we are not careful, years pass and the deepest parts of us go unexplored. We slip into mediocrity. We figure as long as we are not hurting anybody and people seem to like us, we must be okay. But we live far from our best lives.

(David Brooks, Eulogy Versus Resume Virtues)

Once in a while, we realize what is happening. We stir a little. We decide to turn over a new leaf. We find that we cannot heal our own apathy. We are unable to stop existing and start living. We are victims of our routines, too stuck to change.

Like this guy by the pool. Another feast comes around. Jesus is back in Jerusalem. Near one of the Temple gates there is a pool. Hundreds of sick people—blind, disabled, paralyzed—are there. They believe the pool at Bethesda is special, because, every once in a while, an angel stirs up the water. Whoever steps in first after the stirring of the water is healed.

Jesus asks, “Do you want to get well?”

The sick person says, “Sir, when the water is stirred, I don’t have anybody to put me into the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in.”

Maybe he is defensive because he is tired of suffering—it has been 38 years—and tired of being made to feel like it is his fault.

The question Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” implies that he is somehow responsible.

Maybe he is defensive because here is this man he has never met, asking a question so obvious that it is offensive. Of course, he wants to be healed, that is why he has been coming to this first century Lourdes for 38 years. He does not know Jesus. This stranger might be there to insult him, but he knows he is alone and knows he needs help.

As Jesus speaks to him, he is no longer alone. He has someone who will help him: “Get up. Take your bedroll. Start walking.”

The man picks up his stuff and walks off. People with physical disabilities would have good reason to hate this story were it not for the tone of Jesus' question. The way John tells the story suggests that we have our own ways of not being made well by God, our own defensiveness at the idea that there is something wrong in us that needs to change.

The writer is asking how we would react to being asked by Jesus, "Do you want to be healed?"

Williams leaves the office early one day to go to the doctor, who tells him that the cancer has spread. Williams has six months to live. He does not tell his son or daughter-in-law. If you met her, you would understand why.

He withdraws half of his life savings, buys sleeping pills, and goes to commit suicide in a seaside resort town. But then he meets a writer who thinks Williams needs a round of wine, women, and song. This seems like a good idea, for ten minutes.

Williams goes back to London, but not to work. He goes to lunch with a former colleague, a young woman whose passion he envies. He tries to remember what it is to be alive: "I didn't notice what I was becoming. I would like to be alive for one day, but I realize I don't know how."

He needs to do something good, before he dies. He goes back to work. He forces his co-workers to construct a playground that has been bogged down by paperwork. He fights the bureaucracy, pushes the process, and stands up to his superiors. Just before he dies, Williams watches children play in the finished playground.

Parents of small children show up at Mr. Williams'

funeral. The Mr. Williams they knew the last six months has little in common with the Williams co-workers knew for decades. The playground parents knew him after he gave up apathy for compassion, after he picked a cause, and went to work on something that matters.

Everyone has the option of contributing something, but we have to work at it. We have to fight the forces of apathy to make a difference. We can improve the lives of those around us. We can leave a legacy born out of God's healing.

David Brooks talks about two sets of virtues—résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. Résumé virtues are the skills we bring to the marketplace. Eulogy virtues are the ones they will talk about at our funeral—whether we were kind, brave, or compassionate. The eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones, but our culture spends more time teaching strategies for career success than the qualities of God's healing. We can be parents who parent, teachers who teach, students who learn, writers who write, and painters who paint.

Ray Bradbury says, "Stuff your eyes with wonder. Live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds. See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories."

We can be deeply good. We can listen well. We can make others feel funny and valued. We can be grateful. We can do wonderful work. We can live with a generous spirit.

God heals us, so that we will want more. God heals us so that we want to worship. We want to learn. We want to grieve when others grieve. We want to be happy when

others are happy.

We want to be good friends. We want to help our friends look good. We want to expect more. We want to pray. We want to feed the hungry. We want to welcome the outsider. We want to surprise ourselves. We want to face the unknown. We want to be big-hearted. God will heal us, so that we want to live like Christians.

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