

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

March 15, 2009

Got Care? Acedia

Third Sermon in a Series on the Eight Bad Thoughts

The Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 91; Ephesians 5:15-21

For today's topic, I have to introduce a term that has no precise English language equivalent. The word is "acedia." If you have an especially good dictionary, you may find it there. One I consulted defines it as "spiritual torpor and apathy; ennui." That might not clear up the meaning for all of us.

Acedia is one of the Eight Bad Thoughts described by Evagrius and Cassian, early monastics who warned against particular temptations which can destroy our life with one another and our life with God. Over time, these Eight Bad Thoughts became the Seven Deadly Sins, as defined by Pope Gregory in the sixth century and later popularized by the poet Dante in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy* in which those guilty of the particular sins are consigned to different levels of hell. Acedia did not make the final cut to the list of seven, because it is usually combined with the sin of sloth.

Indeed, it may look a great deal like laziness, but its sources are much deeper and its consequences much broader than a mere desire to avoid hard work.

The word is derived from two Greek terms: *ἀ* which means “not” and *κηδία* which means “care.”

One challenge as we try to identify this temptation is that it is so pervasive. It can be expressed in a mere shrug of the shoulders, “why should I care?” the neglect of a friend, averting our gaze from someone in need, or abandoning a challenging task to which we have been called.

Acedia is giving up or giving in. It declares, “I don’t care any longer, if I ever did care.” It’s all around us and within us. We see its effects when we lie in bed, convinced that our work is all in vain or when we allow small conflicts to fester, persuaded that reconciliation is not worth the effort.

Acedia is always linked to self-absorption.

It is a great temptation at many points in life. We see it on the roadways. After all, there are few activities which are as self-absorbed as driving. Acedia mixes with pride to say, “I am the only driver on this road who really knows what he’s doing. All the rest of you are idiots.” It mixes with anger to curse and yell at another driver who’s moving slowly or having trouble navigating a turn. It means, “I don’t care about your needs, or that you are unfamiliar with the road you’re on or need to be more cautious than I think you should be.”

No doubt, you can see how such attitudes can destroy a community. Evagrius and Cassian were aware of the danger. In all probability, they

experienced the temptation in themselves. No doubt, they saw it in their fellow monks: first of all in a resistance to scrutiny by others. “I don’t want anyone telling me what to do, or advising me, or even helping me along.” With correction comes improvement, but acedia says, “I don’t care about the group and its norms, and I don’t care to get better.”

Taken to an extreme, acedia leads to a hatred of the place we’re in or the people we’re with. “There is more important work for me to be doing somewhere else. There is a better group of people waiting for me in another place.”

So it is that monks grow weary of the monastery and find an excuse to leave it. Church members give up on their congregation and look for another. Husbands or wives tire of their marriage and seek the adventure (so it seems) of starting with someone new. In all of these cases, it is an abandonment of the relationships that sustain us and the people with whom we were called, at some point, to offer and receive nurture and love.

A story has been told of a Pastoral Nominating committee that asked prospective ministers to describe the people in their previous churches. The first minister said, “Oh, those people are terrible. They are not friendly. All they care about is money. They like to argue all the time.”

When the minister asked the committee what their people were like, they said, “Oh, they are much the same here.”

During the next interview, the second minister was asked the same question and responded, “Well, my old church has a lot of lovely people. They are supportive of one another and friendly to outsiders. Sometimes they have disagreements, but they try to resolve them before they get out of hand.”

Again, the second minister asked, “So what are your people like?”

And the committee responded, “Oh, our people are much like yours.”

We tend to find the same kind of people no matter where we go. It may just be the case that we meet whomever or whatever we bring with us: our own expectations, our own prejudices, our own desire to love and be loved.

Acedia tempts us to believe that is not the case. Good things will never happen here! It is summed up well in that old question which sometimes used to show up on office posters. “How can I fly like an eagle if I’m surrounded by turkeys?” That kind of dismissiveness is acedia speaking; it is giving up on the people around us.

It can also mean giving up on ourselves. In this respect, acedia can sometimes look like depression. That is an example of how our spiritual and emotional lives are closely linked. Like despair, acedia says there’s no point in the tasks which lie before us.

Why should I bother being kind to others? It just leads to disappointment.

Why should I continue to pray? My prayers never seem to be answered.

Why should I try to feed hungry people? There will always be more of them.

Why should I work for justice? I could be happier if only I kept quiet.

In many tasks of Christian calling, it is hard to see dramatic or even tangible results, and it is very easy to become discouraged. I'm not sure that we preachers prepare our flocks well for that kind of discouragement. The work of a Christian is hard work, not simple work, yet we tend to downplay that. Jesus tells us to count the cost, but it's easy to pretend that there will not be a high cost for us, that we can live our lives pretty much the same as we would have lived them without the gospel. And this is never the case. So in the face of discouragement, or conflict, or loss we are easily tempted to abandon our calling.

A little over a year ago some of the private writings of Mother Teresa were published posthumously under the title *Come Be My Light*. Many commentators were shocked to learn of the crises of doubt and uncertainty she faced in the midst of hardship and solitude. And it was a lifelong struggle which she describes in one place as “Such deep longing for God — and (yet to feel) repulsed — empty — no faith — no love — no zeal. — [The saving of] Souls holds no attraction — Heaven means nothing — pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.”<sup>1</sup>

Some anti-Christian commentators seized on such statements as being an indictment of the faith. But, for those who know better, they demonstrate a great

triumph of faith. Teresa, like all Christians, was facing the temptation of acedia, what has often been called the “noonday demon,” or in the words of the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm, “the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

According to the poet Kathleen Norris, a student of Evagrius and the author of a book-length treatment of acedia, “The demon of acedia manipulates both our presumption and despair, puffing us up with thoughts of great accomplishments we will make, and then crushing us when our efforts fall short of expectations. We may be left feeling we have gained nothing, and that we were idiots to have attempted anything in the first place.”<sup>2</sup>

The answer to acedia is zeal in caring. That is the witness of Teresa’s life, enduring in charity, never flagging in her efforts on behalf of the poor, even when the voices within were urging her to give up.

In a recent newspaper piece, the disgraced financier Bernie Madoff was quoted as saying, “I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I did it anyway.” In summary form, that is the most basic definition of human sinfulness: to know the wrong and choose it. On the other hand, to know the right and to choose it is a virtue, hard to practice, but one to which we all can aspire. And we begin with a deep care about how we go through life. Will we go through life with blinders on, or with our eyes wide open to the needs around us? Will we be deaf to the cries of others, or will we be willing to hear them? Will we respond to others even at great

cost to ourselves? Will we worship God even when we do not feel like it? Will we persist in prayer, even when we have grown weary of it?

Again, I quote Kathleen Norris, “Acedia’s virtue is a caring expressed in thoughtful and timely acts that enhance our relationship with others.”<sup>2</sup>

Someone may ask you if you care. In a moment of weakness, you may even ask yourself “Got care?” It is a fundamental question of the Christian life.

Let’s close with a prayer that asks God to give us the ability to answer with a “Yes.”

“This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to speak out let me do so truthfully. If I am to keep silent, may I do so patiently. If I am to offer help, let me do so lovingly. If I am to receive help, let me do so thankfully. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, ed. by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer’s Life* (New York: Riverhead, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from a prayer in Kathleen Norris’s, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer’s Life*.