Sunday, February 26, 1984
THE SIN OF LAZINESS
Matthew 7:7-14

According to tradition, there are seven deadly sins. They are: pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. How this particular list of sins came to be, I do not know; nor do I know why where are seven rather than six or eight or 10 or 12. Perhaps there was one sing for each day of the week.

This morning I want to talk about only one of the seven: sloth, or the term we more commonly use is “laziness.” Normally when we think of laziness, we have in mind someone who does not want to work or someone who loafs on the job, an individual who stands around with his hands in his pockets and does as little work as possible, a person who does not do his or her part. And that is one form of laziness.

This morning, however, I want to look at another kind of laziness, a kind that is a part of all of us. I’m talking about what might better be described as mental or spiritual laziness. It is the unwillingness to examine our biases or our perceptions, our basic assumptions. It is the unwillingness to continue to learn and grow.

It’s not a new problem. Galileo, who was summoned to the Inquisition in Rome for his radical views on the nature of the universe, at times showed his telescope to the leading sages of the day. The result generally fell into three categories of response. A few people were willing to look through the telescope and were open to another view of the universe. They were not afraid of the possibility that the commonly held assumptions about the nature of the universe might be wrong. They were not afraid of new knowledge which could threaten their present view of what they believed. Others, however, peered around the other end of the telescope, convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass: the picture of a planet, the moon, whatever. They did not want to believe what they were seeing and didn’t. It was too threatening for them to face the fact that the universe might be different from what they always believed. The people in the third category also did not want to face any changes in what they believed, so they’d simply refuse to look through the lens. They didn’t want to entertain any new possibilities at all. They were afraid of new possibilities. The kind of laziness we are talking about this morning is illustrated by the people in these last two categories.

But why should anyone be afraid of new possibilities? Because they can be painful in that we have to rearrange our whole way of looking at the world. In this sense, all growth, mentally and spiritually, is painful and difficult. New thoughts, new discoveries are most often opposed.

For example, a study of the history of modern medicine shows that most of the significant discoveries have been made by individuals who, by standards applicable to their time, could only be considered scientific heretics. They dreamed impossible dreams. But the penalty for such dreams has been severe — derision from their professional contemporaries, the label of fraud, or worse.

Twenty years before Louis Pasteur stated his germ theory of disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes, S. in America and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna had held that germs on doctor’s hands caused death in childbirth and in surgery. Both of these men went down in utter defeat: Holmes retiring to write essays and humorous poetry, while Semmelweis was driven out of his mind, into an

asylum and to an early death from the very staph infection that he had claimed had been killing mothers.

In his book The Road Less Traveled Dr. M. Scott Peck uses the metaphor of a map to describe the way in which each one of us perceives the world around us. He puts it this way: "Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are. And if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost." No one's personal map, of course, is totally accurate, but some are more accurate than others.

We are not born with maps; we have to make them and remake them throughout our lives. The problem is that some people stop making their maps by the end of adolescence. Their maps are sketchy and small at that time; in other words, their views of the world are narrow and misleading. Unfortunately, by the end of middle age, most people have given up the effort. They believe their maps are complete, that their world-view is correct, and they are no longer interested in new information, which means they stop growing mentally and spiritually.

Others have called these maps "paradigms." A paradigm is a model or pattern or a shared set of assumptions. It helps explain the world to us. When we are in the middle of the paradigm, it is hard to imagine any other paradigm. Another way of putting it is to say that a paradigm is a conceptual scheme.

For example, a famous historical paradigm is the Ptolemaic view of the universe. Here's the earth in the middle of the universe, for, as any fool can see, the sun comes up in the east, moves overhead, and sets in the west, and the stars move around in predictable courses. Ptolemy's science won out in its day because it explained the world better than its competitors. But then along came Copernicus and Galileo. They said something different. The earth moves around the sun. But paradigms do not change easily. The establishment is always invested in the old paradigm. So the new paradigm or map does not get adopted just because it is neater and works better than the old one. The old crowd wins the first few battles, and, in fact, the paradigm doesn't usually change until the old crowd dies and the new, young crowd grows up and rewrites the textbooks and becomes the establishment itself. In the case of Ptolemy and Copernicus and Galileo, the Church as one of the most powerful parts of the establishment fought the new paradigm, was guilty of the sin of laziness, and only last year finally officially admitted that Galileo was right.

Today in the scientific world, the paradigms of Einstein and others like him have replaces those of Isaac Newton.

Each are of the world's life has its maps or paradigms. For example, in the field of foreign policy in this country, for the past 30 years of more the most adhered to paradigm, which is still held by many people of both political parties, is that all conflict in the world is basically a battle between the forces of freedom led by the United States and the forces of Communism led by the Soviet Union. There have been those who have called this way of looking at the world into question and have said that this paradigm desperately needs revision because it doesn't explain all that has been happening. But paradigms are hard to change because the establishment always has so much invested in them.

In a similar way, our personal maps or paradigms are hard to change because we have so much invested in them.

Again, Dr. Peck in his book The Road Less Traveled maintains that the process of active clinging to an outmoded view of reality is the basis for much mental illness. Psychiatrists refer to it as transference. Dr. Peck defines transference this way: Transference is that set of ways of perceiving and responding to the world which is developed in childhood and which is usually entirely appropriate to the childhood environment (indeed, often life-saving), but which is inappropriately transferred into the adult environment.

We do this often in the field of religion. As children, we develop a belief about God, about prayer, which is quite appropriate for a child. But then about the age of adolescence we stop growing religiously. We stop examining our map, our world view, and later, when we meet adult problems, we only have a childhood religious faith to deal with them, and so many people become disillusioned with religious faith itself. Again, it is the sin of laziness which works within us. We are too mentally and spiritually lazy to keep growing in these areas.

The opposite of the sin of laziness is a life of continuous and never-ending self-examination, and the examination of the world around us, including our basic assumptions. The opposite of laziness is continued growth, mentally and spiritually.

In his biography of Lyndon Johnson, Merle Miller quotes Johnson as he was reflecting on his years as president of the United States. After Johnson left office, and as he looked back on his handling of the Vietnam crisis, he said, “I never felt I had the luxury of re-examining my basic assumptions. Once the decision to commit military force was made, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and find a way somehow to make it work.” And therein, of course, says the biographer, is the heart of that tragedy in a nut shell. And it is the heart of many tragedies, not only in foreign policy, but in our personal lives, as well.

Re-examining our basic assumption is never a luxury; it is an absolute necessity! I believe the whole thrust of Jesus’ ministry was in precisely this direction. Instead of regarding the re-examining of basic assumptions as a frivolous luxury, Jesus saw it as an absolute necessity; in fact, it is the way God meant for us human beings to grow toward our fulfillment. Thus, when the rich young man came to Jesus and asked what he must do to become a part of God’s kingdom, Jesus said to him, “Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and then come follow me.” And the young man went away sorrowful, because he had many possessions. Jesus was saying you have to re-examine the whole basis on which your life is built. But he was unwilling to do that.

What’s what Jesus meant by the word “repentance.” What is repentance, actually, if not the power to go back and re-examine old assumptions and, wherever necessary, to set out in a new direction, to find a new map, because the old one is inadequate or faulty. The word repentance means to turn and go in a new direction.

The whole idea of being “born again” requires the learning of something new which requires a giving up of the old self and the death of outworn knowledge and outworn ways of looking at things. Of course it is more comfortable and less painful to stay the way we are, to keep living on the old assumptions, without questioning them, to avoid suffering the death of cherished notions and prejudices.

That’s why Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” The sin of laziness is always the

easy way out. Therefore, said Jesus, “The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

I believe God wants us to continue to grow spiritually and mentally, and that means overcoming the sin of laziness. Growth is the way that everything comes to its fulfillment in this world, and Jesus teaches us that God is the author of such growth. God doesn’t merely tolerate it or permit it; God encourages it. Since we have free will, however, we can choose to grow or choose not to grow and change.

So, there it is! The sin of laziness is one major block to mental and spiritual growth. There is the laziness of attempting to avoid necessary suffering or taking the easy way out. Laziness is also present when we are unwilling to extend ourselves for our own growth or for the growth of others.

The kind of mental and spiritual laziness which we are talking about is a large part of what Christian theology has traditionally called “original sin.” There seems to be present in us a reluctance to extend ourselves to new areas of thought, responsibility, and maturation. I believe that no matter how energetic, ambitious, or even wise we might be, if we truly look into ourselves, we will find laziness lurking at some level. It is the force of entropy within us, pushing us down and holding us all back from our spiritual development.

But some of you will say, “I’m not lazy. I work 60 hours a week at my job. In the evenings and on the weekends, even though I’m tired, I extend myself to go out with my spouse, spend time with my children, help with the housework. It seems that all that I do is work, work, work.” However, remember, we are talking about mental and spiritual laziness, the unwillingness to consider new thoughts, or to challenge old ways of looking at things. We find new information threatening because it requires that we re-examine our old beliefs. That’s why we cloak our mental laziness in all sorts of rationalizations.

However, the good news is that we can choose to do otherwise, and in addition to the force of entropy at work in the world and within us, there is a more powerful force at work: it is the force of the love of God which wants to lead us toward continued growth and maturity. Repentance means to turn around and go in that direction, rather than let the force of entropy keep us back and drag us down. Our lifetime offers us unlimited opportunities for spiritual growth until we die. To choose to continue to grow is to enter be the “narrow gate,” as Jesus called it. “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction.”

The overall purpose of life is to continue to grow mentally and spiritually, which also means to grow in love. I believe that’s what Jesus meant when he said, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48) And God’s love is present within us and among us to help us along this path.

But it frequently means dropping old ideas, old assumptions, old habits, old ways of looking at things along the way. Amen.