

Acedia

Acts 5:27-32

April 11, 2010

When did the church become harmless? When did nice replace good? When did it become the highest of Christian virtues to not make waves? When did it become the worst of all sins to cause offense? When did we decide to talk about Jesus only among ourselves?

You may not agree with many of the positions espoused by the Christian Right: against abortion rights, against extending rights to homosexual couples and working women and undocumented immigrants, against efforts to counteract global warming and protect endangered species, for restoring prayer and teaching creationism in schools. You may not agree with many of their positions -- and I do not -- but you have to give them this: they are troublemakers! They are a force to be reckoned with!

You may not agree with all of the actions taken by the leadership of the United Church of Christ: for health care reform and immigration reform, for equal marriage rights, against torture and the death penalty, for workers rights and affirmative action, against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. You may not agree with all of their actions -- and I do not -- but you have to give them this: they do make waves! They are not afraid to speak out on sensitive and controversial issues.

Peter and the other apostles were troublemakers. They talked about Jesus everywhere, in defiance of the ruling religious authorities. They refused to defer to the will of the Council, saying they must obey God, not men. And they did not hesitate to pin the blame for Jesus' death directly on the members of the Council. They spoke out -- about what they knew to be the truth, about what they believed God called them to say -- regardless of the consequences. They caused as much trouble, and provoked as much anger as ... well, as Jesus himself!

And it only got worse. As the years and decades passed, as the apostles continued to proclaim openly and boldly the message about Jesus, the outrage of the establishment boiled over, and Christians were denounced and ostracized and imprisoned and tortured and even put to death, just for being Christians.

When did the church become harmless? When did nice replace good? When did we become part of the establishment? When did we become part of the problem?

When we were overcome by acedia.

Acedia? What is acedia?

Acedia is worrying about yourself and leaving others to worry about themselves.

Acedia is protesting, "I am not my brother's keeper."

Acedia is not being hot, not being cold, just tepid, blending in, adapting to your surroundings.

Acedia is going with the flow, because you don't want to make waves, and because you don't have the energy anyway to swim against the current.

Acedia is not getting too excited about anything, except things that don't really matter -- sports or clothes or video games or *Survivor* or *American Idol* or Michael Jackson or Mylie Cyrus or Tiger Woods.

Acedia is not taking anything -- anything -- too seriously.

Acedia is starting lots of things, but finishing nothing.

Acedia is being eager to hear the latest gossip, but bored of hearing the same old story about Jesus.

Acedia is making few commitments, and treating casually those you do make.

Acedia is praying ... occasionally. Going to church ... when it's convenient. Reading the Bible ... well, you don't really read the Bible. Giving ... what you can spare.

The word "acedia" literally means "without care." Acedia is care-less-ness, listlessness, sluggishness. When you are overcome by acedia you lose your passion. You lose your will. You lose your joy. You lose your heart. The flame of the candle of faith Jesus put in you burns dimly, if it has not been snuffed out entirely.

What causes acedia? Any number of things.

Acedia may be rooted in fear: pulling in, pulling back, to avoid offense, to avoid provocation, to make sure you don't get anybody upset with you.

Acedia may be rooted in exhaustion: physical exhaustion, but more likely emotional exhaustion, because it takes energy to care, and caring makes you vulnerable -- to being used, to being hurt, to disappointment.

Acedia may be rooted in distraction: lives filled up with so much stuff, so much busyness, having so much to do or so much you think you have to do that you don't have time to care.

Acedia may be rooted in laziness, spiritual laziness, in underdeveloped and under-exercised spiritual discipline. Just as unfit bodies are harder to get going, and have less energy when they do get going, and tire quickly, so do unfit spirits get flabby and weak, giving out quickly, giving up all too easily.

And, in extreme cases, acedia may come from or may lead to an entire absence of love. You don't care enough to care. There isn't anybody, even your own self, worth the effort. There isn't anybody, even your own self, worth loving. Life becomes simply a matter of finding ways to pass the time and break up the boredom.

What's the cure? How do you heal a soul sick with acedia?

You start with the heart. You start with the heart's most basic choices, with the heart's most basic commitments.

We must obey God.

You cannot jump start your soul by yourself. You must want to be cured, but the cure does not come from inside yourself, it comes from outside yourself, from God. When you listen and trust and obey, the caring will come, the caring will come with the doing. You don't love your neighbor because you're a loving person or because you feel loving, but because it is God's command. And as you do it, as you act in love, love grows within you.

Motivation and will and energy and endurance come from God, from what God does for you and from what God puts in you. What has God done for you? What did God do for Peter and the other apostles that got them all excited and sent them into the streets of Jerusalem?

God raised Jesus from death! God made Jesus our living Lord and Savior! Jesus is alive! Jesus is with you, for you, calling you, leading you!

Death has been defeated! (Ho hum ...) The way to true shalom, true peace, has been revealed! (Who cares?)

How could we? How could we not be excited, energized, passionate about being alive in a world into which God is even now breathing new life?

And what does God put in you? The Holy Spirit, God himself in you, our source of wisdom and strength and comfort and courage and hope.

Only God can cure acedia, but it's our job, and our privilege, to help each other be helped. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote this:

Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise. Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.

Good health is a matter of good habits, for the body and for the soul. We need each other. We need to meet together, regularly, Sunday by Sunday, or even more often, for the sake of the well-being of our souls, for the sake of the well-being of our congregation, for the sake of the well-being of God's kingdom in this world. It's that important!

Don't let acedia get the best of you! Don't let acedia poison your spirit! Don't let acedia destroy your joy! Don't let acedia deprive this world of a vital source of its blessing -- you!

*Gonna meet God's children at the fountain of life,
where the word and the water and the Lord Jesus Christ
make a new creation out of every one:
Holy Spirit of love, let the waters run ...*

Holy Spirit of God, make our flame burn bright!

*Brighter, brighter than the sun
is the candle of the Holy One.
Bigger, bigger than the sea
are the waves of God washing over me!*