Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No.’

This sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins was delightfully interrupted last week by DiscipleNOW weekend and a sermon by Yvette Jackson that resulted in a standing ovation. That doesn’t happen very often. I’m glad I was here to see it. But it doesn’t make it easy to be here, now, standing in a pulpit that is still trembling from Yvette’s spirited delivery.

I’m going to do the best I can.

And I’m going to begin by reminding you of that acronym for the Seven Deadly Sins. It’s EGGSLAP, and it stands for Envy, Greed, Gluttony, Sloth, Lust, Anger, and Pride. So far I have covered all but two of those sins, and with each of them I offered a “cure.” I said:

- The cure for Pride is Humility
- The cure for Envy is Contentment
- The cure for Greed is Generosity
- The cure for Lust is Love
- And the cure for Anger is Patience.

That leaves us with Gluttony and Sloth, two sins that sound so repugnant I didn’t even include them in the sermon title. How will I preach about those?

On Monday, February 10, at 8:04 a.m., I got a text message from Clint Smith, who has been teaching in his Sunday school class the same topics I’ve been preaching from the pulpit, but using his own research and results. Clint knew that I was scheduled to preach on Gluttony the next Sunday but he also knew Yvette would be taking my
place, so he wrote, “Pastor—are you planning to preach a sermon on gluttony…or are you going to combine it with sloth next time you’re in the pulpit? Thx, just trying to plan for my lesson tie in.” I replied, “I’m planning to combine sloth and gluttony Sunday after next. Thought I would talk about those people who sit on the couch and eat Doritos all day (just kidding).” Clint responded with three emojis of that little smiley face laughing so hard tears are coming from its eyes. And then I had this epiphany: I wrote, “Clint: you could do gluttony this Sunday and sloth the following Sunday. I’ve been thinking about gluttony as an inability to say no and sloth as an inability to say yes.” There was a pause and then Clint replied, “Interesting. I may do exactly this. Thx, Pastor.”

I had been thinking about it. I had been thinking about it that very morning. But until I replied to Clint’s text I don’t think I had put it in those words: gluttony as an inability to say no and sloth as an inability to say yes. And that just opens it up, doesn’t it? Because while gluttony could still refer to one’s inability to say no to dessert it could also refer to one’s inability to say no to heroin.

I’ve been haunted for years by a poem that begins with these words:

*Chinese addicts say*
*Your heart begs you to stay away*
*Even while your legs are carrying you back.*

The poem is about heroin addiction, but it could be almost any kind of addiction, couldn’t it, including an addiction to food? “Your heart begs you to stay away even while your legs are carrying you back.” You know it’s not good for you, you know you shouldn’t do it, and yet, as you sit there at the all-you-can-eat buffet, there is some part of you that knows you’re going to do it anyway. You feel helpless in the grip of a power stronger than you are. What is the first step of the 12-step program used by Alcoholics
Anonymous? “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.” What does Paul say, in Romans 7:15? “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” If you have ever known that feeling, if any addiction has ever held you powerless in its grip, then you know something about the sin the medieval church called Gluttony.

I found an article on the WebMD website (the one you should never go to if you have a cold, because once you type in your symptoms it will convince you that you are terminally ill). But this article asked, “Could you be hooked?” and then listed “10 Surprising Addictions” beginning with your smartphone. “You can't quit it, can you?” the website asks. “You keep it with you all the time and check it every few minutes. You work too much because you can't turn it off on the weekend. You ignore the people you're having dinner with to catch a text or a post from someone miles away.” Those are the symptoms; what’s the cure? It shouldn’t surprise you that the WebMD website tells you to, “Get help from a doctor!”

Surprising addiction number two is caffeine: “Do you need your morning jolt of caffeine?” the website asks. “That’s not necessarily an addiction, but trying to cut it out of your life may leave you anxious for a fix and nursing a serious headache. That's called withdrawal.” The list goes on: chocolate and other sweets; shopping; gambling; plastic surgery; tanning (the kind you do at the beach, not the kind you do with deer hides); exercise; social media; and sex. Some of those things sound harmless enough: others don’t. But if “your heart has ever begged you to stay away even while your legs are carrying you back” you have known the power of addiction. The end of that poem I quoted earlier says the days and nights begin to run together for the addict in an endless
cycle of using heroin, begging for money to buy more, getting the money, buying the heroin, using it, and begging for money to buy more, until the addict wakes up one morning to all she’s lost:

    her happiness,
    her younger years,
    the child she might have had.

You can see why this sin is so deadly.

But it’s not the only one we’re talking about today. We’re also talking about the sin of Sloth which I have defined as an inability to say yes. In a blog post from 2018 Anne Stych writes: “Can’t seem to turn off Netflix and get off the couch? It’s not that you’re lazy. It’s just that your brain doesn’t want you to. A study by a researcher at the University of British Columbia showed that your brain has evolved to keep you sedentary to conserve energy. ‘It’s minimizing energy costs,’ he said. ‘This minimization was useful during evolution because it provided us an advantage for survival.’ In other words, when you have every intention to go to the gym, your brain is working against you, and you have to fight hard to follow through on your good intentions. So you're not lazy, just highly evolved.” ii We love those kinds of conclusions, don’t we? The ones that tell us it’s OK to stay on the couch?

But often it’s not OK.

At one of my churches there was a woman who just couldn’t seem to get motivated. She sat in my study one day telling me how the laundry was piling up at home and the kids toys were all over the floor. It wasn’t the first time we had talked about this. In fact, she seemed to want to come by every week and tell me how she had done almost nothing the week before. I finally got tired of it and said, “Look, here’s what.
I want you to do: I want you to get up, go home, and put a load of laundry in the washing machine. As soon as it’s in there you call me and let me know, OK?” “OK!” she said, bouncing out of her chair. She gave me a high five and practically ran out the door. She lived a mile away from the church, but an hour later she hadn’t called, and four hours later she still hadn’t. So, I called her. I think I woke her up. I said, “How’s the laundry coming along?” and she yawned and said, “You know, I got home and thought maybe I would take a quick nap before I started the laundry. What time is it?” I realized in that moment that it wasn’t a matter of wanting to do the right thing, it was a matter of not being able to do it.

That’s the sin of Sloth (or in her case the sickness), and if you don’t think it’s deadly ask that woman now how it affected her life, her marriage, her family. Ask her what she would have given in those days for the ability to get up off the couch and do the laundry. Ask her what she would give for it now. Sloth affects all of us from time to time. How many times have you had every good intention of doing something but didn’t, or couldn’t, for one reason or another? How many times have you sighed and said, “I probably should…,” or, “I really ought to…,” and then didn’t? How many times have you felt a sudden surge of motivation and said, “I’m going to fix that leaky faucet! I’m going to write a letter to my mother!” and then didn’t follow through? In other words, how many good deeds have gone undone because we couldn’t seem to make ourselves do them? And how have our lives been affected, not so much because we did all those bad things, but because we didn’t do all those good ones? How has the world been affected? Some people define Sloth as apathy: when you just don’t care. How might the world be different if people of good will, like ourselves, had cared enough to do something about
slavery, poverty, racism, and inequality? If you have ever committed a sin of omission, you have committed the sin of Sloth.

Is there any cure? Well, maybe. And maybe the cure is Lent (not the kind you find in your dryer but the kind we find on the Christian calendar). Today is Transfiguration Sunday, when we find Jesus standing on the mountaintop, his face shining like the sun. But three days from now we will be plunged into the darkness of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent. Frederick Buechner explains it like this: “After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.”iii Like Jesus, we sometimes do that by wrestling with temptation, and, like him, we hope to emerge from the wilderness victorious.

I watched a television show once—a comedy—where a woman had been forced to turn a heavy crank day after day after day. When someone asked her how she did it she smiled and said, “Well, I decided I can do anything for ten seconds. So, I turned the crank for ten seconds, and then I turned it for ten seconds more, and then I turned it for ten seconds more.” What she meant is that we can take almost anything in small doses. I wonder if the forty days of Lent could be considered a small dose. I wonder if we could do almost anything for such a short time. I wonder if there are some things we could stop doing.

Let’s say that you are battling an addiction, whatever it might be. Do you think you could give it up for ten seconds, or ten hours, or ten days? Do you think you could give it up for the full forty days of Lent? You might need some help. The people I know
who are in Alcoholics Anonymous tell me that they are still alcoholics even though some of them haven’t had a drink in twenty or thirty years. They take it one day at a time, and at their meetings they cheer for those people who have achieved one day of sobriety as well as those who have been sober for years. That kind of support makes a difference, and that’s why it has been replicated by so many other groups like Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and Sex Addicts Anonymous. If you need help getting over your addiction, there is almost certainly a group for you. Or you can do what the WebMD website suggests: you can see a doctor. You can see a counselor. If you’re addicted to pornography you can download software that will block adult websites. If you’re addicted to Internet gaming (something I know almost nothing about) you can unplug your router and put it in the freezer until Lent is over. Help is available for almost every addiction. What if you used the Season of Lent as the push you needed to take that first step, to make that first phone call, to attend that first meeting?

Or let’s say it’s not something you need to stop, but something you need to start. Could the Season of Lent be the push you need to get up off the couch and begin? At my daughter’s church in Savannah the rector used to encourage his congregation to try “Worship Plus One.” The people he was talking to had already made a good start. They had already gotten up off the couch and come to worship. But he wanted them to try one other thing the church offered, whether it be the Wednesday night fellowship meal or some kind of weekend service project. Could I do the same for you? You’ve already made it to worship this morning. Good for you! But during the Season of Lent could you add one other thing? And could I make a suggestion?
Steve Booth tells me that our Lenten small groups meeting across the city are almost full, but we still have room for 25 people. What if you were one of those 25? What if you made up your mind today that you were going to get up off the couch and go to a Lenten small group? What if you got up off your pew at the end of the service and walked down this aisle? It would be a beautiful thing to see, wouldn’t it? Twenty five people coming down the aisle because they were determined to do something rather than nothing?

You don’t have to do it that way, of course. You can just go out in the hallway after worship and sign up like everyone else. And you don’t have to come down the aisle if you have decided to join a recovery group. You can just make a phone call this afternoon. But wouldn’t it be a beautiful thing to see everyone who decided to stop something or start something during the Season of Lent coming down the aisle this morning to make that decision public? It might also help. Because then, when we saw each other in the hallway, we could ask, “How’s it going?” If it was going well we could clap our hands together in celebration, and if it wasn’t we could put our hands together in prayer. We could support each other, we could encourage each other, we could take this Lenten journey together. We might even come out of the wilderness cured, cured!

Of the Seven Deadly Sins.

—Jim Somerville © 2020

1 “Digging,” by Sam Willetts (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/53290/digging-56d232741ea0c)
2 Anne Styh, “Can’t Get Off the Couch? Blame Your Brain,” Bizwomen, September 25, 2018
3 Frederick Buechner, “Lent,” from Whistling in the Dark.
4 https://www.covenanteyes.com/