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An Invitation to Abundant Living

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Philippians 4:1-9

It is great to be with you today! One of the readings from the lectionary is from Philippians 4 which we heard read today. This is a familiar and popular text often heard at Thanksgiving. It would have been an appropriate reading for last week when you also dedicated the chancel and new stain glass window. It was indeed a time to give thanks and rejoice in the Lord.

Well, today, on an “ordinary” Sunday we have this text before us. I wonder what might the Spirit be saying to us today? After the feast days are over do you ever notice that there is a lull and days are quieter. We can’t blame the turkey and all the carbs, but we may be feeling bit flat, a bit disconnected or restless. On ordinary days we can experience apathy or a lack of care that can prevent us from living a full and abundant life.

In the early church the Desert monastics spoke of a condition called “acedia” (ἀκηδία) and it was akin to sloth or laziness. It was also known as the noon day demon or the eighth deadliest sin. Acedia has been described as listlessness and hopelessness, negligence and numbness, restlessness and weariness, or the state of being unable to perform one’s duties in life. It may sound like depression but is spiritual not clinical.

Acedia can take two opposing forms: despairing resignation or desperate escapism. It can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity.

In the 14th century, Chaucer writing about the parson in *The Canterbury Tales* said “a great heart is needed against acedia, lest it swallow up the soul.” For Chaucer stability of purpose and a steadfast faith could help combat acedia.

Evagrius who lived in Asia Minor and died in 399 is one of the first writers to address the subject of acedia. Living in solitude he came to know the temptations of acedia. He said acedia would often appear at the time of day when the sun was at its hottest. Evagrius noticed that at noon it was hard for monks to concentrate on prayers or the reading of scripture, and often this was the time when the mind would wander.

Acedia would distract a monk and lead him to desire other things or think negative thoughts. If a monk was struggling with acedia you can see how adoration of God was not the foremost thought.

Evagrius encouraged the novice, pilgrim, and the disciple of Jesus to be attentive to feelings of acedia. He knew people can easily run from reality and be lured into a land of fantasy. Living in the 4th century, Evagrius could not imagine our post-modern world with all the cyber distractions we face, but he was aware of the human condition.

The distractions we encounter involve the busyness of texting while walking, sending emails during meetings, chatting on the phone while cooking dinner. Today don’t you find it a luxury to be doing just one thing at a time?

The Noon Day Devil likes to fool us into thinking that multi-tasking is more productive, that it saves time and is stress free. We fail to notice that by responding to unnecessary interruptions we do deplete our good energy. The Noon Day Devil may also convince us to skip regular breaks in the day or forfeit a time of relaxation, recreation and prayer.

The Noon Day Devil can also lead us down the slippery slope of mental distractions. Have you

ever found yourself full of dread and anxiety imagining the worse, or dwelling in a world of hasty judgments and harsh comparisons, or surrounded by negative self-talk unable to silence that inner critic?

At noon we don't see our shadow.

When I think of acedia as the Noon Day Devil I imagine a creature or trickster who is lurking around, unnoticed, and out of sight.

The gift of the Noon Day Devil is when we catch sight of it in the broad daylight, or in a mirror, and come to the realization that we have not been living at our best. If we can be awakened to the fact we have been sitting on the couch too long or we have been too busy to spend quality time with those we love, we can name the discontentment or dissatisfaction that is stirring within us. When we are open and honest, when we acknowledge our weaknesses and the ways we wish to change that is when transformation may begin.

The good news is that the Spirit is here to help us make healthy and wise choices for abundant living. The Spirit is here to support us:

- as we re-evaluate our priorities and reschedule our time appropriately
- as we sign up for that class
- As we complete an action or project we have always wanted to do
- as we make room to enjoy regular Sabbath time including a Cyber- Sabbath... or
- as we follow through taking *all* of our holidays for the year.

The recognition of acedia offers us an invitation to change and grow and it can affect the community in a positive way.

If acedia is a lack of care or an absence of intentionality, then someone is left lacking, an elderly person may be unattended, a hungry person goes unfed, a grieving person is not comforted, a lonely person becomes more isolated. When we acknowledge acedia in us, we may choose what is beautiful and good. When we are open to the transforming love of God in our lives, people may see the image of God in us and through us may experience the love of God in their own hearts.

What is the remedy for acedia?

The Apostle Paul tells us a joyful and grateful heart.

In Philippians we read:

4 Rejoice^{*} in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.^{*} 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle continues and encourages us to be discerning in the choices we make and in our thinking.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

In Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi, the apostle is encouraging followers of Jesus to practice discernment and learn to recognize right from wrong. He is encouraging followers in the early church to live wisely and thoughtfully so that they may grow in knowledge and maturity of faith.

In a sense, this text challenges us in the way we talk to ourselves and invites us to be aware and mindful of the ways we interpret the things that are happening around us. I think the text encourages us to find God in the ordinary, to find joy in our regular routines, and to make choices in our daily walk that lead to peace.

Practicing gratitude in all circumstances means to learn the discipline of sifting through our thoughts, looking for the good, acknowledging the presence of God in our life, and setting aside the distractions caused by the chaos of the world. By practicing prayer and seeking to live in the present moment, we can find abundant life and the path of peace.

Recall if you will the fictional character, Peter Pan, created by novelist and playwright J. M. Barrie. Peter is a free spirited young boy who lives in Neverland; he can fly and never grows old. There is a famous scene, when Peter is in the children's bedroom. They have seen him fly and they desire to fly too. They have tried it from the floor and they have tried it from the beds and the result is failure.

"How do you do it?" John asked.

And Peter answered: "You just think lovely, wonderful thoughts and they lift you up in the air."

Now this story may seem a little trite/sentimental, but it contains a measure of truth. The way we can defeat negative thoughts and overcome acedia is to learn to think differently and not resist or fear the transforming ways of God's love. The Apostle tells us to be intentional about focusing our minds and to have a heart that is continually grateful.

In Travelling Mercies, Anne Lamott recounts the words of a wise old woman at her church who told her that "the secret is that God loves us *exactly* the way we are... *and* that he loves us too much to let us stay like this."

When we suffer from acedia, we may not want to change and would rather just stay the way we are. Yet to experience abundant living, something must die in order for the new self to be born, even if it is the old self to which we are very attached.

Kathleen Norris, essayist, poet, and author of "The Cloister Walk" and "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography" dedicated a whole book to this topic and called it, "Acedia and me." She struggled with acedia. When she detected it was beginning in herself, she would try to head it off by remembering the pain it would bring if unattended. She knew *from* acedia is born idleness, rudeness, restlessness, and instability of mind and body.

She writes, “If I allow myself to reach this stage I will be a distracted tourist rather than a pilgrim, and am likely to turn away from the very things that might bring me to my senses.”

What is the way *from* acedia, we may ask?

Kathaleen Norris encourages us to be accountable. She writes, “A safeguard against the callousness of acedia is accountability. I try the best I can to be there for my family, friends, and church community, and try not to be too hard on myself when I fail.”

Striving for balance in life can help us be discerning people, keeping a watch on our footing can help us be grounded, knowing where we are rooted in love, we can find strength and stability from the communities to which we belong.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador who was murdered as he celebrated mass was known to say: “Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy. Try it, brothers and sisters; I have tried it many times and in the darkest moments, when slander and persecution were at their worst: to unite myself intimately with Christ, my friend, and to feel a comfort that all the joys of the earth do not give – the joy of feeling yourself close to God, even when humans do not understand you. It is the deepest joy the heart can have.”

When we are equipped with joy we are able to accomplish many tasks that first appeared too difficult or tiresome to be done. With joy we can cope with challenges and difficult people. With joy we are able to endure discomforts or changing circumstances. With joy we can be filled with hope and courage to move forward toward what we most deeply desire.

Listen to a poem by the late John O’Donohue, called *A Morning Offering*, published in his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. It reminds us that we have choices to make each day and asks what is holding us back from fulfilling our heart’s desires. It invites us to love, to make a difference, to contribute and create.

“A Morning Offering”

“I bless the night that nourished my heart To set the
ghosts of longing free
Into the flow and figure of dream That went to
harvest from the dark Bread for the hunger no
one sees.

All that is eternal in me Welcomes the
wonder of this day, The field of
brightness it creates Offering time for
each thing
To arise and illuminate.

I place on the altar of dawn: The
quiet loyalty of breath,
The tent of thought where I shelter, Wave of
desire I am shore to
And all beauty drawn to the eye.

May my mind come alive today To the invisible
geography
That invites me to new frontiers,
To break the dead shell of yesterdays, To risk being
disturbed and changed.

May I have the courage today To live the life
that I would love,
To postpone my dream no longer But do at last what I
came here for
And waste my heart on fear no more.”

To God be the glory! Amen.