

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Spinning Gold Into Straw (and vice versa)

What must I do to inherit eternal life? – Luke 10:25-37

Many of you will know the story of Rumpelstiltskin, the fairy tale recounted by the Brothers Grimm, a horrible story really, about a proud father who boasts that his daughter is such a wonderful fabric artist that she can spin straw into gold, about the greedy king who takes that boast literally and threatens the young woman with death if she doesn't convert a roomful of straw into gold overnight, and a strange little man who appears, and in exchange for gifts and promises, performs the miraculous deed required, saving the woman's life.

But there is a truth to that story: Sometimes life gives us straw, and sometimes it gives us gold. We can take the straw and spin it into gold, or we can take the gold and spin it into straw. Spinning straw into gold is tricky, like magic – you either have the touch or you don't. Spinning gold into straw is much easier.

Kathleen Norris uses the metaphor of spinning gold into straw in her recent book on *acedia*. *Acedia* is a Greek word which means "not caring," a deep lack of care in which we don't even care that we don't care. We take the gold of our life and take it for granted, thinking it doesn't matter – it has become like straw. Like depression, *acedia* sucks the joy out of life. *Acedia* can contribute to depression, but it is a spiritual temptation rather than a medical problem. In lists of the seven deadly sins, it is often given the name of sloth or apathy, cynicism or laziness.

When we read the commandments to love God and our neighbour, when we hear the prophets rail against injustice, when we hear modern prophets condemn social and environmental sins, it isn't enough to know that we should care about such things. If we are afflicted by *acedia*, we may find it hard to care about anything. If we are to love as God would have us love, we must resist the temptation of *acedia* and learn to care again.

Norris remembers first encountering *acedia* when she was fifteen, although she didn't know the word back then. She remembers feeling very acutely the futility of making the bed, because she would just have to do it again. That isn't very unusual for teenagers, except that it wasn't just making the bed that felt futile to her. It was all the routines of life. It was life itself. Our lives are made up of routines. Eating, sleeping, feeding the dog or the cat, doing the little acts that constitute caring for other people – these are all

routines which keep us and others alive and when we stop caring about them, it is a very short step to not caring about anything in life.

Perhaps the best definition of acedia comes from the Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, who once said that to succumb to acedia was to fail in the art of life:

What is it like, this failure in the art of life? It is the failure which manifests itself in a loss of interest in really important things. There is nothing dramatic about it, and thus it works with a dreadful advantage. It creeps up on us and once it has us in its grip, it is hard for us to recognize what ails us. But if your feelings and sensibilities are withering, if your relationships with people near to you are becoming more and more superficial, if you are losing touch, even with yourself, it is acedia which has claimed you for its own. [from a talk by Robertson Davies, "The Deadliest of the Sins", quoted on CBC radio program "Tapestry," August 2, 2009]

In the fourth century, the early Christian monks recognized in themselves the temptation, not only to not care, but to not care whether they cared. They gave this temptation the name acedia, and thought of it as one of the three greatest dangerous thoughts, along with anger and pride. The monks say that acedia is the temptation to doubt that your life has meaning. The abbot of one monastery told Kathleen Norris that every monk experiences acedia. They often come in as novices with romantic notions about monastic life, and at some point they come to him and say, "I'm a fraud, you're all frauds, I have to get out of here, I can't spend the rest of my life doing this." His response, "you don't have to spend the rest of your life doing this. You just have to get through today. Find the good in today." At its heart, acedia is the "rejection of the gift of the present moment," and the way to deal with it is to find ways to appreciate the gift of the present moment, to find ways to appreciate the gifts which are right in front of us:

The danger is not confined to monks and nuns. In the early 20th century, the scientist and author Aldous Huxley claimed that acedia was the primary danger of our age, and Kathleen Norris believes that now is the golden age of acedia, not caring. Not caring about ourselves, about our health, our physical, mental and spiritual well-being, not caring about the people around us and the world around us.

I think that they are right. Acedia is invading every corner of our lives, turning gold into straw. Our lives are dominated by routines, which can become pretty old, pretty fast. We do the same things with the same people over and over: eating breakfast, cleaning, going to work, looking after children and homes and pets; even our most intimate moments can become routine and repetitive. Especially in mid-life, we can be overtaken by acedia and begin to despise our lives, our jobs, our families, our spouses and imagine that we could be happy if only we cast off our current routines and attachments and found something or someone more interesting. But often the problem is not in the job or the routine or the partner. The problem is that we have fallen victim to acedia, and to the sense that our

lives, as they are not worth living. The abbott's advice is good advice. You just have to appreciate one day at a time.

Kathleen Norris cites some research on what helps marriages thrive. These researchers looked at practices, the things that couples do, day by day, week by week, and measured whether, over time, couples that did them survived and thrived. What they found was somewhat surprising. The only thing that seemed to make a notable difference to the health of the marriage was how couples greeted each other and said goodbye, the little routine of the kiss of greeting and saying "I love you" on departure or arrival. What surprised these researchers the most was that it didn't matter at all whether the kiss was sincere or deeply felt. It was the routine that was important, and in particular, the routine of appreciation.

That shouldn't surprise church-goers, because we should know that the things we do repetitively change the way we think. We should know that, but do we? One of the reasons I wanted to talk about *acedia* today is that I have been wondering if communities can suffer from *acedia*. In particular, I have been wondering if our church is suffering from *acedia*. Is there, in this community of faith, a loss of the sense of the importance of what we do together? Have we stopped caring, and stopped caring that we don't care? And if we have stopped caring, then we are violating the greatest commandments to love God and our neighbour. If this is the golden age of *acedia*, it is not surprising that it is spilling over into the church; but it may also be that resistance to *acedia* may be the greatest witness, and the greatest gift that the church can give to our culture.

I am increasingly struck by how common apathy and *acedia* have become in our common life: how many people continue to do things that they know are unhealthy and could even kill them; how common is the intellectual laziness that leads people to settle for black and white answers on issues for which there are many shades of gray, how voters are so easily swayed by racism, scaremongering and fear, how populist politicians exploit people's anger rather than offer serious and reasoned policy proposals. Recent polls show that most Canadians know that climate change is now an emergency that threatens the well-being of our children and grandchildren, but most aren't willing to support any serious action that would cause them inconvenience. Only rampant *acedia*, widespread apathy can explain that. And perhaps it is only the pervasive cynicism bred by rampant *acedia* that can explain the Brexit decision in Britain or the election of Trump in the U.S. This is indeed the golden age of *acedia*. That means that resisting *acedia* may not only help us individually but be what saves the world.

The experience of the monks is that *acedia* is a choice. We have indulged in negative thinking, and we can pull ourselves out of it, not by one-time heroic efforts, but by routines, routines of appreciation, the greeting with a kiss, long walks in nature, the spiritual practices that remind us that this place, this person, this community are the gifts of God, the ones in whom God is pleased to dwell. If *acedia* is the rejection of the gift of

the present moment, then perhaps, practices of appreciation, practices that remind us of the sacred dimension of life, practices that remind us that when we love the concrete people around us, we are also and at the same time, loving God, these practices can help us to cherish the present moment, the present place, the present person, the present community.

Perhaps the story of the miller's daughter spinning straw into gold is about such experiences. We spend our lives trying to spin straw into gold, trying to take the ordinary stuff of our lives and make something beautiful out of them. And sometimes we are lucky and some inspiration comes to us in the dark of night and we are lucky. But sometimes, we are visited too by dark and dangerous thoughts that threaten to turn the golden gift of the present day into straw.

In that story, on the third night, the strange little man who has been the hero of the story, turns suddenly demonic. He demands that in exchange for another night of turning straw into gold, the miller's daughter promise him her firstborn child. She makes the promise; what choice does she have after all, survives the night and ends up married to the king. A year later she gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, and not long after, the strange little man appears to demand she keep the half-forgotten promise. She begs and begs for reprieve, but the mischievous man offers only that if she can guess his name within three nights, that he will spare her child. And so for the next two nights she guesses every name she can think of, and during the day puts the considerable resources of the palace to work trying to come up with his name. Quite by accident, she hears of a strange little man named Rumpelstiltsken, and when that night she guesses that name, guesses correctly, as it happens, Rumpelstiltsken stamps his foot so hard that his leg gets caught in the floor and he tears himself in two pulling it out.

There is an old tradition that a demon only has power over us until we learn its name. When we learn its name, it loses its power. That was the case with Rumpelstiltskin. It may also be the case with Acedia. I hope that by giving a name to the danger of not caring, you will be able to recognize it when it comes to you, to understand what it is, and to choose to resist its power, so that you may cherish the gift of where and who you are, so that you may live out to its fullest measure the commandment to love God and our neighbour.

Let us pray, using the words of Richard of Chichester:
Lord Jesus, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen.