

*Lord and Master of my life!  
take away from me the spirit of sloth,  
faint-heartedness, lust of power, and idle talk.  
But give rather the spirit of chastity,  
humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.  
Yes, O Lord and King!  
Grant me to see my own errors  
and not to judge my brother;  
For thou are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.*

**The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian** takes us back to the *roots* of our Christian heritage—back to the fourth century. I commend it to you as we journey through the wilderness of Lent.

Sloth is one of the seven deadly sins, but it doesn't seem to get much press these days. It sounds like an old-fashioned word that perhaps many of us don't immediately even identify as a sin we ought to be asking God to deliver us from. We feel so busy after all, so over-extended and perhaps exhausted; surely we cannot be guilty of sloth, can we?

But the true meaning of sloth isn't exactly laziness. Literally it means "spiritual or emotional *apathy*" or "*carelessness*." You and I are called to be passionate about our lives for Christ's sake: careful of how we use our time, talent, and treasure as gifts from a generous God. Thomas Aquinas defined sloth as a "sluggishness of mind, which neglects to begin good." That, I think, is a definition many of us can identify with: all of those distractions that keep us from doing the work that God has given us to do. Too often we sit around with John Mayer waiting for the world to change; but Christ is calling us to take up our crosses and to follow him and to *become* the change we wish to see in the world.

Lent simplifies things. We live in a complex world, to be sure; but the core proclamation of the gospel, while no doubt hard to live isn't that hard to understand. *'Tis a gift to be simple*, as the old Shaker song puts it. In that sense, the Torah and the prophets are pretty simple. Quoting from summaries in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Jesus says the whole thing can be summed up in just four words: *Love God, Love neighbor*. Worship that doesn't lead to service is a form of sloth; I think that is what all of the readings appointed for today are about. Now is the acceptable time; now is the time to begin to do the good we can do, the good we are called to do. We don't have all the time in the world on this earth: *remember that you are dust*. It is another variation on sloth to think that we'll deal with the really important stuff in our lives that is both urgent and important next week or next month or next year or a decade from now.

It's interesting to me that, as I read Ephrem's prayer, he is basically identifying faint-heartedness, lust for power, and idle talk as the root causes of sloth. All of them keep us from doing the good that God calls us to do. Sometimes we are just too timid and afraid to act;

sometimes we are too focused on ourselves, and sometimes we are too busy with trivialities. But all of these keep us from keeping first things first, and doing the work God calls us to do.

Ephrem prays that God would take away sloth, and replace it with *a spirit of chastity*. Our fixation on sex makes us hear that word far too narrowly, as if chastity is only about sexual matters. But in fact, the older meaning of chastity is about purity; I think it is very much connected with those Jesus pronounces as blessed in the Sermon on the Mount: the “pure of heart.” “The essence of chastity,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote “is not the suppression of lust, but the total orientation of one’s life towards a goal.” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*)

Again, if we define chastity in that way we begin to see that Ephrem’s prayer isn’t a quaint relic from the past. What he is praying for goes to the very heart of what repentance is about: not paralyzing guilt but a change of heart, a re-orienting of our lives toward God. Only in our turning and returning to God are we able to discover (or re-discover) our true calling. As we move from sloth toward chastity—or we might say from apathy toward a more purpose-driven life—we begin to claim the gifts that this Lenten season offers.

What are the marks of a chaste life? Ephrem asks for humility, patience, and love. Humility begins with the awareness that we are dust: to be human is to be formed of the *humus* of this good earth. We are creatures and not the Creator. Rightly understood this serves as a reminder that we cannot do it all and we aren’t asked to! It is the height of arrogance to think it is our job to bring peace on earth and good will to all; that job is already taken! We are dust, and God knows that about us even when we forget it. But it is our job to bring peace and good will to our own homes and neighborhoods and parish church. It is our job, with all humility, to do what we can.

There is no shame in being dust; we are dust of the earth that has been formed into God’s own image and we carry within us the very breath of God. So Lent calls us back into our bodies, back to the goal of living as children of God in order to focus on our true purpose and mission with patience and love. The good news of Lent is that humility, patience and love trump faint-heartedness, lust for power, and idle chit-chat. The good news of Lent is that we are made for chaste living, not sloth.

*Because we cannot do everything we must do something.* Like good old Johnny Appleseed, our work is to plant seeds knowing full well that we may not live long enough to enjoy the fruit that grows from the seeds we plant. We plant the seeds of peace and justice nonetheless, in hope that our children and children’s children will reap what we have sown. All of this is simply to say that we do well to take the long-view.

So Ephrem prays that God would take away a spirit of sloth and give a spirit of chastity. But there is one more petition in this Lenten prayer. He reminds us that we aren’t called to confess other people’s sins in Lent, but to look in the mirror and make our own spiritual inventory. Lent is a gift because it gives us an opportunity to work on our own stuff, with God’s help, and to ask for the help and support of the community along the way.

Sometimes it is easy to know our sins but sometimes we are blind to the hurts we cause. I think this is because we know our own motivations and rarely do most of us mean to cause harm. But it is naïve to think that we don't. If someone hurts us very badly it is all too easy to attribute the worst of motivations to that person: clearly they acted to cause pain, we think; when in reality they may well have acted out of their own pain. That is not to excuse them; it is simply to say that holding people accountable for their actions and presuming to understand the motivations behind those actions are two different things.

But sometimes we do just the reverse with our own actions. We didn't mean it; we're sorry if someone was hurt by what we said or did or didn't say or didn't do but clearly that wasn't our intent so they should just get over it! If we aren't careful we *maximize* the sins of others and *minimize* the sins we commit. I think that Jesus in his humorous but insightful way is saying just that when he says that we spend way too much energy finding the splinter in someone else's eye when there is a beam in our own. So Ephrem prays simply that God would help him to see his own mistakes rightly, and not to be so hard on others.

It seems to me that if we can make this prayer our own for the next forty days this will be a holy-enough Lent. Less apathy and more of a sense of purpose. More energy on getting our own act together and less energy wasted on trying to fix others. All with God's help.