



SUNNYVALE

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From the Pulpit

Sermon Series ~ *The 7 Lively Virtues*
Sermon ~ *Renewal: Catching Your Second Wind*
The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ June 12, 2011

Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

Ezekiel 37:1-10

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

In the history of Christian spirituality both scholars and saints have spent a lot of time reflecting on those things that degrade our faith and diminish our souls. In their desire to know God they have identified a list of several perils and pitfalls that can hinder healthy spirituality. Over time that list has been refined into what has become known as the 7 deadly sins: pride, sloth, lust, gluttony, greed, envy and anger – things that can wreck our faith and ruin our souls.

I thought this spring and summer we might look at these *but* rather than focus on what *hurts* our relationship with God I wanted to take this list and turn it upside down and reflect on what *helps*. Right? I mean rather than look at the negative let's look at the positive! Rather than focus on the don'ts let's explore what we can "*do*" to strengthen our faith and grow in our relationship with God. So... last week I began a series, *not* on the 7 deadly sins, but on what I'm calling the 7 *Lively Virtues*. It's a list I've just made up on my own after reflecting on what would be the positive, upside counterpart to the deadly sins.

Last Sunday I suggested that the antidote to pride (which is really just self-centric living) the antidote to pride is worship. Worship recalibrates life so that we are centered on God not ourselves. This week I want to look at what would be the opposite of the second deadly sin, sloth.

Now a lot of people hear the word sloth and they think of that odd animal that I actually saw hanging from the rafters at a rustic lodge I stayed at in Costa Rica. This place was deep in the forest and had no electricity and I remember coming around the corner one afternoon and seeing this guy (picture of a sloth). He wasn't alarmed at all by my presence – he had no reaction to my walking up close to him and taking his picture – other than to give me this lovely smile. But he didn't move. If one definition of sloth is something that is slow and sluggish then this guy is aptly named. In fact you see the green on his back? That's algae; that's mildew – it's like moss! You know the phrase, "a rolling stone gathers no moss"? well this guy gathered a lot of moss because he was not rolling at all, in fact he wasn't even moving (pictures end).

When the desert fathers spoke of sloth as one of the deadly sins they certainly weren't talking about this gentle creature. Nor were they talking about laziness or being a couch potato. We may well have an obesity problem in our country from too little exercise and too much sitting in front of monitors and screens and game consoles... but that's not what they were talking about. When they spoke of sloth they were talking about a malaise of spirit, a listlessness of soul – they were talking about spiritual lethargy

Have you ever felt like that spiritually? Have you ever felt that your faith is bogging down, your spiritual life is flagging and the climate of your soul seems arid and barren? Have you ever felt like you *knew* there was a God but you didn't feel like you knew that God, personally? Have you ever felt like your prayers just bounce off the ceiling, like your heart is hardened to God's love, that your spirituality is as flat as a soda left open on the counter for 3 days? Yeah, me too.

Actually the writers on the spiritual life often used a different word for sloth to avoid the misconceptions we may have about it. They would sometimes use the word *acedia* which literally means "without care". Sometimes God can seem so far off and our spiritual life seem so dry and lifeless that we give up hope, despair of change and no longer care. That's *acedia*.

Acedia is that spiritual lethargy that lets us sit untouched on the sidelines of grace -- that hangs around unaffected on the peripheries of God's presence -- that takes up residence in the vicinity of the divine power -- and yet which resists the transforming touch of God in our lives.

The opposite of sloth – the opposite of *acedia* – is renewal. When spirituality gets bogged down so that our hearts feel distant from God and we feel like there's no hope of change

and so we just don't care... then we need renewal: life-giving, verdant and refreshing, gushing up like a clear and flowing spring... our hearts long to be renewed by the life and love of God.

And renewal is what God is always about when God moves towards us in grace. God knows us! God knows our hearts can grow cold, our faith can falter and our souls become dry. And rather than punish us for that – rather than look at us with disappointed eyes and turn away from us in exasperation – God sends us the Holy Spirit for our renewal.

On this Pentecost Sunday we are grateful for the gifts God has given to each one of us and how we use those gifts in the service of Christ. On this Pentecost Sunday we are grateful that it is the birthday of the church and, for all of its shortcomings, that the church is that community of faith that tries to make God's love real in the world.

But on this Pentecost Sunday we are *most* grateful for the fact that God has not left us alone; that God does not expect us to grow in faith all on our own – that God is not waiting for us to prove we are worthy and demonstrate we are holy. Pentecost means that God knows we need help. Pentecost means renewal! If your faith feels dead and your spirit feels dry and your soul seems arid... all that can change because God makes available to us resources outside and beyond ourselves so that we can be renewed and find a new joy in our faith!

Ezekiel writes at a time in the history of the people of God when they felt forsaken and hopeless. They have been carried off into exile in Babylon. To them it felt like God had failed to protect and provide for them. They were far from the place and the time when their faith was alive. They are cut off from their center of worship and they languish in a place of bondage. Ezekiel is given a vision that captures the essence of the peoples' spiritual experience – that captures the climate and condition of their souls: it's a valley of dry bones.

In this vision God leads Ezekiel through the valley where the lifeless reality of the bones reflects the condition of the people's spirits. Then God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Which must have been exactly the question Ezekiel was asking himself: *can* these bones live? It's a question we ask of our own selves and souls when in the doldrums of acedia we wonder if we will ever see the light of God's love again; if our faith will ever again be vital and real –if our spirituality can be renewed and the laughter of our souls rekindled. Sometimes things seem past hope and beyond help. But what we can't answer, God can accomplish! And so when God asks, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel simply answers: "O Lord God, you know."

And then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones; that is, speak God's word to them. He does and "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling and the bones came together, bone to bone... And there were sinews on them and flesh had come upon them and skin had covered them... *But* there was no breath in them".

Look, one of the foundations of spiritual renewal is God's word – the word preached that we hear in worship; the word that we discuss together in Bible studies – the word that we read in our daily devotions –God's word is key. But the word apart from the Spirit is simply lifeless letters. The first part of Ezekiel's ministry in the midst of the Valley of dry bones is impressive: the bones are brought together; sinews connect them to one another; flesh and skin cover them – all these things could be symbols of the church and its ministry. The bones are the structure and the foundation of its organization. The sinews are the people and their giftedness who give of themselves and of their time to accomplish the work. The flesh and the skin are the programs and ministries of our church that become the physical face – the external presentation of our ministry... But it's not enough. It's not enough! There needs to be breath. There needs to be Spirit. There needs to be renewal that comes to us from outside of ourselves.

And so God says to Ezekiel prophesy to the breath and call the wind of the Spirit from the four corners of the earth that they may fill the lifeless bodies and bring them renewal. In our Protestant individualism we can read this text as the renewal that the Spirit does in our own hearts. And it's true; God wants to do that in each of our hearts and souls today. But this is not just a passage about personal piety or individualistic spirituality. It's also a passage about the people of God – about the community of faith. It's about renewal that comes from the Holy Spirit that breathes into each of us and into all of us and raises us up together: a vast multitude ready to serve God!

Friends, it's Pentecost. What we need in our souls has been promised by God, poured out at Pentecost and is present today. For all the centuries that have passed since that first Pentecost, genuine spirituality is still not something that can be muscled out by self-effort alone. If we want to know the reality of God in our lives then we must open ourselves to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. There's no better time and no better promise than that God will come to each of us *and all* of us and fill us with the Holy Spirit and make us new. Alleluia, Amen!