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'Demon' slayer

San Diego's John N. Blackwell battles sloth, a deadly sin that's worse than you think

Reviewed by Karen Clark Ristine
May 16, 2004

Committed any deadly sins lately? Gluttony? Lust? Avarice? Pride? Envy? Wrath?

For most, the answer is probably yes to all of the above.

But what about sloth?

Of the deadly sins first identified by a 4th-century monk and later modified by a 6th-century pope, sloth might be the one transgression most people think they can easily dismiss. God only knows how busy we are. In the lives of most 21st-century Americans, there's hardly time for leisure, much less sloth.

Author John Blackwell would have us think again. And again and again.

Sloth, he asserts, is not inaction; it is indifference. And serious self-reflection is its antidote. If we become so busy, so preoccupied with the deadlines and routines of daily living that there is no time for reflection, we risk becoming indifferent both to good and evil.

The Noonday Demon: Recognizing and Conquering the Deadly Sin of Sloth

John N. Blackwell
Crossroad Publishing,
165 pages, \$16.95

"The Noonday Demon" is the first in Blackwell's series of books on the seven deadlies for Crossroad Publishing. He argues that our busy lives can be incubators for slothful attitudes that threaten to poison the rest of our being.

"By sloth, I do not mean laziness," Blackwell explains. "Sloth is not the ability to relax – the enjoyment of relaxation is not deadly."

Instead, he sees sloth as "willful oblivion to goodness, human

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dignity and the preciousness of life." It is, he says, a militant and joyless indifference. "Sloth involves ignoring what is good, true and beautiful. It includes apathy toward others – their dignity, their circumstances, and their feelings. And it includes joylessness, even in the face of extraordinary goodness and love."

At their most deadly, he asserts, apathy and indifference are at the root of some of humanity's most violent behavior, from school shootings and stalking roadway snipers to terrorist acts by forces both domestic (Timothy McVeigh) and foreign (Al-Qaeda).

Sloth "does not make violence inevitable, but it creates conditions that may lead to violence," Blackwell writes.

But where do the rest of us come in? Absent homicidal tendencies, why worry about sloth?

Blackwell, an associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in San Diego, advocates self-reflection – a regular and meaningful look at our lives and our relationship to God, to the world and to people around us. Self-reflection offers a way to be ever vigilant against indifference to the consequences of our daily actions.

Sloth is a popular literary topic this year. In July, Oxford University Press will release Wendy Wasserstein's take on sloth as the fifth in its series on the deadly sins, each by a different author.

In "The Noonday Demon," Blackwell makes his case in a series of self-contained essays on topics ancient and modern, using both biblical and literary references, telling the stories of everyday people who live good lives and reminding readers of well-known evildoers whose sloth became deadly.

Blackwell tells his own story, too. Most of the essays contain observations on his slothful behavior and attempts to overcome it. He writes with courageous candor about his own battles with sloth and his refuge in reflection. At times, these examples and attempts to neatly work the subject of sloth into otherwise independent essays feel forced. And it does raise the question of whether he can (or should) be so candid when he writes about lust and pride. But, overall, the essays provide fodder for reflection, and that seems to be Blackwell's goal.

"The Noonday Demon" is as much a primer on soul searching as it is a cautionary tale about the deadly sin of sloth.

■ Karen Clark Ristine is a Union-Tribune assistant metro editor.

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