We are in a sermon series on the seven deadly sins and seven lively virtues. Last week, Pete addressed the topics of sloth and diligence, which we will do again today. I was thinking about Pete’s sermon on Monday as I drove to work, when I heard an interview on NPR with Jonathan Franklin, the author of *33 Men: Inside the Miraculous Survival and Dramatic Rescue of the Chilean Minors*. It’s been a year since their rescue, and the interview drove home the danger of sloth and the importance of diligence.

Franklin shared how well the men coped at first, because they were diligent to exercise, work together and cultivate community. But the turning point was when a TV was provided, connecting them to the outside world and causing their community to begin to disintegrate. They began to argue more, especially about what channel they would watch, and became discontent—so much so that they would send back desserts that were not hot enough to suit them. The TV proved a distraction that pulled them away from the attitudes and actions that were needed for their life at that moment. If that was true for them, how true is it for the average American, who watches over four hours of TV a day.

Franklin also mentioned that 32 of the 33 men were suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Who wouldn’t? But there was one who didn’t. Who and why? It was the preacher, whose unending faith gave him the resources to deal with this crisis and enabled him to escape the lasting effects that the others suffered. Wow! Now that’s a witness for the importance of diligence in giving ourselves over to the inner work of transformation to ensure that we are ready to meet the everyday challenges as well as the catastrophes of life.

Our passage for today is about Samson, a man like no one else in the Bible—lauded for his extraordinary physical strength, given by God. He was able to do astounding feats such as killing a lion. Samson was a judge of Israel. He wasn’t a legal judge as in our day but a warrior-ruler who led Israel in fighting oppressive enemies and maintaining religious life.

Samson’s story is both amazing and disturbing. He had the opportunity to use his God-given strength to lead the
As strong as Samson was physically, he was weak morally and spiritually. And so he is an appropriate example of sloth.

Israelites out of bondage to the Philistines, but he didn’t. He could have led them spiritually as well, but he didn’t. As strong as Samson was physically, he was weak morally and spiritually. And so he is an appropriate example of sloth. Let’s look at why that is so.

Samson was set apart by God from birth to be a Nazirite, which meant there were certain vows he was to keep as a sign of his commitment and reliance on God. He broke all of them, including touching a dead carcass, drinking wine and cutting his hair.

Samson also exhibits sloth because he allowed his sensual appetites to control his actions again and again and again. He went against Mosaic law by demanding a pagan woman from outside Israel for a wife, visiting a prostitute and allowing his passion for Delilah to put him into the hands of the Philistines.

Let’s look specifically at our passage for today. It’s easy to focus on Samson’s hair being cut off. So, he went from looking like Fabio to Howie—what’s the big deal? Now listen to me. The story is not about Samson’s external appearance. The hair cut is a symptom of a much bigger and deeper problem. The point of the story is Samson’s lack of character and commitment to his vow to God. He lacked the virtue of diligence and failed in the role and responsibility that were entrusted to him as a leader of God’s people.

The story of Samson and Delilah is infamous and exemplifies Samson’s sloth. Delilah clearly was not a good choice for a wife, which is evidenced by her willingness to so easily sell him out. And she is relentless in persisting in getting what she wants. And because of his inner moral and spiritual weakness, Samson succumbs to the outer pressures to tell the secret of his strength. The text says in verse 16, “Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. So he told her his whole secret.” For Samson, it’s just too hard, too demanding to resist and stay faithful. Being slothful was easier than being diligent.

The irony is that Samson’s sloth turns out to literally be a deadly sin. His hair is cut off. Samson is at first figuratively blind to his slothfulness and then to the reality that the Lord had left him and that his strength had left him, too. But this figurative blindness is made literal and physical as the Philistines capture him and “gouge out his eyes.” It’s really quite a gruesome scene. And while the enemy is real and horrible, what we are left to ponder is Samson’s sloth that got him into this horrible predicament. Because Samson failed to attend to being transformed internally, his life is
... but one of the most deadly aspects about the sin of sloth is that most of us probably don’t think we’re guilty of it.

Later in the passage, his hair grows back and he gains strength and causes the pillars of the temple of Dagon to collapse, resulting in the death of many Philistines. He is portrayed as a hero in children’s Bibles, because he wins the Lord’s victory in the cosmic battle against Dagon, the pagan god of the Philistines. But Samson remains a tragic figure because his motivation is personal revenge. He remains spiritually blind to the larger significance of his mission as an agent of God’s deliverance for the people of Israel. Samson remains slothful, because he doesn’t get that it’s not about him; it’s about God’s Big Story of redemption and his part in it.

A few weeks ago, while preaching on lust, Pete mentioned three well-known political figures. While these men were certainly guilty of lust, they were also guilty of sloth. They could be viewed as modern-day Samsons. They were given power, position and opportunity to lead and to serve in public office, but, sadly, they neglected the inner quality of cultivating character, integrity and holiness. In the end, their sloth proved deadly—not only for their political careers but for their most important relationships—and who knows what else.

Most of us wouldn’t put ourselves in the same category as these men, but one of the most deadly aspects about the sin of sloth is that most of us probably don’t think we’re guilty of it. As Northern Virginians, we are not lazy people. We are busy people doing good and important things, as Sally Mitchell described in her Witness.

In his book *Leading with a Limp*, Dan Allendar writes, “Being busy seems like the polar opposite of laziness, but a busy person is not so much active as lost. A lazy person does little to nothing while a busy person does almost everything, but the similarity is that both refuse to be intentional. Busyness is the moral equivalent of laziness…. In our culture and day, the benefits of greater reflection, wisdom, and excellence that increase well-being and longevity don’t seem as valuable as frenetic movement does. Our use of noise illustrates this truth: we hate the quiet, so we turn on the radio or CD player as soon as we get in the car. We surround ourselves with noise and busyness so we don’t have to look at the monotonous trap we have created for ourselves. We do so to avoid facing disillusionment.”

It is possible to be very active and busy and at the same time be slothful. Laziness is not doing anything, while sloth is
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not doing what is needed. We
can be very busy but fail to do
the right thing. The title of this
sermon is “Just Do It.” Nike’s
logo may urge us to just do
something, probably something
physical. What I mean is some-
thing different. We are not to
do just anything. We are to do
IT—the right thing.

What is IT? you may ask. The IT is connected to the big
questions of life: What is my
purpose? Why am I here? Jesus
made that very clear in The
Great Commandment: “You
shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and with all
your soul, and with all your
mind.” This is the greatest and
first commandment. And a
second is like it: “You shall
love your neighbor as yourself”

Jesus also clarified our pur-
pose in giving us The Great
Commission: “All authority in
heaven and on earth has been
given to me. Go therefore and
make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of
the Father and of the Son and
of the Holy Spirit, and teaching
them to obey everything that I
have commanded you. And
remember, I am with you
always, to the end of the age”
(Matthew 28:18-20).

So, are you doing IT? We
need to honestly look at our
lives to assess if we are loving
the Lord, loving the people and
making disciples. If we are so
busy with tasks, responsibili-
ties, achievements and accomp-
ishments that we are not
diligently fulfilling God’s
purposes for us and for His
world, then we are guilty of the
sin of sloth because we are not
doing it.

Discipleship is the primary
IT. In the words of Dallas
Willard, “Discipleship is
learning to live my life as Jesus
would live it if he were me.”
Nobody can do that for you or
for me. IT—discipleship—is
my responsibility, and I must
be both diligent and intentional
in following Jesus.

On vacation, I finished
reading Invitations from God
by Adele Calhoun, who will be
coming to lead our women’s
retreat this fall. There was an
incredible paragraph in the
introduction that speaks to sloth
and diligence. She writes. “In
our culture, the more invita-
tions that come our way, the
more valuable we are
considered to be.... By saying
yes to the invitations, we prove
that we are important, wanted
and—of course—busy. The
truth, however, is that when we
say yes to invitations that keep
us compulsively busy, we may
be exhibiting a lazy ambiva-
Ience that actually keeps us
distracted from the invitations
that matter most. Squeezing
every margin to the max, we
are left with less time and space
to respond to the invitations
from God. We want to enjoy
life, but ironically our many
yeses to invitations keep us
stressed, drained and inattentive.
Diligence reflects the intention of living faithfully our true identity as disciples or followers of Christ.

to the divine invitations that bring real freedom and belonging.

“God’s invitations are meant to mend, shape, anchor and grow us into the character of Jesus. They call us into our true selves in Christ. They free us from the lie that says, ‘The more invitations the better.’ Invitations from the Holy One serve God’s dream for the world. They don’t call me to become what I produce, what others think of me or what I know. They invite me to be free. And freedom comes from being an intentional follower of Jesus—one who is a little Christ in this world.”

Slothfulness can be seen in an unintentional driveness to do more to achieve and succeed. Like Samson, we may have lost our inner strength. Diligence reflects the intention of living faithfully our true identity as disciples or followers of Christ.

I recently watched the movie Ray, about the life of singer/songwriter Ray Charles. His story is like Samson’s in that it is both amazing and disturbing. He was a person of incredible talent and ability who overcame many obstacles to achieve fame and wealth, and power through the music industry. But his inner life did not match his outer life, because he was addicted to heroin and women.

The difference between Samson and Ray Charles is the childhood wounds that Ray suffered, including poverty, racism, the tragic death of his younger brother, and going blind at the age of 8. While he may not have had the emotional, social, or spiritual resources to deal with them as a child, he chose as an adult to cover his pain with drugs and women. Spiritual director and writer Richard Rohr says that pain that isn’t transformed is transmitted. That was certainly true of Ray Charles, whose soul, family, career and very life began to collapse until he took responsibility to find healing for his brokenness.

I share this example with you because there are many who cover up pain or fear with addictions of one kind or another—to alcohol, drugs, sex, food, shopping, TV, work, or simply busyness. Friends, we cannot avoid difficulty and pain in life, but many avoid dealing with pain responsibly. And if we don’t allow God to transform our pain, then we are practicing the deadly sin of sloth. Because pain that is not transformed will be transmitted. If there is anything that is getting in the way of your learning to live your life as Jesus would live it if he were you, deal with it. Participating in your healing and transformation is your IT—what God is calling you to.

So, how do we do it? How do we even discern what the IT is? How do I begin to learn how to live my life as Jesus
To live in Christ means spending time with God, getting to know Him and experiencing His love.

would live it if he were me? An important aspect of the spiritual life is to attend to where we are in the journey of faith and to listen to our lives. It takes wisdom and strength to name where we are and to find the resources that are needed to allow God to transform us in doing what ultimately only he can do.

We also need to live within limits. We have to accept that we cannot do everything. We cannot say yes to every invitation. We will have to say no to some people and some opportunities, which will undoubtedly lead to disappointment. But we are called to be intentional and diligent in discerning what IT is that we are called to do—so that we can say yes to God and what He is calling us to. In some ways, that will be very individual, depending on our age, stage of life, stage of faith, availability of time, and so on.

But no matter who we are or where we are in the journey, I believe that as disciples we are called to arrange our lives to live In Christ Together for the World. This phrase may sound familiar to you, because we used it for our sermon series last year, but it is also a good summary of our disciple-making mission. It is the summary of my personal rule of life, which involves the sacred rhythms that enable me to avoid sloth and live with intentionality and diligence as a disciple.

To live in Christ means spending time with God, getting to know Him and experiencing His love. This is not a drudgery or duty but a delight. A personal rhythm involves daily devotions that include reading scripture and praying, weekly Sabbath that enables us to say no to work so that we can say yes to worship, needed rest, and the joy of being a child of God rather than a producing machine, and an annual retreat that ensures extended time away from the responsibilities and routines of life to attend to God and any new insights or direction He may want to give.

To live together with others acknowledges that we were created for relationships, so make it your aim to share the journey with others by cultivating intentional community with family. For those of us who are married and/or have children, our families are primary vocations. It is easy in the demands of work and the busyness of life to neglect really loving and serving the people closest to us because “they will understand.” But this is sloth.

Beyond our family, we need to cultivate intentional community with spiritual friends. Here at VPC, we encourage everyone to share the journey by becoming a part of a small group or a mid-sized Bible study or class where you can experience the joy of being known, loved and celebrated.
To live for the world recognizes that God has uniquely gifted each one of us to love and serve others. There are so many possibilities, we may wonder: Who? What? When? Where?

No one can really answer those questions for you. You have to know yourself: who you are, what you are good at, what you really like to do, what stage of life you are in, how much time you have to give. This is not someone else’s responsibility; this is your life—a precious gift from God, and the manner in which God wants to use you to love and serve Him and others is yours to discern. And that leads to the final point.

Discern what invitations God is extending to you now. Every week we put in your hands a bulletin that contains myriad opportunities for growth and service. I know that that the information in this document can be overwhelming, but I also believe that embedded in this document may well be an invitation from God to you. An invitation to:

- cultivate intentional community by becoming a part of a group or attending a retreat.
- serve God as a part of Labor 4 Your Neighbor Sunday.
- become a part of making VPC a safe church by participating in Virtus.
- make disciples by leading our children and youth and so fulfill your promise at baptism.
- participate in and find support in your healing through a variety of Care Ministries.

Some of you may find you have been doing these for a long time, and you find yourself longing for more or even feeling stuck, as Sally described, earlier. Perhaps God is inviting you to consider Growing Your Soul.

It may seem like just too much trouble to figure out what the IT is for you, but let me be clear: First, this is your responsibility. No one can do it for you. But second, you don’t have to figure this out on your own. If you need help, fill out the card in the pew and drop it in the box on the sign up table. We want to help you find your place to connect. A staff member will be happy to follow up and talk with you in person or by phone.

And most important, you are not on your own, because the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit will help you and me to resist the sin of sloth and to practice the lively virtue of diligence as each of us seeks to learn how to live his life as Jesus would live it if he were you. But don’t put it off for another day, or another year. Just do IT!