

CAN WE TALK ABOUT...ACEDIA?

Colossians 2:5-10

August 3, 2025

It's the devil we don't know. Not by name. A vice eviscerated in the sixth century when eight terrible truths became seven deadly sins. A temptation so pernicious it hides in plain sight. A condition as common as the air we breathe.

Acedia. It is possible—perhaps probable—that the word means nothing to you, that you were wondering how to pronounce it until twenty seconds ago. You aren't alone. One member asked me before early worship whether I was preaching on the stunning national park on the coast of Maine. Not quite.

No, our acedia maps the soul, not the coastline. In the earliest centuries of the Christian movement, the word, literally meaning "not caring," was included on lists of evils for followers of Jesus to avoid. In the year 590, Pope Gregory consolidated these various lists and declared that there were seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, avarice, gluttony, lust, and sloth. Acedia, collapsed into sloth, disappeared from the dialogue. But just because we don't talk about it doesn't mean it isn't real.

In 2008, struck by this realization, the author Kathleen Norris wrote a book titled, *Acedia and Me*. That's where I first encountered the word. It felt like Norris was reclaiming something vital, something that we in the church need to discuss.

And so, I wonder...can we talk about acedia?

Acedia is numbness. It is not laziness, the way we might understand sloth. It is the soul's quiet collapse. Overwhelmed, burned out, spiritually disconnected, not caring. It is captured by what one sociologist calls the creed of the crash-out generation: *nothing matters*. Acedia is existential anxiety. It is nihilism born of felt powerlessness. It is what it feels like to scroll endlessly

past headline after headline of horrific acts, image after image of starving children, the empty words of so-called leaders, all interrupted by the occasional ad for sports equipment or AI assistants. It's the bottomless pit of tedious work emails, performative busyness. It's the mindless rush toward the latest technology or the most upsetting scandal.

Acedia has questions. What's the point? Why bother? Who cares?

The Apostle Paul is writing to people he's never met in a city he's never visited. His letter to the Colossians offers wisdom, some practical advice, and—perhaps most of all—undaunted encouragement. Aware of their struggles and the persistent temptation to give up, Paul writes these new Christians with a deeply pastoral, personal assurance. He speaks from the heart. "Though I am absent in body, I am with you in spirit."

Now, I must admit, that line landed a little close to home for me this week. After ten weeks away on sabbatical, I'm back in body and (I promise!) in spirit, too.

But Paul's language got me thinking about its inverse, about the opposite. About those times when you are present in body but absent in soul. When we show up but feel empty inside. When the fire has gone out, when we are disengaged, numb, indifferent. Acedia is so dangerous because it can perfectly mimic productivity. It can feel or look as if you are doing something, but it lacks deep purpose. It even shows up when the goals are virtuous and worthwhile, gnawing at us with that pesky question: *does any of this even matter at all?*

Paul does not dismiss the struggle. He does not offer an easy fix. His words aim deeper. He offers a grounding truth, a word of encouragement, advice, and wisdom.

Continue. Continue. "Continue to live your lives in Christ, rooted and built up in Christ, established in the faith."

Continue. Keep going. Keep growing. Keep caring. Paul warns against these unnamed, deceptive philosophies. I think of them as smooth-sounding distractions that impersonate depth but are hollow at their core. Sounds a lot like acedia to me.

The prophet Jeremiah offers a striking contrast in competing images. First slide: there is a shrub in the desert. It's dry, rootless, vulnerable to all kinds of heat and weather. That's us on acedia. Then, second slide: a tree planted on the banks of a flowing stream, its roots go down deep, its leaves bright green, its life drawn from something unseen and yet quietly enduring. The prophet and the apostle suggest we have a choice to make.

So, how do we counter the rootlessness of acedia and rediscover purpose? This morning, I'll offer three recommendations grounded in the gift of time set apart this summer and the fertile soil of sacred scripture.

First, weep. You see, one of acedia's most destructive effects is its theft of our ability to grieve. In such a world, tears are a radical act of holy resistance. Jeremiah was the weeping prophet. He surveyed the sin and sorrow of his people, and he wept for them. He saw the suffering of his people and wrote lamentations to describe the depths of his pain. Our faith calls us to resist the seduction of apathy. This requires a persistent commitment to see the suffering that surrounds us. To see the friend facing a daunting diagnosis. To see the victims of violence on the streets of our city. To see families grieving the unbearable loss of precious children. To see people taken from their homes without explanation or justification. To see the gaunt faces of fellow humans starving as we stock our refrigerators. Acedia urges us to look away, look elsewhere. *Nothing can be done.* Faith demands we open our eyes and let the tears fall.

During my sabbatical, I kept a journal. The first entry begins, "May 21 – I cried the whole drive home. When I walked in the door, the boys were in the kitchen. Ben ran up and gave me a hug and said, 'Dad, I've never seen you cry before.'" (That's not true.)

"Why the tears?" I wrote. "Final goodbyes. The lifting of pressure. The weight of fatigue. God give me the patience to wait and the strength to listen for your voice." In an age of apathy, weeping is a spiritual practice.

A second recommendation to ward off acedia: practice your faith in ordinary ways. This superhero summer, we might be tempted to believe that superhuman powers are required to make a difference in the world. One of the lies we must resist is this one: if you can't solve the issue, you shouldn't waste time trying. But here's the truth. Practicing your faith will not solve all suffering. It *will* shape you into disciples who live with compassion and conviction.

On June 1st, this congregation—and the Church universal—lost one of our leading lights. As a pastor, teacher, scholar, writer, and longtime Vice President for Religion at Lilly Endowment, Craig Dykstra thoughtfully guided the Christian witness, particularly in the direction of practices, the beauty and centrality of practices that shape our lives. Craig was convinced that we are formed by how we live, not only what we profess. He insisted that faith is about our embodied virtues, our character. By acting faithfully, we grow in faith. Now, I admired Craig Dykstra's work long before I knew him. But when he and Betsy returned to Indianapolis, I quickly discovered that Craig's witness matched his work. I saw him volunteering in the Food Pantry, greeting each client with a smile and a gentle word. I watched him nurture friendships, lifelong and brand new. I saw him mentor pastors and scholars, even stopping to offer a concrete word of praise to the preacher on his way out the door on Sunday mornings. I hope he knew how much those words mattered.

Acedia says, "If you can't fix it, why try at all?"

Faith answers, "Start where you are. Do what you can."

Don't get stuck in your head. Letting the world's sorrow reach your heart is a sign that your soul is still alive. But when the permacrisis immobilizes us, it feeds acedia. The witness of the saints offers a sturdier truth: our actions are the sunshine and soil that grow our faith. So, when you feel most helpless, when you are overwhelmed, here's my pastoral advice. Do something for somebody else. Serve a neighbor in need. Make a gift that demonstrates your

values. Make peace with someone close to you. Write a letter. Welcome a stranger. Show up. Practice your faith.

Finally, to pick up Paul's agrarian metaphor, one more recommendation: root yourself. You see, acedia aims to separate our souls and our bodies, but the incarnational faith we follow says we need both to be fully present. And so, I worry about the ways that life these days feels disembodied. I'm convinced that the ability to be anywhere often leaves us nowhere. So, root yourself somewhere. My journeys this summer, from the Northwest corner of Montana to the Canadian Rockies to the Great Smokies, followed this common thread: that place matters. Physical spaces ground us in God's faithfulness.

At every stage of my journey, I met people rooted in a place, people whose rootedness shapes their faithfulness. People like my new friend Tom Esch, a Presbyterian elder in Kalispel, Montana, who came west as a sixteen-year-old summer intern and never left Glacier National Park. Fifty years later, Tom is a joyful force for good in his church and in his city. Rooted. Grounded. Useful.

For the final weeks of sabbatical, our family returned to the North Carolina mountains, the place where we most experience renewal and rest. One morning, after taking the boys to their summer clubs, I drove 110 miles from Montreat to Woodleaf, the small farming community where I lived for the first decade of my life. On the way, I texted David Correll. David is a third-generation farmer and one of my childhood role models. But the truth is, I hadn't spoken with him in many, many years. My text message was last-minute and out of the blue. I wrote, "David, I'm on sabbatical this summer and thought I'd drive down to Woodleaf. I'd love to bring back some fresh produce, and if it's possible, to spend a moment in the sanctuary at Unity."

A response came two minutes later. "We can handle that. Let me know what time you'll be down." Two hours later, I was in the packing shed where tomatoes were being separated by size and boxed for sale. David and I drove the quarter mile to the church. The key, no kidding, was still in the same spot it was kept thirty-five years ago. David let me in, and I spent a couple hours alone in that space. I walked to the cemetery outside, and the manse that was

our home. You know how it goes. Back yards that used to stretch on for miles and miles now seem so small. Later that day, I visited with Nancy, my teacher in the threes class at Unity Preschool. I left with a heaping box of tomatoes and melons—and something more. A deep sense of rootedness. Of belonging. In a town where neighbors know each other's stories and care for each other's needs, where the sanctuary and the cemetery stand side-by-side, reminding us that in life and in death, we are rooted, we belong, body and soul, to Christ and to one another.

Acedia is the numbing sensation that we are unmoored, detached, disconnected, cut off, all alone. You know the feeling, even if you've never heard the word—a dulling of the soul. A whisper in the night, "Nothing matters. Why care?"

Why? Because caring is the most important work in the world. So let your heart break. Then do the good that is yours to do, starting right where you are.

Root yourself. Trees by streams of water. Tomatoes nourished by good soil. Memory anchored in sanctuary and cemetery. Root yourself in Christ. Root yourself in community. Root yourself in grace.

Friends, acedia is a lie. Everything matters.

This is it. The place you're planted. The time you've been given. Don't miss it. Don't waste it. What good will grow because *you* showed up? Amen.