

Reclaiming Sabbath: For the Rest of Your Life

I. The Temptation of Time

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Mark 1:9-15

One night on the David Letterman show, in a feature called "Stupid Human Tricks," Dave introduced a guy who claimed he could juggle anvils. After the requisite joking prattle, and testing to determine they were in fact iron anvils, the man lifted one, then, two, and with what seemed Herculean effort, a third anvil and kept them awkwardly rotating in the air for an excruciating four seconds, before they all came tumbling down. I watched in utter fascination as it dawned on me: This is a metaphor of my life, and of the lives of most people I know. We carry heavy responsibilities in our families and work, at home and in the community, and it's up to us to see that they are all juggled appropriately. Woe to the one who drops anything!

In that metaphor lies the motivation behind this Lenten sermon series. We are tired of juggling anvils, but don't know how to stop. Our lives are seriously out of balance. Our work seldom feels light or delightful. Increasingly we are isolated from one another (because that takes intentional effort and time) and filled with fear by what is gaining on us that makes us drive on, harder and faster. The result is that we find ourselves spiritually exhausted, starving for nourishment, and searching for something that will restore the joy of simply being, of putting down the anvils for awhile, breathing deeply and freely, and resting in the grace of God.

Christian priest and mystic Thomas Merton went so far as to equate overwork with violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. [quoted in Muller, p. 3]

Perhaps it is not by accident that the Chinese pictograph for "busy" is composed of two characters: *heart* and *killing*, which further suggests the physical toll extracted by such imbalance. Local Case professor Richard Boyatzis has written of the vicious cycle of giving oneself without replenishing expended physical and mental resources. "I actually think burnout is the wrong description...more accurately it's 'burn up' because

that's what you're doing physiologically because of the chronic stress on your body." [quoted in the *Plain Dealer*, February 13, 2006]

Is there an antidote? How can we regain balance amid complex lives? At the heart of it, this imbalance is a spiritual problem, one to which our Judeo-Christian offers this remedy: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. [Exodus 20:8]*

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is a prescription for rest, to cease from our labors and to remember the Divine in whose image we were created. Along with sacred commands to love, to serve, to "do," God has intended the creation also to rest. Right from the beginning, God made Sabbath part of the weekly cycle, resting on the seventh day to rejoice in the beauty and goodness of all God had created. During the next six weeks, we will explore the meaning of "Sabbath" for our lives, and how we can reclaim this gift and experience it as regular nourishment that contributes to our health, physical and spiritual. Sabbath does not require us to leave home, change jobs, go on retreat, or remove ourselves from ordinary life. We don't have to wear special clothes or purchase any special equipment. We only need to remember. [Muller, p. 8]

Today we begin with time, that shape-shifting fourth dimension providing the framework for our lives. At funeral or memorial services, one of the affirmations made in the opening sentences is an acknowledgement that human life is both passing and eternal. Both realities shed light on the time of our life, and how we save or savor it, make or spend it. How can time in its swift passage become our friend, and reveal something of the eternity that is our destiny?

The gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent is always set in the wilderness, a Biblical place signaling both revelation and danger. Jesus is there, compelled by a sense of divine calling, perhaps to test that calling, to figure out who he is and what he will do. Listen for God's Word to you, in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the first chapter at the 9th verse (found on page 34 of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along). [MARK 1:9-15]

I don't have time.

This pronouncement, whether spoken with regret, with impatience, or with resignation, offers a telling insight into contemporary life. We have so organized our calendars and days that there is room for nothing more, nothing *else* than what we have crammed in to fill our lives. And it's absolutely true: we don't have time... for the reflection that would show us the way to go... for the rest that would renew our exhausted

spirits...for the recognition of God's grace and the joy it brings. We're simply too busy.

Our morning text, spare as it is in detail, does note that Jesus was in the wilderness "forty days." If that time designation sets off some mental alarm bells, good for you, because it is linked to other important biblical stories, such as the duration of the flood and the years of Israel's desert wandering, which concern preservation of life amid danger. Though the other gospels identify the specific ways Jesus was tempted, for Mark it is enough to say that Jesus shared this human experience, a threat to spiritual well-being, resisted, and received the insight he needed to take the next steps in his remarkable life.

Friends, not unlike Jesus we are daily faced with the temptation of time: what we will do with it, how we will invest it, who we will be in it. We are more likely to bemoan our lack of time than to examine how we spend the time we have, but make no mistake that this is a spiritual issue. Because paradoxically, time is exactly what we DO have: twenty-four hours every day, one hundred sixty eight hours every week that we are alive. The temptation of time is to imagine that we possess it, that it is our own to use as we wish, when in reality, time is God's gift to us. Each new day, every small moment within that day, the sweep of our years, whether long or short....a gift from the One who created and loves us without end.

That's one of the reasons I like to begin the children's message with the verse from the Psalms "This is the day the Lord has made"----a reminder that time is not a commodity we can manufacture or purchase. Its rhythms and inevitable passing are beyond our control. We remember first of all that the days of our lives are sheer gift. Which makes the rest of the verse an invitation to praise and thanksgiving: "Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Remembering the sacred origin of our time helps us think of it in a different way, not as something to "fill up" (even with productive activity), but as a gift to receive. Into that gift God has placed moments for work and rest, for action and prayer, for conversation and silence, for duty and delight. Friends, time becomes our enemy when we forget...that God has given it to us for good.

So we remember the Sabbath day—not necessarily a day, but as a particular and regular designation of time-- and resolve to keep it holy. The great 20th century Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel wrote that keeping Sabbath is an affirmation of God's presence in all the times of our lives, and setting aside a day each week imbued all of it with that

presence and spirit. "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else." [Heschel, xv]

For most of us, resting in the day feels like wasting time. Our full calendars give evidence of our importance, of the urgency of our work, of the volume we give. I believe Sabbath-keeping calls us to re-examine this notion and resist the temptation to fill every waking moment with more and more.

Do you know how you spend your time? Does your time reflect your values and priorities? Does your week regularly include time to nurture your closest relationships, to feed your spirits, to rest from work, to open a space for God? I'm not sure I do.

I'm going to try keeping a log of my activities for one month, and then examine it for places of imbalance and consuming busy-ness. I'm going to set aside time each day for conscious prayer and openness to God's Word in scripture. I'm going to try and live more mindfully, appreciating individual moments as opportunities to say I love you, to notice the lengthening light of pre-spring days, to remember God and God's love for me and for the whole creation. I don't expect it to be easy, these forty days of wilderness and wild animals. But one thing's for sure: Jesus will be there too.

Just as Jesus is here, at the table of abundance. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of remembering...who we are and Whose we are. It is a joyful feast shared with God and with one another. Time for rest, for nourishment, to receive again the gift of grace, strengthening us well for the one hundred sixty-seven hours to follow. AMEN.

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Resources upon which I have drawn for this sermon series, and suggestions for further reading on Sabbath

Bass, Dorothy C. *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951. Re-released in 2005 with an introduction by Susannah Heschel.

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

[SIGNAL USHERS TO BEGIN DISTRIBUTING SCRIPTURE GUIDES]

In Reformed worship services, the sermon is followed by an affirmation of faith, usually one of the historic creeds or confessions that mark our tradition. During this season of Lent, I propose another way to respond to God's Word. As we explore God's gift of Sabbath and how we might receive it more fully in our lives, we will use the time following the sermon to taste a bit of Sabbath-keeping, to experiment with practices that may give us new insight on how to reclaim the sacred rhythm of rest.

Today [I am] [the ushers are] distributing guides for Scripture reading, selections from the gospels around the theme of following Jesus Christ. I invite us all to commit to a discipline of daily Bible reading using this guide. Try doing this with all the members of your family. One Fairmount family told me they have incorporated this practice into their children's bedtime ritual, along with snacks and tucking in. If you do the readings alone, try creating a special space by lighting a candle or moving away from your desk so you don't get distracted.

It will be strengthening for us all to remember while we are reading, that we are doing this together, a tangible way to help one another to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God's love through Jesus Christ. Let us hold each other in prayer as we do. As John Calvin said of the Sabbath, "we cease our work, so God can do God's work in us." Amen.

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