



“Rest Time”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

Sunday, July 19, 2009

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

July means vacation to many people – including Greg Jones and Paul Fleckenstein – and we hope their vacations translate into *rest time* for each of them. Vacation should mean rest, but it does not always work out that way. When my family traveled to Hawaii a number of years ago, we spent our final few days on Maui, and some of us took the well-known bike trip down Mount Haleakala. Our guides told the story of leading a group of Japanese tourists down the mountain. After they had gotten to the flat portion, and were still riding in single file, all of a sudden one of the bikes veered off the road and went into a cornfield, down a row until it stopped and the rider fell gently against a cornstalk. The guides hurried to the site, fearing a health crisis such as a heart attack or stroke. But the rider had simply fallen asleep. You see, those Japanese tourists work their vacations, and schedule every minute to the point of exhaustion!

Surely we are very familiar with this serious work ethic, where we become so occupied and wired that we cannot even let go on vacation! Our contemporary

culture's easy and immediate communication through email, voicemail, texting and twittering, instant message, beepers, and cell phones is both blessing and curse. It helps us keep in touch with family and loved ones, but it also makes it harder to leave the office and work behind. How many have already taken a vacation this summer? I wonder how many of you did not check email, or send messages related to work. How many did not text or even take your cell phones with you? Traveling out of the country may necessitate this, but then you may invest in an international cell phone.

One would think that all these modern conveniences would raise our productivity and increase our time off, but studies show that Americans work longer hours than ever before. Essentially our advanced technology has increased our heartbeat and turned life up to warp speed. We are inundated with information, and the pace is so fast that we may sometimes feel like we cannot catch up or keep up. Twentieth century Trappist monk Thomas Merton suggests that in our busyness and hyperactivity we succumb to doing violence against ourselves. Our very full calendars and frenetic lives conflict with the rhythm of life God intends for us.

Jesus had a busy ministry, with continual requests made of him and demands placed upon him, yet the gospels indicate that he regularly withdrew to a quiet place for prayer and reflection, a time to connect with the one he called Abba. In

our warp speed world of constant communication and endless work, don't we long to hear Jesus' words to the disciples this morning? Listen again: he says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

What prompted Jesus to coax his disciples to rest? The disciples had just returned from their first mission trip – where in pairs they had been sent to preach and heal – and were full of stories to tell. Jesus surely saw their enthusiasm and excitement, but also sensed their fatigue and need for refueling. They had been teaching repentance and casting out demons, their spirits were soaring high but their tanks hovered near empty. There were so many people gathering around Jesus that they did not even have the leisure to eat.

Jesus issues an *invitation* to his disciples and to us. Jesus bids us to attend to the body's need for rest and the spirit's need for renewal. Essentially, he sought to teach them this rhythm of grace – of not always doing, but of resting. As someone recently mentioned: in today's society we are at risk of becoming human *doings* rather than human *beings*!

Essentially Jesus' invitation hearkens back to the fourth *commandment* to observe Sabbath. Remember, that Sabbath was given as part of the Decalogue, following the Hebrews' enslavement in Egypt where they worked continually under harsh conditions and had no rest. Sabbath is so essential to Judaism, that

should a lapsed Jew go to a Rabbi with the desire to renew faith, the rabbi's first directive is, "Observe Sabbath."

Literally, the word *Sabbath* means "to cease." Sabbath calls us to cease our work schedules for something different. In Judaism Sabbath is welcomed as a beautiful bride on Friday night – with the lighting of candles and the family meal. Sabbath includes time for worship, for reading Torah, for receiving instruction, and also for rest, and family time, for enjoying creation, for love-making.

As Christians, we typically observe Sunday as our Sabbath, a day of worship and rest. Reformer John Calvin, whose 500th birthday was celebrated by many Presbyterians last week, described how we are to cease work on the Sabbath, in order to allow God's Spirit to be at work in us. Sabbath rest enables us to stop and listen for God's Word, to rejoice in God's creation, to enjoy the community of faith.

For centuries medical personnel have known the benefits of rest to the human body. Rest is essential to healing. Rest reduces stress hormones, lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels, enhances the production of the brain's painkillers, increases the brain's production of happy neurotransmitters, and aids the immune system in its capacity to fight disease. But with the development of antibiotics, people began to think all we need to do is take a pill and keep going.

But rest is essential to being fully human. Rest charges our batteries – re-

energizing us physically and mentally. Moreover, if we rest in God – that is, spend quiet time focusing on our awareness of God, then rest results in spiritual renewal as well. As Augustine, one of the earliest Saints said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord.”

Yet, even with this knowledge, or understanding of the benefits of Sabbath rest, we still ignore this commandment, don't we? Christian minister and writer Dorothy Bass realized one day that this 4th commandment is the Rodney Dangerfield of the Decalogue - the only one of the 10 commandments that gets little or no respect. In her study of Sabbath, she noted its place at the heart of Judaism, and realized its possibility for restoring balance to the lives of people of faith. Gradually Bass recognized that Sabbath was God's *gift* to us – a gift which offered us a path for restoring balance in life – a balance between work and play, between giving and receiving, between doing and being. Indeed, Sabbath nurtures a rhythm of grace.¹

Notice, if you will, how it appears in our passage that, in this instance, Jesus and his disciples never got their time away in a deserted place. They only got the time together on the boat when some were probably working pretty hard. Each time they disembarked from the boat, the crowds were already arriving and would

press upon Jesus with requests for healing and teaching. And Mark reports that Jesus had compassion on them, viewing them as sheep in need of a Shepherd.

How many times does our Sabbath rest time get sabotaged? We plan on a day off, but there's a report due at work, or a sales trip to make. A student prepares to catch up on sleep on Saturday, but has a game to play, a paper to write, a band practice. We intend to take vacation in July, but there is a death in the family, a health crisis, a pet who needs special care.

Our story from Mark reminds us that sometimes our plans do not work out the way we envision. We simply cannot count on our annual or semi-annual vacations as adequate time for rest and renewal. In a given week we cannot rely on always having our day off, or in being able to take the one we have. And so we would be wise to find creative ways to observe Sabbath and find time to rest.

In his book *Catch Your Breath God's Invitation to Sabbath Rest*, author Don Postema tells of a number of ways to observe Sabbath breaks. He writes:

I was at the dentist office getting a gold crown. While taking an impression the assistant said I would have to sit for six minutes while the stuff was in my mouth. "do you want something to read?" she asked. "no," I answered, "I'll just breath. I'll take a mini-sabbath and focus on God." And I did, and it was refreshing.ⁱⁱ

Remembering our breath is one of the simplest ways of becoming aware of God. Perhaps this is why yoga has become such an important spiritual exercise for

me in the past two years. As any yoga instructor will tell you, “It’s all about the breath.” Similarly, many forms of meditation lead us to focus on our breathing. In her book *Encountering God*, Diana Eck proposes that “resting the mind on the breath for ... a moment virtually any time of the day can be a vehicle for resting in the Spirit. A vehicle for returning attention to the present and for returning attention to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to the dentist’s office and a yoga class, another perfect opportunity to practice breath prayer or meditation is in the car, whether at sitting at a stoplight or stalled in the midst of a traffic pile-up on I-95.

Friends, let us embrace God’s rhythm of grace, by practicing Sabbath rest. It is God’s invitation to salvation, God’s commandment to cease, and God’s gift for restoring balance in our lives. For God intends us to observe Sabbath in order to live an abundant, fulfilling life. Christ our Shepherd knows our world weariness, and reaches out with compassion, calling us even now, to stop, listen for his voice, and abide in Him, for He yearns to surround us with green pastures, to lead us beside still waters, and to restore our souls.

ⁱ Dorothy Bass, “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice” *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.) pp. 75-89.

ⁱⁱ Don Postema, *Catch Your Breath* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997.) p. 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 43.