

Rest Must Become a Priority

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 18, 2021

On the cover of today's worship bulletin, you'll notice a long flat rock balancing on top of a pointed rock. And there are two smaller rocks balancing on top of the flat rock. This picture of balance serves as a metaphor. In this case, the caption reads: "Labor --- Rest: A Balancing Act". Time and time again we learn that **a healthy life, physically, mentally, and spiritually, always involves the need to find ways to balance any number of priorities or things in our lives.** Chances are, in some areas we are fairly successful, in others, not so much. For a vast majority of us, chances are we are out of balance when it comes to getting the rest we need to lead truly healthy lives. And I'm not just talking about the amount of sleep we get each night.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares, "**Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest**" (Matt. 11:28). In today's Gospel Reading from Mark 6, Jesus tells his weary disciples, "**Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while**" (Mark 6:31). I've preached many sermons over the years using those two passages of scripture to encourage us to find that necessary balance. And yes, I will keep preaching this message. A bit surprisingly, but perhaps not, **many of us are finding ourselves as weary and in need of rest now than when we were in the midst of the disorienting pandemic last year.**

Weary can be defined as, "exhausted in strength, endurance, vigor, or freshness; having one's patience, tolerance, or pleasure exhausted." **Rest** can be defined as "freedom from activity or labor, to refrain from exertion, to be free from anxiety or disturbance." So, let me ask, **are you currently feeling exhausted, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually? How free are you from over-exertion and anxiety?** If you're like most folks I've been in contact with lately, you may not even remember the last time you felt fully rested.

Well, we're in good company. For we learn in today's Gospel reading from Mark 6 that even Jesus and the disciples needed some 'down-time.' In today's story, we learn the disciples have just returned after Jesus sent them out in pairs to the surrounding countryside in Galilee to heal and teach and spread the good news. They had been working hard and running at a fast pace. As the gospel writer describes it, they were so busy in their coming and going that they couldn't even find time eat. Some of you may be able to relate to that. So what did Jesus do? **He didn't tell them to run faster.** Instead, upon their return, Jesus asks them to share how things went and what they taught. **He sat them down and listened to them.** Then, Jesus tells his tired, hard-working disciples to "**come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while**" (Mark 6:31). There's a good lesson there for us. **God knows when we are tired, exhausted, perhaps even burned out, and in need of rest.**

Several years ago *Sojourners Magazine* had an article by Jewish Rabbi Arthur Waskow entitled, "Radical Shabbat: Free Time, Free People." It is subtitled, "Honoring work and restful renewal are both aspects of responsibility." He reflects how most

Americans today have less time to raise children, share neighborhood concerns, or develop our spiritual life. The rabbi asks, "Why is this happening?" and then answers, "Because **doing, making, profiting, producing, and consuming have been elevated to idols.**" **The biblical concept of rest, known as Sabbath, is a critique of these idolatries.** It's not that doing, working, and making things are intrinsically bad, it's just that **a society that never pauses has a hard time affirming community, relationships, family, as well as physical, spiritual and mental health.**

It is helpful to recognize, therefore, that Jesus encourages the disciples to care for themselves. We are no different from those disciples when it comes to our need for rest. **Jesus gives us permission to take care of ourselves, to be more intentional about self-care!** Unfortunately, when it comes to this I'm one of those who find it hard to practice what I preach. Perhaps most of us do.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) released a paper back in 2000 entitled, "**An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift.**" See if the following excerpt doesn't ring true for you, and perhaps for us as a congregation:

For some, the need for Sabbath emerges as a cry from within. Exhausted, we yearn over the loss of time to rejoice in those closest to us, or simply to play, to rest and be still, to delight in the goodness that we believe yet surrounds us.

8For some, the need for Sabbath names itself in quiet grief. Grief that we are moving faster and faster in our lives, but the only progress we seem to make is into a greater emptiness. Grief that the ways we have strained so conscientiously to live are simply not working. Grief that although we partake abundantly from the table our culture spreads before us, we come away from the table still hungry, as hurried and pressed as ever rather than nourished and renewed.

8Referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath, our own **John Calvin** (who helped invent the 'Protestant work ethic' 500 years ago) declares that *sabbath*, the need for rest from our weariness, reflects God's genuine concern for God's people. Calvin writes, "**Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing.**" And as that General Assembly report states, "And so Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is, even as God rested on the seventh day and rejoiced in all the goodness of creation." That report, and remember it was written 21 years ago, also recognizes what often happens in our corporate church life. It states, "**At all levels of our denomination, persons struggle with exhaustion.**" Then it asks, "**What patterns of drivenness do we need to let go of in our congregations? What forms of true spiritual rest do we need to embrace?**"

One of the dangers in relatively smaller congregations like ours is that a large percentage of the work falls upon a small percentage of the membership. This especially applies to our ruling elders. So, to you elders currently serving on the Session, I especially want you to take note of Jesus' words, "Come away and rest a while." Saying that, may this also serve as a call for others of you to volunteer to help. But know this, College Hill is blessed, and has been throughout the decades, with many dedicated, strong leaders and volunteers, of which I am so deeply grateful. And not all congregations can claim that.

I want to share with you, now, something I find as a very disturbing current trend.

In this week's commentary on this biblical passage posted in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, the **Rev. Teri McDowell Ott** asks, "Anyone else experiencing 'The Great Resignation in your church?" She writes:

The Great Resignation refers to the surge in people leaving their jobs post-pandemic, a trend predicted by Anthony Klotz, a Texas A&M University professor of management. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, a record 4 million people quit their jobs during the month of April this year.

"In normal times," [writes Andrea Hsu for NPR](#), "people quitting jobs in large numbers signals a healthy economy with plentiful jobs. But these are not normal times. The pandemic led to the worst U.S. recession in history, and millions of people are still out of jobs." The Great Resignation might also be called **the Great Reassessment, as the pandemic led people to consider when, how and for whom they wanted to work**. Also, according to the anecdotal evidence of my social media feeds, **people are just plain burned out**.

In church circles, our Great Resignation refers to deacons and elders resigning after a tumultuous and exhausting year of service, and pastors leaving not just their current call, but ministry altogether. This pandemic year has not only burned them out, but disillusioned them to ministry... **Exhausted pastors often feel like they're not serving anyone well, including themselves**.

This is a disturbing trend, indeed! And yes, even within our own presbytery there are now seven congregations currently in search of a pastor, whose pastor has simply chosen to retire or move on. Rest assured, I am not one of those considering either option.

As you may be aware, I meet every Tuesday afternoon for an hour and a half with other pastors here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. These weekly gatherings began when our churches started to close about 16 months ago, as the pandemic was closing down our society. We have been using this time to check in with each other, to take inventory of how we are doing, both professionally and personally. We also have a church-related topic to discuss, one relevant to what most all of our congregations are facing at any given moment.

Just this past Tuesday, however, we set aside our planned discussion on post-pandemic intergenerational ministry, and concentrated on what one pastor described as the "**systemic weariness**" of pastors here in the presbytery, and frankly, nationwide. We talked about the need for pastoral sabbaticals, perhaps even sponsored, in part, by grants from the presbytery itself. **But much like the outcome of this biblical story today, well-made plans for rest are often interrupted by the need (or at least our perceived need) to continue to compassionately look after the flock to which we have been entrusted**.

With a note of deep thankfulness, however, that while admitting to suffering from weariness myself, pastoring this congregation, unlike some of my colleagues, isn't the primary source of that weariness. **Like many of you, weariness comes from so many factors in simply living life during these tumultuous times**. Rev. Ott closes her commentary with these words of hope for all of us.

None of us is Jesus. All of us need to be fed. Being honest about our need and being gentle and compassionate with one another during these extraordinary and exhausting times are essential for us to continue in our work. **This pandemic has left many of us reeling. It's okay to say we are not okay. In fact, it's necessary if we are to find our way to healing.**

She then asks, "Who could use Jesus' permission to take care of themselves? How can you, or your church, help them take some needed rest?"

As your pastor, and I say this while also looking into a mirror, **I can recognize, honor, and support the varied needs you may have for rest, for sabbath, in these times of transition.** No, we are not 'back to normal', nor will we ever be. But whatever we face in the future, both individually and as a congregation, **let us remember to give ourselves permission to balance our lives, especially our labor with rest. Yes, rest must become a priority!**

Amen.

Resources:

Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, "Anyone else experiencing 'The Great Resignation' in your church?", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 18, 2021.

"An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift", report approved by the 212th General Assembly (2000) of the PCUSA.