

Remembering the Sabbath: Learning To Exhale
Psalm 122
March 21, 2010

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First Christian Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pity my poor parents. I gained a great appreciation for what they had to endure with me as a preschooler when I helped my daughter Erica and son-in-law Brendan with the 9:00, midnight, and 3:00 a.m. round-the-clock feedings for my premie-born grandchildren Finn and Cassidy in January. That schedule kept me from sleeping more than an hour or two at a time. So, my parents must not have slept much more when I was 3 or 4 years old when I slept only an hour at a time, due to tonsils and adenoid problems.

This was before wall-to-wall carpeting. The only way I got to sleep was by kicking my legs and rocking my head back and forth and going, “Ahhh!” I rocked my bed so hard I was literally able to move it across the room without ever having to get out of it, all because I couldn’t breathe.

Of course, we all know someone who struggles to breathe: Asthma & emphysema victims; apnea sufferers who at night often stop breathing at all.

So, countless people, spiritually speaking, struggle to catch their breath or just to exhale a sigh of relief. They hold their breath: bracing for the next disaster, the other shoe to drop, that dreaded pink slip to show up on their desk. How they would love to regain the rhythm of breathing in *and breathing out*, and *finding Sabbath rest*.

The preacher Qoheleth of Ecclesiastes understood these rhythms:

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to harvest, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. What does the worker gain from his toil?”¹

He could’ve added, “A time to inhale and a time to exhale.” Despite the fact Ecclesiastes isn’t cheerful Qoheleth understood life is full of rhythms.

He isn’t alone. Wayne Muller whose book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal & Delight in our Busy Lives* is the basis of our Lenten study and sermon series, says, “The most recognizable quality of creation is this rhythmicity. The pulsing light and dark, expansion and contraction, the seasons and tides, the cycles of growth and dormancy, of life, death, and regeneration are unmistakable characteristics of all living things, from the smallest microbe to the largest galaxy. If we are too busy, if we do not rest, we miss this rhythm.”²

And miss them we do!

Part of this is caused by the requirement to be more productive in the workplace. If we can’t accomplish what we need to do in the hours we’re assigned, we work more hours. “By the 1990’s, the average worker was putting in 164 extra hours of paid labor each year—the equivalent of an extra month of work—[than what the average worker put in during the 1960’s.] Around this same time, the two-income household was becoming the middle-class norm, which meant that the new pressure at worked was

matched by new pressure at home.³ It's hard to breathe in and out, if obligations have a stranglehold on your life.

There are real consequences to such stress and loss of Sabbath time. As psychologist Steven Schwartz, coordinator of behavioral medicine at the University of Michigan Health System says, "Rest is a biological need that repairs damage that results from the high stress living process. Constant stress produces biological changes, life-threatening heart arrhythmias, changes in the immune system and increased susceptibility to disease."⁴

Often these stresses are magnified by the stresses we add ourselves! Last week I mentioned that Peter was on a swim team when he was 8 and 9 in Indianapolis. What I didn't mention is that immediately after swim practice I'd often shuttle him to Tae Kwan Do. I'd pack his uniform for him to change into on the way to Tae Kwan Do. In between we'd also stop at Wendy's or some other fast food joint so we could get something to eat. At the same time, René would shuttle our then high-school aged daughter Erica to play or choir practice at high school. Sometimes we'd actually all be able to have dinner together by meeting somewhere in the middle of our routes.

Another busy pastor who was living the rhythms of busy family life: of van-driving, soccer-league, piano-lesson, school-orientation-night years asked his spiritual director, "What do I need to do to be spiritually healthy?"

Long pause. “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life,” he said at last. Another long pause.

“Okay, I’ve written that one down,” I told him, a little impatiently. “That’s a good one. Now, what else is there?” I had many things to do, and this was a long distance call, so I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible.

Another long pause. “There is nothing else,” he said. “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”

“I’ve concluded,” writes this pastor, John Ortberg, “that my life & the well-being of the people I serve depends upon following his prescription, for hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. Hurry destroys souls.”⁵

So, how do we regain Sabbath rest as the alternative, rhythmic beat of our hurried, harried, lives? Prayer certainly helps. As Wendy Wright in *Weavings* suggests, “Prayer is the plumb line that finds its rest in the place where our hearts beat in rhythm with the heart of God.”⁶

Rabbi Heschel tells this allegory. At the beginning time was one, eternal. But time undivided, time eternal would be unrelated to the world of space. So time was divided into seven days and entered into an intimate relationship with the world of space. With every single day, another realm of things came into being, except on the seventh day. The Sabbath was a lonely day. It may be compared to a king who has seven sons. To six of

them he gave his wealth, and the youngest one he endowed with nobility, with the prerogative of royalty. The six older sons who were commoners found their mates, but the noble one—Sabbath—remained without a mate.

After the work of creation was completed, the Seventh Day pleaded: “Master of the Universe, all that Thou hast created is in couples; to every day of the week Thou gavest a mate; only I was left alone.” And God answered: “The Community of Israel will be your *mate*.”

That promise was not forgotten. “When the people of Israel stood before the mountain of Sinai, the Lord said to them: ‘Remember that I said to the Sabbath: The Community of Israel is your mate.’ Hence: *Remember* the Sabbath day to sanctify it. The Hebrew word *le-qadesh*, to sanctify, means in the language of the Talmud, to consecrate a woman, to betroth. Thus the meaning of that word on Sinai was to impress upon Israel the fact that their destiny is to be the groom of the sacred day, the commandment to espouse the seventh day. The Sabbath is a bride and its celebration is like a wedding. Come, let us go out to welcome the *Queen Sabbath*.⁷

You see, we cannot say “Yes” to God without saying “No” to God’s rivals. Conversely, when we say “Yes” to God’s rivals, we are saying “No” to God. We do this every time we permit everything, all our work and all our leisure to crowd God and our Israel, the church out of our lives.

Eventually, if we are to say, “Yes” to God, we must also say: “No, I will not

earn my way today. No, I will not make anyone else work either. No, I will not worry about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink, or about my body, what I will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? And there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.⁸

Remembering the Sabbath is our way of marrying God again and again, so the 7th day has a partner. Remembering the Sabbath is our way of restoring the rhythm with which God created the world.

As James Thiem writes in “The Four Seasons,”

To live is to have rhythm, for rhythm is the hymn of the universe: of every land and family, of every man, and you and me. There is a beginning: birth, baptism, the bursting of new life and you, morning, faith, Easter.

Come summer suddenly: afternoon, growth and friends, love and freedom, listening and learning, the spirit of truth, Pentecost.

Fall time: beautiful, colorful, evening, seriousness, settling down, reaping the harvest: a hundred-fold, bread and wine, hope, the Church, All Saints.

The winter of life: old age can be long and hard, short and peaceful, cold or warm; it can be almost anything but avoided. And it will be good: for preparing, resting, dying. And the last day will be the best: to become God—like a backward Christmas.

These are life’s seasons and the mystery of rhythm. In the evening of our day it will be love that will make the difference, and to be Christian is to learn to dance the rhythm, until the whole world is on tiptoe, ready to begin, the Fifth Season.⁹

¹Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4, 9.

²*Sabbath*, NY: Bantam Books, 1999, p. 67.

³Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Practice of Saying No," *An Altar in the World*, NY: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 129.

⁴Found in *Detroit Free Press*, March 16, 2001, Annie Lehmann, "Remember the Sabbath: A simple day of rest can help ease stress."

⁵"Ruthlessly Eliminate Hurry," *Leadership Journal.net* (7-4-02) as found in "Busy Pastor Learns Hurry Destroys Souls," *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword: Sabbath.

⁶Found in "Truest Measure," *PreachingToday.com*; Keyword: Prayer, from *J/A Christianity Today*, Vol 40, no. 12.

⁷Abraham Heschel, "Thou Art One," *The Sabbath*, Boston: Shambhala, 2003, pp. 43-4.

⁸Adapted from Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁹James Thiem, "The Four Seasons," passed onto me by colleague Nancy Phillips, Religion Instructor at Creighton University.