

July 29, 2018



“THE RHYTHM OF REST”

Proverbs 23:12; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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About a month ago, a couple of members stopped me to ask how long I’ve been here at Birmingham First. When I told them that I arrived about a year ago now in June, they said, “It seems like you’ve been here a couple of years already.” While I agree that time has flown by, I’m somewhat thankful that it hasn’t gone that fast. I might have missed out on a few things. On the other hand, our time together has been full of ministry when we think about how our journey has included not only a year, but also an amazing visioning process that is still unpacking the last pieces of a plan for the next three to five years.

In addition to giving thanks for our great ministry together over the past thirteen months, Dawn and I also appreciate the tremendous blessing of being closer to some of our family in this area. As many of you already know, we spend most Fridays with two of our nieces, Andi (seven months old) and Ella (4 years old). They bring a lot of joy to life even when our calendar is a little full. Caring for our nieces also helps us to care for our souls. Watching them helps me to remember to take my day off. Well, it’s at least a day off from work. I don’t know that a seven month old and a four year old equal a day of rest, but they do keep us otherwise occupied.

Our Friday mornings are usually packed with plenty of activities that might include a trip to the zoo, going to breakfast, a swim in the summertime, or playing in Ella’s kitchen playset that was one of her favorite rummage sale finds. Can you believe that a four year old has a favorite rummage sale find? She puts on her apron along with her chef’s hat and you can never guess what she’s whipping up for lunch.

When the afternoon comes, it’s nap time. A couple of months ago, however, Ella began to decide that the whole nap idea was not for her. One day she told me, “I’ll lay down, but I’m just going to rest my eyes. I’m not going to sleep. I don’t need a nap.” I told her that was fine, but she needed to rest a little in the afternoon even if she didn’t sleep.

Ever since then, when two o’clock rolls around and I tell her it’s nap time, she tells me the same thing. “I’m just going to rest my eyes today, all right, Uncle Elbert?” She begins with a book in her bed and rests her eyes for a little.

Two hours later when I knock on her door, I walk in and she'll be sound asleep with a book or a stuffed animal beside her. Sometimes, she'll tell me that she didn't sleep at all as she yawns and stretches. I tell her that's all right, but quiet time is good for all of us.

I laugh at Ella as I remember back to my own childhood when my grandmother made me take an afternoon nap. I thought it was the cruelest time in the universe. I would be outside playing and having the best time. Before I knew it, it was time for a nap. My friends in the neighborhood didn't have to take a nap, but I did.

Now that I'm older, I covet a good nap from time to time. I wish my grandmother would make me take a nap on some days. One of the great pluses about preaching on most Sundays again over this past year is that it provides a perfect excuse for what I've always called my "Sunday afternoon pastor's nap." When I was a district superintendent, I didn't have a good excuse to take a pastor's nap on Sunday. Now, it's a part of the routine on most Sundays again. Following church on Sunday, we go out to lunch and then we head home for the infamous "pastor's nap." I place my head on the pillow for a few minutes. Like Ella, I'm just going to rest my eyes for a little bit, right?

The only problem is that this is also the time my family loves to call. When the phone rings, I'll pick it up only to hear my father's voice saying, "What are you doing, son? Are you sleeping? It's the middle of the day." He knows me too well. I grumble about how nice my nap was going, but he moves on with whatever he had to chat about on any given Sunday.

Most of us know that need for a moment of rest from time to time throughout our week. It becomes so easy for us to get caught up in our work on any given day that we forget to pause and rest. Time flies by and before we know it, we're on to whatever has come up next in our lives.

In our scripture lesson this morning, the apostles have been really busy. Not too long before this passage, Jesus had sent them out two by two on a mission to teach, to preach, and to bring healing to the people in the surrounding areas. Mark tells us that they were even driving out demons.¹

By the time our passage arrives, the apostles had been hard at work, travelling throughout the region of Galilee. They are gathered around Jesus and telling him all about the exciting ministry they have done in the area. Perhaps noticing that they had not only been hard at work, but may have needed some time for renewal, Jesus invites them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."² Mark tells us that they were so busy that they didn't even get a chance to eat. So Jesus takes off in a boat with them to a deserted place.³

Have you ever had those days where you're so busy that you just can't eat? Perhaps today some of us forget to eat while others of us don't make the greatest choices in meals because we just do not have the time.

It could have been that the disciples were really enjoying the work that they had been sent out to do. They were watching miracles happen as a result of their ministry. They were all caught up in

the work they had been doing. Imagine teaching and preaching as people around you are healed miraculously.

Not only did this ministry excite them, but it caused the throngs to flock to see them wherever they went. Before they knew it, the demand was so great that they just couldn't find the time to stop. The needs of the people soon become so great. Their lives are changing as they go from being "disciples" and students of the rabbi to being "apostles," or "those who are sent out" into ministry. Noticing this, Jesus encourages them to practice a little self-care. "Come rest awhile," he says to them. Calling them aside to a deserted place, Jesus seems to know how great the demands can be in the work that has been given to them.

As they head out, however, the crowds take note where they are travelling by boat. So the crowds travel all the faster by land because they want to see their own loved ones healed. Their needs are great! Loved ones are sick and ill. Jesus could help them. The crowds seem to be watching the boat from the shore and following along. Before you know it, they are there to greet Jesus and the disciples as they step off the boat. Mark tells us that Jesus, seeing the great crowd, has compassion on those who have run around the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret) to catch up with them. Before you know it, Jesus begins to teach the crowds yet again.

Just a moment ago, he was instructing the disciples in self-care. And now Jesus is over functioning himself. The Board of Ordained Ministry would remind him to practice a little self-care and take his day off. In the verses that we didn't read following this passage, we can see that what follows is Mark's version of the feeding of the five thousand. The miracle follows Jesus reminding his disciples to rest as he then gets caught up in caring for the people once more. It's hard to stop when there's work to be done...or better yet, compassion that's needed.

I don't know about you, friends, but it is so easy to get caught up in the hectic pace of life that happens around us. Whether it's serving others, working long hours, caring for friends and family, taking care of our homes and businesses, or just the plain everyday nature of life, it's so easy to keep up with the frantic pace that we forget to stop from time to time. It becomes easy to think that we don't have the time to rest. Or we don't need to rest. Or resting is not a part of who we are. Besides, resting decreases the time we have available for productivity.

I find it somewhat comforting to discover that even Jesus struggled to find a balance between rest, work, and sharing compassion for everyone else. In one moment, he encourages the disciples to get away to a deserted place. Yet, before we know it, in the immediacy that is often so much a part of Mark's gospel, the break time is over. It's time to get back to work! There's a great need at hand as Jesus sees over five thousand people on a hillside and instructs the disciples to "give them something to eat."⁴

While we know that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, we still struggle to find the time for Sabbath. God intends that Sabbath rest is a part of the natural rhythm of our lives. Yet, it's so easy for us to find ourselves out of sync with that rhythm, isn't it? Even when we try to get away, the rhythm of life and work breaks into our desire to find the pause of rest.

Several years ago, when I first travelled to Israel, I marveled at how Sabbath is celebrated in the Holy Land. When Friday sundown comes, everything comes to a halt. For our tour groups, Sabbath was often a time of travel from Galilee to Jerusalem because nothing was open or functioning when the Sabbath arrived. Elevators stop on every floor of your hotel so that no one has to hit a button because it could be considered work on the day of rest. Stores and shops are closed. Sometimes cars simply pull over to the side of the road because people were stuck in traffic and they find themselves walking home because the day of rest has arrived. All around are visible reminders that Shabbat, the Sabbath, has come and now it's time for rest!

While for some this might seem almost a legalistic interpretation of how to honor the Sabbath, I found myself amazed at the strong reminder that it is for our need to pause in order to be renewed in the rhythm of our life that can only be experienced through Sabbath.

Wayne Muller in his book, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in our Daily Lives*, writes:

Sabbath requires surrender. If we only stop when we are finished with all our work, we will never stop—because our work is never completely done. With every accomplishment there arises a new responsibility. Every swept floor invites another sweeping, every child bathed invites another bathing. When all life moves in such cycles, what is ever finished? The sun goes round, the moon goes round, the tides and seasons go round, people are born and die, and when are we finished? If we refuse rest until we are finished, we will never rest until we die. Sabbath dissolves the artificial urgency of our days, because it liberates us from the need to be finished.⁵

Sabbath breaks into our work and the busyness of life, inviting us to find the deserted place in between the times of teaching and the miracles like feeding five thousand people. Sabbath reminds us that there will always be work to do, but the renewal that Sabbath brings is key to who we are as human beings. Sabbath was created as a gift to us in the midst of work that will never be completed as long as we draw breath.

Years ago, when I was in junior high and high school, I discovered that music was one of those gifts that often helped me to discover a sense of peace in life. In seventh grade, I joined the band and learned how to play the tuba. I loved helping to keep the beat for the band. Every now and then, the parts could be really exciting. Give me a Sousa march and the syncopation kept me thrilled for days.

As I learned to read music and the timing of notes, I also learned more about rests in music. You see, tuba players are not often known for carrying the melody. Often, we found times of rest written into the music for us alongside the notes. On the other hand, the rests were just as important as the notes that were written on the page. Composers write rests into the music for intentional moments of silence that make the notes all the more beautiful.

There's not much worse than having someone in the band play when the entire band should be holding a rest. A misplaced note might go unnoticed to most ears when other notes are being

played or sung, but a note played during the silence of a rest stands out like a sore thumb. Musicians know that there is a rhythm to the rests that brings the music together in a way that a piece filled with notes could never do on its own. The rest gives you a moment to read ahead. Musicians can catch a breath as they reengage the notes on the page.

Is this not how it is for us in our lives, as well? When we pause in the moments of rest and we receive the Sabbath as a gift from God in which to live, our lives and the world around us become more beautiful. When we discover the rhythm of rest, we infuse the world around us with the same renewal that touches our lives.

At the end of our gospel lesson, the throngs of those with needs have surrounded Jesus and the disciples yet again. Life seems to be always waiting for us. The tasks will always call out to us. Yet, how might we be renewed for even greater works when we discover the rhythm of rest?

¹ Mark 6:7-13.

² Mark 6:31a, NRSV.

³ Mark 6:31b-32.

⁴ Mark 6:37.

⁵ Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (Kindle Locations 1018-1023). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.