

The Way to Abundant Life: Reclaiming the Gift of Sabbath

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Exodus 16

Sunday, July 1

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

I'm still processing all that I experienced during Calvary's mission trip in La Feria, Texas this past week, but one of the questions I have found myself asking is this: "How much and to what extent do I really trust God?"

All week long, I have been inspired, challenged, and humbled by the faith of Pastor Melba Zapata and the beautiful community at New Wine Church – and the myriad of ways in which they wholeheartedly trust in God to provide their needs, big and small.

Their church building is an old RV warehouse - prime property right along the interstate – and they trust in God month after month to provide the money to pay their rent. And Melba says they never even get nervous about it, because every month, the money always shows up.

They didn't know if they were going to be able to do VBS for children in their church or community this year – and yet they trusted in God to provide a way. Calvary was able to partner with them this week and to lead out in VBS with them. Local organizations donated prizes for the kids throughout the week. And various businesses from the community, like Pizza Hut and Golden Corral, even showed up with snacks for the kids each night.

Flooding in the area prevented the church from getting the word out about VBS as early as they would have liked. Even while we were in La Feria, several main roads were still closed because of the flooding. And yet despite the circumstances, Melba and the church trusted and prayed that God would send the children who needed to be there, and God brought children to VBS anyway. One little girl, named Oliva, brought 10 different friends with her to church throughout the week, none of whom had been to church before.

New Wine didn't have a working kitchen to be able to fix meals for their church and community. Their kitchen consisted of a plastic sink, a folding table, and a microwave. They began to pray about how God might provide for that need, too. God brought the dream team, David Norris and Glen Guthrie, to do a complete Fixer Upper on that kitchen, and Chip and Jo Jo don't even begin to hold a candle to the two of them. By the end of the week, a refrigerator even showed up unexpectedly one night after VBS that had been donated to the church by CBF.

Melba was called as Pastor of New Wine in January, but she hasn't had the opportunity to go to seminary. She was getting ready to leave for college several years ago when her father became ill, and she stayed home to support her family. And has been there since, continuing to take care of her aging parents and grandparents. She has taken some certificate of ministry classes through a local satellite school, but she is not allowed to take the pastoral ministry classes, because she is a woman. (We are actually working with her on exploring other educational opportunities and scholarship possibilities, which she is very excited about). And yet, even without much support in her area or formal training or education, she continues to wholeheartedly trust in God to lead her forward as a pastor, with the most abundant, childlike faith I have seen or experienced in a long time.

So many others would look at this church and see scarcity, not enough, and a depletion of resources. Many churches would have closed their doors at this point if they didn't already have the funds to pay next month's rent. And yet this beautiful, faithful congregation continues to trust in God to provide.

And what's even more beautiful is that they continue to give. Melba was actually meeting this week with local non-profits and immigration groups to see how they as a church might minister to some of the immigrant children and families living in La Feria, and her hope is that they can adopt a family to support as a congregation. And, we're already having conversations about when Melba and the church might come to visit us in Waco to partner with us in mission here at Calvary.

As we debriefed on our drive home on Friday, David Norris said this: "Their faith in God's vision is what in human eyes looks like extreme scarcity. Their faith was almost unreal. The Bible talks about needing to have child-like faith – and we saw that on full display this week."

And over the course of this week, I have been so convicted that when I think about my leadership as Calvary's pastor, and our life of faith together at Calvary – I don't know that I or that we trust in God in this same childlike way.

I (and we) do a really good job of trusting in our abilities. Our resources. Our talents. Our incredible people. Our education. Our training. Our diversity of backgrounds and experiences. And it's true that all of these are gifts God has given us – gifts to be used and spent and given away in every way imaginable for the kingdom. And yet I have asked myself, over and over again this week, "How much and to what extent do we really trust God?" And how much do we trust in the gifts God has given us - instead of the Giver of every good gift.

I think this is the question that Moses and the Israelites are forced to ask themselves in the wilderness in today's text, in Exodus 16.

It had been 45 days since God parted the waters of the Red Sea and delivered the Israelites from slavery in the land of Egypt. And the Israelites began to complain against Moses in the wilderness. They say, "If only we had died back in Egypt – at least there we had food. Have you brought us out here into the wilderness to kill us?!"

When all of the sudden, the Lord says to Moses, "I am going to provide what you need." And God commands quails to cover their camp in the evenings, and a flaky layer of bread, called manna, to appear over the ground each morning. And there is more than enough for what the Israelites need each day. There is never a shortage but always an abundance.

But, like we tend to do, instead of placing their trust in the Giver, they place their trust in the gift. They begin to want more and more of the gift – one day's portion is not enough.

And so they begin to store up and hoard more and more so that they won't run out. Except when they do this, the next morning, they wake up to find that all of the leftover food has spoiled and gone sour.

As OT scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "When they tried to bank it, to invest it, it turned sour and rotted, because you cannot store up god's generosity... It's a wonder, it's a miracle, it's an embarrassment, it's irrational, but God's abundance transcends the market economy."¹

¹ <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/>

And so, in response to all of this, Moses has an idea. Although it's not really his idea – it's God's idea, as it has been from the very beginning. In response to all of their storing and hoarding of the manna – Moses calls everyone to take a break. To practice Sabbath. They are allowed to gather up two days' worth of manna on the sixth day – this time trusting that it won't go bad and that God will provide enough food for them to eat the next day as well, allowing them to rest on the seventh day.

I think we sometimes forget that practicing Sabbath is one of the ten commandments – it's right up there with "Do not kill or steal." And yet most of us tend to structure our lives as if Sabbath is an "optional" or "as needed" practice. The idea of setting aside time and space to rest, to stop what we're doing, to quit working, and to be unproductive – is completely counter-intuitive to the way most of us live our lives.

Which causes me to return to my original question: "How much and to what extent do we really trust God?" Because when you and I don't stop – when we constantly keep pushing through, keep checking emails, keep doing more, keep burning the midnight oil – are we trusting in God to provide for our needs, or are we trusting in ourselves - in our own abilities and gifts and resources?

I love how Wayne Muller says it in his book, *Sabbath*. He says, "All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between exhale and inhale."²

Friends, I'm not sure where or when or how it first happened, but somewhere along the way, in the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost this essential rhythm. We have run ourselves ragged.....as if the rules that govern the sun to set, leaves to fall, lungs to exhale and notes to play simply don't apply to us.

Muller goes on to say, "Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something – anything – is better than doing nothing. Because of our desire to succeed, to meet these ever-growing expectations, we do not rest. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. Poisoned by this hypnotic belief that good things only come through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we never truly rest."³

And I can't help but wonder if our lack of rest also shows our lack of trust that God will provide all that we need.

I can't preach this sermon and pretend like this is something I do really well – you all know me better than that. I'm standing before you today completely exhausted, and more often than not, I put work before rest. And while I love the work that I get to do as a pastor, the reality is that it is never going to be finished. I never finish the day thinking, everything is checked off the list and all the ministry is done...that's just not the nature of my job or of any of our jobs, is it? It's not the nature of being a parent, or a family member, a spouse, a good friend, or an engaged citizen, either.

Nearly every person I've talked to this morning at church has been tired. We are writing books. Returning from mission trips. Engaged in advocacy work. Volunteering in our community. Teaching summer school. Taking

² Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*

³ Ibid.

summer school. Working with children. And the list goes on and on. I'm especially mindful that we are coming off of a very full month of mission and ministry together at Calvary. And as great and profound and life-giving as all of this work has been, friends, we need to rest now.

Because the person who doesn't rest in Scripture isn't Moses. It isn't the Israelites. It certainly isn't Jesus, who we know often went to a quiet place to rest and to pray, even when he was surrounded by great need like we see in the gospels. No, the person in Scripture who worked himself and his people to death – was Pharaoh.

There is no record in Scripture that Pharaoh ever took a day off – he always kept pushing people harder because he feared that there was never going to be enough. And this is the relentless life the Israelites are accustomed to. So when they are thrust into the wilderness, they are forced to answer the question: Are they going to trust in the skills and strength they developed throughout slavery? Or, when everything else has been stripped away from them - are they going to trust in God to provide?

Author Henri Nouwen came to a point when he was forced to answer this question as well. Nouwen was a brilliant priest. He wrote 39 books, which are reported to have sold over 7 million copies worldwide, and have been published in more than 30 languages. He had been a professor at Harvard and Yale and lectured all over the world, and yet along the way, he felt that something was missing. He was tired. He was empty.

And in the midst of his prayers during this season of his life, he felt God answering with these words: "Go and live among the poor in spirit, and they will heal you." And so Nouwen went from Harvard University to a small community of adults with intellectual disabilities called L'Arche – and he became their priest.

He writes, "The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking and disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, the books could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction...Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, and reputations could no longer be counted on.

"The experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self - the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things - and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments."⁴

Friends, I think some of the most important spiritual work that you and I can do is to begin to uncover the many layers of identity that we place upon ourselves – layers of education and achievement and resources and skill sets and accomplishments and titles and you fill in the blank – in order to truly get down to the unadorned self, as Nouwen calls it. Because I believe that it is only the unadorned self, the child-like self, that is truly able to begin to trust in God.

But sometimes, that means stepping away from a life of constant going and doing and producing and achieving. It requires Sabbath. It requires stopping and letting go in order to let God take the lead.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*

And so, how much, and to what extent do we really trust God? May we go with the faith of my new friend, Melba Zapata and New Wine Church, trusting in God, and in God alone, to provide all that we need.