

## “Finding Real Rest”

July 24, 2016

*Starting Over, Digging Deeper series*

I told you that I didn't like tent camping a few weeks ago, and then I told you that I went tent camping just after that confession - and that it wasn't so bad. The weather was great, which helped, but there was something else about it. It was restful. It was peaceful. It was time set aside to be with my family and some of our good friends. It was good.

I think my favorite part of the whole camping trip was a pick-up kickball game that our group played. It was kids and adults, and all of us enjoyed it. As we walked back, the adults especially commented on how much fun it was to play - something we hadn't done to far too long.

The power of remembering how to play. Some of you know that I drove down to Kentucky to be with our High School Youth mission team this week. I was there for two days serving with them as they worked on two homes, but I got to play, too. Have you ever played Red Rover? It's a group game that our youth used to show the power of strength in numbers. One night we played Red Rover together, and it was hilarious! All of us enjoyed ourselves.

One afternoon was designated as a time of rest from the work at Henderson Settlement, so we went to Cumberland Falls. I watched as the youth played in the water down from the falls and, again, as we left, I heard them say how much fun it was just to be together and play in the water. I know they live near Lake Michigan, but this was different.

For me these examples are what Sabbath is supposed to be. Sabbath is intended to be a time of rest and renewal - of playing and praying - of being able to be filled up with love and grace so that we can give it away more effectively. Sabbath is intended to be life-giving.

But taking Sabbath is hard. It's hard in a culture where busyness is a badge of honor. Someone said, "Our culture invariably supposes that doing something—anything—is better than doing nothing." It's hard when "taking Sabbath" is seen as laziness by some. It's hard when work has become our focus - success and achievement and how much time we can put in as a way to impress others. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say, "I need a Sabbath day." I hear people saying, "I need a vacation" or "I need a day off," but I don't hear myself or anyone else talk about Sabbath.

And I'll confess - I'm part of the problem. Saving Sabbath time from extinction is a radical call that we have from God. It's counter-cultural, and it's one of the most powerful witnesses we can offer to the world.

It's hard for me to honor my Sabbath day. Some of you probably don't even realize which day of the week it is. It's Friday, but many times, I find myself doing work and trying to finish a few things that are lingering. When I talk to other pastors, it's pretty typical that we don't do very well at keeping the boundary around Sabbath time.

An important part of our focus on "starting over and digging deeper" is remembering who we are and whose we are. I've been working on being silent for 5 minutes each day, and it's still a challenge, but it's life-giving. Sabbath is intended to be life-giving, too - to remind us to slow down and trust God. That's really the root of Sabbath - to trust that God is God even when there is more to do, more tasks to complete and cross off our lists.

It was just after I entered full-time pastoral ministry that our Bishop called a clergy session - a meeting where every pastor had to attend. The topic was Sabbath, and I remember fussing and complaining about having to go. And I wasn't alone. Other pastors were concerned about how much there was to do and, really, how important is this - to learn about Sabbath?

But since that called session, I'm grateful to Bishop Lee for making us come together and impressing upon us the importance of Sabbath time. The covenant that God made at creation and the covenant that continues through the ages is a safeguard against the run-down, worn-out, too-tired, too-busy rhythm of our lives. God proclaimed the idea of Sabbath for a reason—because we need it to live and grow in faith.

Did you know that in the Chinese language, the word "busy" is made up of two characters that mean "heart" and "killing"? It made me stop and think. When we say we're busy, are we implying that we're killing our hearts with too much to do? Is that what we want to do?

We usually greet each other with a question: "How are you doing?" And what's a popular answer? Sometimes, we simply say, "I'm fine." But I hear myself and others say, "Well, I'm keeping really busy. There's a lot going on. You know how it is." And, we nod in agreement.

Once I was at a meeting, and I heard someone ask a woman, "How are you?" Her answer was "I'm blessed." It made an impression on me. Do you and I want to be blessed or busy? What does God want from us? What does God want for us?

It has always interested me that one important question asked in early Methodist meetings was "How is it with you soul?" It was a greeting that people used with one

another when they met for study and spiritual growth. It's a deeper question and an invitation to share.

What if we greeted one another that way? To talk about the true state of our souls gets down deep to the nitty-gritty stuff of life. We have to go beyond the pat answers to something deeper—how we're truly feeling as disciples of Jesus Christ. The church should be a safe place where we cultivate trust with each other and support one another as disciples. The church can be a place where we hold one another accountable for making Sabbath time.

Plainly and simply, without any apology, God rested on the seventh day. God saw everything and stopped to rest. The word "Sabbath" comes from Hebrew—it means "to stop." Even more, God "hallowed" that day—made it holy, set it apart. Rest and Sabbath go as far back as "in the beginning." Sabbath is part of God's plan for us. God knows our human tendency to make our lives are too busy. God knows that we need rest and renewal.

The verses from Exodus come from the Ten Commandments. These commandments seal the covenant that God makes with Israel. If you've never looked before, notice how these ten words from God are laid out. The first three deal with our relationship with God, and the last six focus on our relationships with others—with our neighbors. It's interesting that this commandment falls in-between: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."

Sabbath time is essential because it's a testimony to God's presence and power in our lives. Sabbath keeps us connected to God and each other. By observing the Sabbath, we keep up our end of the covenant. What effect does taking time with God have on our human relationships? Sabbath time renews us in God's love and refreshes us to be God's people in our reaching out to others.

Perhaps the word we need to focus in on here is: "remember." That's the key word for Israel and for us. Even using the word "remember" implies that God knows our humanness in forgetting how important it is to take time away from the rush of life to be rejuvenated. God knows what we need to hear. And God keeps saying it. There are many references to remembering Sabbath in Exodus, Leviticus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. God continues to remind Israel that Sabbath is essential to their identity and life from God.

So, why is it so difficult for you and me to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy? Simply put, we don't make time. The pressures and priorities of culture get the best of us. What God asks of us is time set aside—made holy—to remember that God created us and wants us to be whole people.

Jesus honors Sabbath, but he's quick to react against those who try to legalize the Sabbath rather than honor it. In Mark 2, Jesus tells the people that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. Sabbath is part of God's plan to nurture and care for us. Part of our search for wholeness is rest and renewal. There's a sacred rhythm to our lives, and Sabbath is essential to that rhythm.

Rest is about honoring God who made us and cares for us. It's allowing ourselves time to get rid of distraction and trusting God to provide for us. Someone said, "Resting on the Sabbath isn't so much about what we do or don't do, but rather about taking time to remember who we are and to whom we belong." Sabbath is really about honoring our identity as children of God.

And even as Jesus seemingly "breaks" the Sabbath, we have a model of taking Sabbath in Jesus. There are many references in the Gospels to Jesus' practice of going away from the crowds to be alone and pray. How can we even think that we can go along without stopping to rest and renew ourselves? Jesus, Savior of the world, made Sabbath time, even in the midst of his life and ministry, and we cannot afford to do any less.

He withdrew from the demands of many people, not to ignore them or to make them wait, but to care for himself so that he might be able to help them. Many times, he goes off by himself to pray after he has healed and served even as others seek him.

For you and me, worship is one way that we honor Sabbath and keep it holy. Coming together as a community of faith is a witness to our belief that God is real in Jesus Christ. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in him. When we worship, we praise and honor God. We seek renewal and refreshment for the days ahead.

Yet our lives require us to find Sabbath time every day. Even if we take five minutes to sit in silence, we might be surprised by what God will do. One child says: "Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go." Prayer has been called a "portable Sabbath." We may have to put it into our routine—block out time to rest in the peace of God.

Some of you find Sabbath in journaling, music, walking, reading Scripture, praying, gardening, sewing, cooking, or even sitting in silence. However we make Sabbath time, God wants to be with us and rejoices when we remember that we are created to be whole and that we are loved. Real rest comes when we remember that we are created by God, that we belong to God, and that we do not carry the weight of the world. We are children of God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

May we find real rest in God. Thanks be to God. AMEN.