

Sabbath Rest

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation. This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Gen. 2:1-4a (CEB)

As I was preparing to retire, several people had advice to offer. And they often gave me the advice, whether or not I wanted to hear it. 😊 Most of the advice came from people who had already made the transition into retirement, and along with the advice, I also heard some warnings.

I heard things like,

- “You’ll be so busy you’ll wonder how you had time to work.”
- “Find a hobby.”
- “Travel while you can.”
- “Don’t sit around and watch TV.”
- “Don’t say “yes” to anything for at least a year.”

What I didn’t hear others tell me was a phrase I had used in numerous sermons before – making me wonder if anyone ever listens to what I have to say. 😊

What I often told people is to remember that we are human beings, not human doings. Our worth is not tied up in what we can show for our efforts; rather our worth is found when we realize that God loves us.

I found myself saying things like that because we live in a culture that has been shaped by what many people call “the Puritan Work Ethic.” The problem is it’s not just a Puritan thing. Nor is it just a Mennonite thing. A variation of the same work ethic can be found among immigrants to this country from Germany, Mexico, India, and China. We have long valued hard work and the rewards that come with it. And many people become so absorbed in their work that they think their value is derived from their work.

That work ethic, and our self-understanding of worth, is hard to shed when we retire. And too many people find themselves bored to death, literally. I haven’t seen the study behind the statistics, so there may not be evidence of it, but many of the people who gave me advice about retirement also reminded me that many people never make it past five years in retirement.

I was convinced that wouldn’t be my plight, simply because I know my worth isn’t based on what I produce. I am a human being, not a human doing, after all.

But I’m not sure that was always the case.

In 1995, I caught a bug the week before Thanksgiving. I was down for about 2 days. I recovered and was able to spend the holiday with my family. Then on the Monday after Thanksgiving, I caught the bug again, this time it lasted less than 24 hours. On Christmas Day, I woke up vomiting. By noon it had passed.

That’s when I realized it wasn’t a bug. It was my body responding to cumulative stress. If I wasn’t going to take care of myself, my body was going to make sure I didn’t work.

After several conversations with folks, and a period of self-examination, I made plans for and took a Sabbatical. I actually refer to it as a mini-Sabbatical because I was only scheduled to be gone for a month, in January

1997. My primary objective was to discern my calling, to see if I was still called to be a pastor, and if so, how I could re-orient my life to reduce the stress I was experiencing.

I spent that time at Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains (in Washington state). The retreat center had a daily rhythm that became a part of my life while I was there. But, keeping with my work ethic, I spent my days reading and praying. I also decided to memorize the book of Jonah, since my call to ministry came from the story of Jonah.

The community rhythm began with a short devotion at breakfast every morning; then there was a community-wide coffee break mid-morning. Lunch and dinner included prayers and announcements. And every evening there was a community worship service. I spent the time between meals in my room or in the library where I read and worked on memorizing scripture. (I might have ventured out for a hike, but with 36 feet of snow on the ground, that was a little more complicated than it sounds.)

Every day it was the same routine. A short devotion at breakfast, a community-wide coffee break, lunch, dinner, and worship. And in between those events, I was reading and studying. Day after day.

When I finished lunch on Saturday, I noticed a puzzle on a table in the lounge. I love puzzles. And it was very tempting to work it for a while, but I resisted and went back to my room. On Sunday, however, the rhythm changed.

Rather than breakfast with devotions, there was a morning worship service followed by brunch. There was no coffee break, nor was there lunch. Dinner came early, followed by a worship service that included communion. After communion, everyone had ice cream.

With the change of community rhythm on Sunday, I changed my rhythm, too. It wasn't intentional, but on that first Sunday I didn't open a book. I didn't stay in my room. I worked on the puzzle and enjoyed the company of others.

The second week, I returned to my pattern of living. The puzzle kept drawing my attention, but I put it off until Sunday, when the rhythm changed again. By the third week, I recognized a longing for the Sabbath, something I had heard in Jewish prayers but had never experienced in my own life.

I had always known the Ten Commandments tell us to honor the Sabbath and to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8-11; Dt. 5:12-15). I also knew that most Christians worship God on Sunday, not the Sabbath, in honor of the Resurrection.

As a pastor, neither Saturday nor Sunday felt like days of rest, though. But I learned at Holden Village that I needed to have a Sabbath day in my life, a day that felt different from the rest of the week.

About the time I was on my Sabbatical, I became familiar with some of Stephen Covey's books. I was particularly struck by his story of the lumberjacks. Do you know that story?

The story goes that there were two lumberjacks who both claimed to be the best of all lumberjacks. Their friends challenged them to a contest to see who was really the best one. At sunrise, they would each begin cutting trees. When sunset came, they were to stop. Whoever cut the most wood could claim the title of the best lumberjack.

On the day of the contest, both men stood ready as the sun rose. They began cutting. It wasn't long before you could no longer see them, but you could hear their saws buzzing in the woods. About mid-morning, one of the saws went silent. People puzzled over it for a while, wondering if he had run out of gas. Before long it began again. It stopped again around noon, shortly after noon, and then again late afternoon.

When the contest was called to an end, there was an inventory of the cut wood. To the amazement of the crowd who had been waiting all day, the winner was the one whose saw quit several times during the day. When they asked him about the times the saw stopped, he smiled and said, “That’s when I was sharpening my saw.”

Covey talks about the importance of “sharpening our saw” by taking time off, by taking walks, by taking naps, by eating healthy and paying attention to our bodies.

When Melissa Hofstetter was with us a couple of weeks ago, she made reference to the need for a rest ethic, not just a work ethic. I think she was saying the same thing in different terms. God needed to rest from work; so do we. We need time in our lives to just be, to stop doing long enough to remember where the source of our worth lies.

While I was on my mini-Sabbatical at Holden Village, I finished memorizing the book of Jonah and had a clear affirmation of my calling in a vivid dream. I’d be happy to talk about that as well as the other things I learned in the process, but the reason I tell this story today has more to do with the concept of Sabbath keeping, of creating a rest ethic that is just as strong as our work ethic.

When my Sabbatical was over, I began taking flying lessons on my day off, doing something I didn’t do at any other time. It made that day different from the rest of the week, and over time I realized my stress levels were reduced. I also learned the importance of taking time in every day to rest, to reflect, to pray. It isn’t that I hadn’t done those things before, but I hadn’t been intentional in my Sabbath keeping.

When I retired, I didn’t feel the same crisis that many people feel. I think that’s in large part because of my Sabbath practices over the years. There is no question that pastoral ministry is difficult and brings much stress into the lives of pastors. I had a friend who retired when I did. She said that for the first three months after retiring, she slept 12 hours every night and took 3 hour naps every day. She had no idea how tired she was.

That wasn’t my experience. Admittedly, my experience was deeply affected by the pandemic. For those who don’t know, in January 2020, I announced I would be retiring in July. Those were probably the hardest months of my pastoral ministry as I found myself learning how to do new things, to keep a church going without gathering inside the building. That led to a huge sigh of relief when it ended; I could feel a load lifted from my shoulders. But I didn’t experience the kind of weariness my friend did.

One thing that did change when I retired was my Sabbath practices. I was able to participate in the community Sabbath practice of participating in worship rather than leading worship. That alone made Sunday a day that was different than the rest of the week. As some retirees have told me, it’s hard to remember which day is which when every day is a Saturday.

Ah! But there is still the Sabbath to keep me grounded, to remind me that my value comes from the God who loves me.

That’s why I’m glad you all take time to come here for a church retreat once a year. We all need a break from the rhythms of life, to experience the sense of Sabbath, to cultivate a rest ethic. After all, God calls us to observe the Sabbath.

May the rest you experience here, in this place, help bring your life into the work-rest balance that God intends, to be reminded that you are human beings, not human doings.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.