

A Sabbath for Service

Mark 6:30-34

Sometimes, the well simply runs dry. I was thinking about this a week ago while on the phone with our daughter, Emily, who lives in L.A. with her husband, Chris. She was bemoaning the fact that the state-imposed water restrictions in California are playing havoc on the new landscaping around her house. After spending a healthy amount of money last fall for everything from shrubbery to fruit trees to rose bushes, many of them are now parched and dying back due to the limited watering they receive. She was particularly upset about her fig tree, which had come out fully this spring before the new rules were in place and was loaded with over one hundred figs, most of which are now undersized and shriveled up. Even though she understands and agrees with the need for limiting the use of available water, still the three-year drought was finally hitting home in the Jones household.

While lamenting the loss of her landscape, Emily also shared her frustration about the stress she had at work. She's in senior management of a fashion company, B.C.B.G., which is in the final stages of being sold by the designer, Max Azria, to the Guggenheim Partners (the ones who own the Dodgers, half of Hollywood, and control over \$250 billion worth of assets). For several years, she has worked twelve-hour days under stressful conditions, with a boss who is eccentric and moody. Though she's looking forward to the new management (which should stabilize the company), at this point she is close to burnout, since she rarely takes time off from work due to endless deadlines and the strain of market competition. Virtually

every phonecall I've had with her over the past two years gives voice to her grievances and weariness. As we both realized, sometimes the human spirit can be just like a well that has run dry.

Emily isn't unique. A week hardly goes by where I don't see evidence of people who are burned out—who are worn down by life's responsibilities and workload—those who never seem to find enough of a break to refill their tank. Even though the economy seems to be doing well, it's often built on the backs of those who work 50-60+ hours a week, from management to service jobs, either in full-time employment or in part-time jobs cobbled together. Many are overly stressed trying to juggle their work schedule, home life, and outside responsibilities, all in an attempt to acquire an elusive quality of life. Free time has become a luxury for many and vacations are but a brief reprieve from the hectic life so many seem to lead.

Why are we so reluctant in this country to balance our lives with needed rest? I suppose, for one thing, there are few incentives or requirements to take time off, recoup, and rest. Unlike other industrialized countries around the globe, the U.S. has no law mandating workers receive paid time off from work (e.g., European countries by law mandate up to a month of paid vacation each year for the entire workforce!). In the U.S., of course, this isn't the case; rest is largely optional. Many American workers who don't receive benefits that include vacation often cannot afford to take unpaid time from their job. Thus, it becomes a choice of work and get paid, or take time off and don't.

Yet, even among those who receive vacation benefits, it is still a struggle. The high demands of many jobs leave employees afraid they

will fall too far behind in their workload by taking significant time off. In many circles, it's common to take work with you, even when you're supposed to be away from the job. All of this adds up and takes its toll. According to a recent article in *Fortune*, "America is experiencing an epidemic of overwork." The author writes,

As a result of...unused days off, one study puts the liability taken on by U.S. businesses at \$224 billion, due to workers' rolling over unused paid time off. And that doesn't take into account the fact that when people don't take time off to reset, their resulting stress and burnout can be detrimental to both workers and their employers. ¹

What Emily is experiencing in her job is a widespread concern in the overall U.S. workforce. Everyone needs the opportunity to rest, regroup, and renew themselves—from top executives to entry level personnel. Otherwise, people become less productive; the proverbial well simply runs dry. As much as our culture and economy has trended away from this, it's apparent that, for us to be productive and be our best, Americans would do well to rediscover the meaning of Sabbath rest.

Sabbath-keeping, of course, is a biblical notion, though it's by no means exclusive to the Abrahamic faiths. One of the values of mainstream religious traditions across the board has been to cultivate practices that protect people from harm—Sabbath-keeping being one example. Keeping Sabbath was not only for cultic purposes (orienting humans to the divine Presence through dedicated times of worship and instruction), it was also to mandate time away from daily labor to prevent people from becoming enslaved to their work or to their bodily needs. The image of the creating God resting on the seventh day was to remind those in the Abrahamic traditions that a time of

¹ Colleen Kane, "Why Americans Just Won't Take Time Off," *Fortune*, May 1, 2015.

rest was integral to their ability to create and produce. Just like fields that lie fallow, a soul needs time to replenish from constant output; every person requires time to physically rest and to spiritually reflect on what is of importance in life. Sabbath-keeping allows the individual to restore his/her place in the creative order and rhythms of nature. Hence, a Sabbath has always been restorative and for filling the spiritual well back up.

However, that said, in virtually every religious tradition, this restorative element to Sabbath has taken a back seat to the institutional demands of the tradition. This certainly was true in Jesus' time, which is why he challenged the scribes and Pharisees over their insistence that Sabbath-keeping was a paramount religious duty intended to honor God from sunset Friday to Saturday evening, with all of its laws, regulations, and enforcement. Jesus took issue with that and transformed the concept of Shabbat with a turn of a phrase: "the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath." This was one of the pointed criticisms Jesus made of the entire Temple system and organized religion, because the Sabbath had been turned into an oppressive whip to reinforce the authority of religious leaders and to fund the Temple treasury. That's what organized religion often does—the institutional interests take precedence over individual need. Instead of restorative to the soul, it became punitive to the sinner.

Our text for today illustrates for me what I think was Jesus' alternative sense of Shabbat, evidenced by his explicit instruction: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Up to this point, Jesus and his disciples had been busy attending to

all kinds of human need—healing people, exorcising demons, and addressing the afflictions of scores of people over a period of time. It was supremely inspiring, but intensive, exhausting work.

Any of us whose occupation involves tending to people's needs can appreciate just how tiring this type of work can be. Assisting people who cannot help themselves (especially those who are “high maintenance”) will physically and emotionally drain even the strongest and most capable care provider. With no surprise, throughout the Gospels are several instances of when Jesus physically removed himself from an intensive setting after healing people, in order to unwind, pray, relax, refocus, regroup, renew, and restore himself, so he could carry on. For Jesus, like any of us, the well would run dry if there was no relief on a regular basis. What he was instructing his disciples at this particular moment was for them to do the same. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” So they took a boat and crossed over to a deserted place in order to take a Sabbath from their ongoing service.

And that needed break should have happened, except the story goes on to reflect a complication that commonly exists, especially for care providers. Namely, it's hard to get away. Those who depend on you for their daily care need it every day. Chronic sufferers don't schedule their pain for another's convenience. When the need is there, so must be the care. The sheer volume of problem-laden people is such that addressing human need becomes a seemingly endless, 24/7 task. It's hard to get days off.

That's what the disciples discovered when they arrived at their deserted place; it wasn't deserted anymore. The crowds followed

them, looking for their needs to be met. Jesus had to interrupt their intended Sabbath rest out of compassion for those who came to him for help. That's what love and service will often ask of us.

However, we shouldn't interpret this as meaning service to others should always take precedent over one's own need for Sabbath. That's not the moral of this story. Yes, our heart and conscience will often compel us to take care of others before attending to our own needs. But there are limits and the important one is finding rest.

So how would that happen, when the needs are constant and compassion calls for some form of intervention? How does the care provider let go of the situation without having things fall apart or descend into a crisis? That's a tough call, though there comes a time when caregiving means helping people provide for themselves. A caregiver cannot always be present. What follows is the story of the Feeding of the Multitude, where the community steps up and learns to take care of one another.

If you recall the story, it wasn't about Jesus magically producing enough food for 5000 people—where he alone, heroically, provides for the needs of everyone, and the take away for us is to go and do likewise. That's a recipe for burnout, even on a heavenly scale. Instead, this overwhelming humanitarian need facing Jesus and his disciples turned into a teachable moment for this mass of humanity, where Jesus demonstrated how they could take care of each other by sharing what provisions they had among them, with the result that no one left there unsatisfied.

This offers an important insight for those who may feel overwhelmed by the situations for which they are responsible—

enough that they're unable to easily get away. It also has a word for those of us who notice the stresses in another person's life and wonder what we can do. Just like the story, we don't have to solve world hunger, we simply need to step up to the moment and share what we do have to offer. Stepping in to give someone a break doesn't mean you have to take on the entire responsibility or even more than you can handle (e.g., offering a day, or even a few hours, of reprieve for a caregiver). But shared among many hands, it becomes a necessary mercy, more than we realize for those who mainly shoulder the burden.

Making Sabbath rest possible for those who would benefit from it becomes a collective responsibility for us all, as we share the burden and take care of one another. No one has to do everything; but we all can do our part in less demanding ways. We might be mindful of that when the call for volunteer help goes out. A Sabbath for service is a special grace for those who need it.

Over the past week, for some reason I've kept coming back to the image of Emily and Chris' fig tree, which came out so abundantly in the Spring but now, because of inadequate water, has leaves wilting and fruit shriveling on the branches. This image intrigues me because fig trees are a common biblical sight and symbol—one of the references being in a rather unusual anecdote right before Jesus' fateful entrance into Jerusalem.

In Mark 11, Jesus, feeling hungry, came upon a fig tree that had no fruit and in frustration, he cursed it, though the verse goes onto say it wasn't the season for figs. By the next day the tree had completely withered. It's a strange story and a tough passage to make

sense of since it seems so uncharacteristic of Jesus to lash out at something so irrationally and scornfully. Why curse a tree for lacking fruit when it was not the time for it?

This story makes no sense until you realize the fig tree was symbolic of the Temple—the religious center of Judaism with the cult itself being ideally portrayed as a repository of God’s *shalom* and blessings. In fact, the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden story was often depicted as a fig tree and associated with Temple life and a pure relationship with YHWH.

So in this Markan story, Jesus’ curse on the fig tree was actually a condemnation of the Temple institution itself, especially for how it failed to do for people what it was intended to do. Religious leaders proclaimed the importance of Sabbath-keeping, but didn’t address the economic conditions of those who were unable to take a day off to go to the Temple, because they were poor and needed to work or they were controlled by superiors who determined their working days and hours. The Pharisees would condemn these poor people for breaking the Sabbath, when the fault for that would lie with the entire economic system that treated people like commodities to be controlled, instead of with the freedom and dignity God gave them. Jesus’ curse was a prophetic warning that religion has no value apart from protecting people from harm—from harming themselves or harming others. The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. For Jesus, Sabbath-keeping for restoration and renewal is as much a call for justice in society as it is a day for worship—something that we, too, should be mindful of. Instead of asking

someone, “Why haven’t I seen you at church?”, ask, “Are you getting the rest you need? What can I do to help?”

Then, I thought some more about what the fig tree symbolizes in our time. I recognized that Emily’s tree was also a victim of a crisis created by the overuse of a resource that needed to be protected and fairly shared—similar to the story of the Feeding of the Multitude. The well runs dry when the outflow is greater than the supply; a sense of scarcity exists when some hoard while others starve. A balance is required in nature, where resources are used only in accord to the supply.

Emily’s fig tree, in effect, was another symbolic warning of the environmental trend in California (and around this planet) that needs to be heeded and proactively addressed in a just manner before there is insufficient water in everyone’s well.

In many respects, conservation is Sabbath-keeping—for, in its simplest explanation, it means preventing injury, decay, waste, or loss of a valuable resource. It means preserving what you have and keeping it from harm in order to sustain its presence and benefit. A lesson from the fig tree is that it is our religious duty and for our benefit to protect and preserve what resources we have—both human resources and natural resources—from further harm or loss. That’s what Sabbath-keeping is for—a gift from God for the welfare of humanity to help us save ourselves and our world from further harm.

So, may we keep Sabbath (whatever time we find it); may we foster its place, not only in our own lives, but in everyone we meet and the world where, in too many settings and situations, the well has

nearly run dry. For what we preserve in the present will be an act of redemption and, in time, become a saving grace for all.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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