



## “Discovering the Blessing of Rest”

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and Mark 2:23-28

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

If we can say anything about the world in which we live, we can say – without fear of contradiction – that it is a busy place. It does not matter our age, our school or work, our home life or our business life – we are busy. I’ve had retired people tell me that they are busier now than when they worked. I’ve seen high-schoolers look like the walking dead because of the busy schedules and homework load they carry. I’ve seen small children look like the haggard urchins of a Dickens novel because of all their activities. So, from a pastoral perspective, I want to offer you some thoughts on “discovering the blessing of rest.”

And, I realize, that I’m probably going to ruffle some feathers this morning. So, let me tell you that I am, in fact, preaching to the preacher. I know what it’s like to burn the candle at both ends and wishing that I could find a way to burn it in the middle, too. I have overbooked my schedule and have failed to take care of my life, my health, and my relationships. I’m not picking on you. I’m trying to speak to all of us out of concern for our well-being.

First, let’s think about being busy. Thirty-four years ago, I was given a copy of Henri Nouwen’s book, *Making All Things New*. I was a student in seminary and coming under the care of my home presbytery as a candidate for the pastoral ministry. They gave me a book. I put it on my shelf and didn’t look at it for several years. By then, I was in full-time ministry in a position that was not feeding my spirit. For some unknown reason, I pulled the book from the shelf and began reading. Some of the sentences were:

Being busy has become a status symbol...

Being busy and being important often seem to mean the same thing...

In our production-oriented society, being busy, having an occupation has become one of the main ways, if not *the* main way, of identifying ourselves. Without an occupation, not just our economic status but our very identity is endangered...

More enslaving than our occupations, however, are our preoccupations. To be *pre*-occupied means to fill our time and place long before we are there. This is worrying in the more specific sense of the world. It is a mind filled with "ifs"...

Our occupations and preoccupations fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives...

It was as though I was reading my biography. Could it be your biography as well?

The words of the Old Testament wisdom book of Ecclesiastes remind us that there is a rhythm at the heart of life.

For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up...

On it goes. You know the words.

Life, the ancient teacher seems to be telling us, is built on a pattern of sacred, God-given rhythms. And we know it's true. There are times of being apart and times of coming together. There are times of being hungry and times of being satisfied. There are times of gathering and times of discarding.

And, if we are honest with ourselves, there are times of being busy and there are times for the blessing of rest. There is the joy of expended energy in a full day spent at meaningful work and there is the joy of relaxation and deep rest at the close of the day. They exist in both tension and in partnership.

It is up to us to keep them in balance and maintain that sacred equilibrium.

In the pages of Scripture, this idea for a time of rest and renewal is given practice in the observance of Shabbat. One of the great gifts I have received from my time in worship at Temple Adath B'nai Israel is the joy and beauty of the Sabbath. The ritualization of welcoming the Sabbath - lighting the candles, saying the blessings, singing ancient songs - finds its fullest expression in a song called the "L'chah dodi":

L'chah dodi likrat kalah, p'nei Shabbat n'kab'lah.

Beloved, come to meet the bride! Beloved, come to greet Shabbat!

And at the moment before singing the last verse of the song, the congregation rises, turns to the open door, and sings:

Enter in peace, O crown of your husband!

Enter in gladness! Enter in joy!

Come to the people that keeps its faith.

Enter, O bride! Enter, O bride!

The tradition is based on a story from the Talmud that says Rabbi Hanina used to put on his best clothes and say, "Come, let us go forth to greet the Sabbath Queen." The Sabbath was seen as Israel's bride, who came to bring peace and wholeness and blessing. The Sabbath was a twenty-four hour period of restoration, renewal, and blessing.

Keeping Shabbat is one of the keys to living an authentically Jewish life. It remembers the day when God rested from the work of creation. Shabbat hallows time, bringing the blessing of rest into lives that are busy and demanding.

Of course, many of us can point to when Sabbath-keeping became, not a blessing of faith, but a burden to be borne. That practice is at the heart of the story from Mark's gospel, when Jesus and his disciples are making their way through a grainfield on the Sabbath. As the disciples walked, they grabbed a few heads of grain to sustain them. The Pharisees went ballistic! "They are breaking the Sabbath! They are working on the Sabbath! They are harvesting on the Sabbath!" You can imagine how it went.

But Jesus reminds them that they are doing only what meets human need and there is no law against that. They are not harvesting to sell the grain. They are plucking a few heads of grain to make a meal for the day.

And then Jesus reminds them: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath..." There is no law, or rule, or commandment, demanding that we rest. The Sabbath is a gift from God and time to rest. The Sabbath is a present - one day out of seven - a time for us to reconnect with God, our families, and our world.

Tilden Edwards, Episcopal priest and founder of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Renewal, in Washington, D.C., writes:

Sabbath rest is such a revolutionary act. It defies the boundedness of the workaday world...Sabbath rest creates a "sanctuary in time." It frees us to recognize our birthright in the image of God and to resist the temptation to succumb to any lesser image.<sup>1</sup>

Observing Sabbath time is a hallowing of time, of setting a day apart as holy - as other - as unique. Keeping a sense of Sabbath allows for restoring health and balance. Keeping Sabbath opens doors and windows to God's Spirit to be active in our lives. Keeping Sabbath is to actively receive God's gift of time - of reviving the sacred connections of life - of reclaiming our identity as children of God.

When you look at the Chinese pictograph for the word “busy,” it is composed of two characters: *heart* and *killing*.<sup>2</sup> And there is truth. Busy-ness – the adoration of being busy – will kill our hearts, wound our relationships, and break the connections which make life blessed.

If we are grandparents, we have the opportunity to carve out a time and place where our children and grandchildren can find refuge from the busy-ness of life. If we are parents, we can actively protect our children from over-scheduling and spirit-breaking demands. If we are young people, we can learn the sacred rhythms of life now and they will become part of who we are as we grow older.

Sabbath keeping – the restoration of body, mind, and spirit – is counter-cultural. There will be many who will not understand. There will be some who may dub us as “lazy.” There will be pressures to make exceptions and excuses for doing a little, even when we’ve decided to rest.

The story is told of Harvard University President Neil Rudenstien oversleeping one morning back in 1994. Rudenstien was a devout perfectionist, right in the middle of a million-dollar-a-day fund-raising campaign. Oversleeping was not an option.

But after years of intense, non-stop work, in an atmosphere that rewarded frenzied busy-ness and encouraged the ignoring of hours spent in work, Rudenstien collapsed. He was physically spent. There wasn’t anything left to draw from. There was nothing left to give.

He went to his doctor. “My sense was that I was exhausted,” he told reporters. His doctor completely agreed.

He took a three-month sabbatical – a 90 day Sabbath – read good books, listened to good music, walked with his wife on a Caribbean beach, and was, finally, able to return to Harvard and take up his work.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” There is a time to work and there is a time to rest. And when we find that time of rest, we discover – or maybe re-discover – that it comes as a blessing.

Sabbath is a time to regain the rhythm of life. It’s like on those hospital shows on TV, when the patient’s heart goes into defibrillation – goes out of rhythm. They get out the paddles and deliver a shock to the heart, hoping to get it back into rhythm. It’s dramatic on television. It’s terrifying in real life.

Take full possession of God’s gift of Sabbath renewal and rest. Let it bring you back into the holy rhythm of life. And maybe, you’ll never hear someone standing over you, yelling, “Clear!”

“Discover the Blessing of Rest.” I hope you will. For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1.) Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, p. 52
  - 2.) Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, p. 3