

Work and Rest

Genesis 2:1-3

Rev. Dan Schumacher

[This sermon will begin with a couple of minutes or so of deliberately uncomfortable silence right after I finish reading the scripture passage.]

Well... that was awkward. I'm glad we got that over with.

We aren't too comfortable with silence, are we? Particularly silence in public. This space is designed for you to have your attention focused on this stage. I mean, the pews are bolted to the ground. You couldn't make them face another direction if you wanted to. They make you face this stage, and from this stage someone should be singing or praying or reading scripture or preaching. But not just staring back at you in silence.

On the evening of August 29th, 1952, a pianist named David Tudor stepped out onto the stage of Maverick Music Hall near Woodstock, New York to perform the piece "4'33" by composer John Cage.

Seating himself at the piano he placed a score on the stand, set a stopwatch, closed the lid – and sat quietly for 33 seconds. Briefly opening then re-shutting the lid, he re-set the stopwatch and sat for 2 minutes 40 seconds, occasionally turning the score's pages. He repeated the process, this time for 1 minute 20 seconds. Finally he stood, bowed to polite applause from the remaining audience and walked off stage.

If you know John Cage's piece, "4'33," then you also know that it is a three-movement *silent* composition. If you were to try and order a copy of the composition, what you would receive is literally a blank score – no notes, no rests, no time or key. Just row after row of an empty musical staff.

The title page has a note that reads, "For any instrument or combination of instruments." Finally, a piece of music that even I could have written.

Cage, of course, caught all sorts of flack for his "work." I mean, it's just a blank composition. Can you even call it a composition when there's been no composing?

But there *is* a brilliance to it, isn't there? Cage was fond of saying, "Everything we do is music."

The clinking of the dishes in the sink as you wash. The clicking away of the keyboard as you type. The swish, swish, swish of the broom as you sweep. Humming to yourself as you shop. Even the jackhammer hammering on the street or the car alarm going off a block over.

Cage heard music in everything — and that was his point. For four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the audience became the orchestra, whether they realized it or not. The rustling of papers, the gentle cough in the back corner, the shuffling of feet and shifting of bodies in seats, Fred Jacobs talking to someone next to him. His point was, there really is no silence — not even when you come to a concert and musicians don't play... or you come to church and the preacher doesn't preach.

Most of us take for granted that we live in a sonic space, that our world is made up of sounds. Over our lifetimes, we get really good at ignoring noises we consider everyday or periphery noise.

But what if you take noise — tones, pitches — and you organize them? You put them in sequence? You make some last longer than others and some shorter? You make some really high and some really low? What if you give the noise order?

We call that *music*. And it's hard to ignore music. We ignore noise without even trying, but music catches our attention.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, it was all *noise*. The earth was without form and chaos covered the face of the deep. But then, God showed up.

When God saw that all was chaos and noise without any order, well, God decided to take that noise and make *music*.

God took position at the directors stand, picked up the baton, and with the downbeat, said, "Let there be light!" And it was! And God took the light and called it day. And God took the dark and called it Night. And God saw that it was *good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the *first day*.

Then with a sweeping pull of the baton, God separated the waters above from the waters below, creating a dome between them. And that dome God called Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the *second day*.

Then God swirled the baton at the waters and said, "Gather." As the waters gathered, he lifted his other hand and said "Appear," and dry land rose up. God called them "Earth" and "Sea." But the day wasn't over yet, so God called out to the earth, "Bring forth vegetables and fruits and trees for shade and grass for feet and every kind of plant." And so the earth brought forth vegetation of all kinds. And God saw that it was *good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the *third day*.

Then God took the baton and began poking holes in the sheet of darkness that he called Night. As he did, God said, "Let there be lights in the dome to separate day and night." Like sharp, quick staccato notes, God poked millions, billions of tiny holes in the Night, but decided to rip poke one large hole in the fabric of Day. He called the greater hole the Sun and the lesser holes the moon and stars. And God saw that it was *good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the *fourth day*.

Now, we humans have only ever been able to achieve four movements in a symphony, but God is infinitely more than us, and so in the fifth movement of God's great symphony, God danced the baton across the Sky and the Sea and said, "Let the waters bring forth fish, and let birds fly above the earth." And they did! — the seas were filled with so many types of fish that we still haven't been able to count them all (trust me I've tried), and the skies with every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was *good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the *fifth day*.

Then God danced that baton across the Earth, and said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cows and horses, sure, but also giraffes and panda bear, earthworms and moles, grasshoppers and ants — *all of the critters imaginable*." And it did! And God saw that it was *good*.

But the great symphony of creation was still missing something — something of God's very essence. So God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over creation." That was it! Humankind was the finishing touch, the missing reprise to the great symphony of creation. And so God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was *very, very good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the *sixth day*.

And on the *seventh day*, having finished his *magnum opus*, his masterpiece, God set down his baton and kicked up his feet, and God *rested* from all the work he had done. God blessed the seventh day and *hallowed it*, because on it God rested from work.

That is the story of how God made music from the noise; how God took the unformed noise and gave it order to make it into music, which over and over and over, God called "*good*."

But did you notice that on the seventh day, God does not call rest, "*good*?" God worked hard for six days and then rested and the rest was so pleasing, so delicious, that God did not call it *good* or even *very good*. God blessed the seventh day and called it *holy*, making the sabbath the first holy thing in all creation.

Rest is so holy, so important for what we would call a blessed life, that it shows up as one of the essential ten commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). We keep it holy by actually resting.

Unfortunately, we have a bad habit of taking the words of scripture and adhering to the "letter of the law" without fully considering the "spirit of the law." That meant, as a kid, I understood the sabbath as the day you on which *could not*, because the Bible said so. You *could not*, get an ice cream cone or go to the rec center to play basketball with your friends or play baseball. You *could not* even do fun things that might be restful for you.

Even in Later Pharisaical Judaism, all of the Biblical laws were broken up into 613 rules that were meant to help keep Jewish people faithful to the *letter* of the law. For instance, you could pick your child up on the sabbath, but if your child had a stone in their

pocket and you picked that child up, that was breaking the sabbath, because lifting even a stone was considered work.

That's what legalism does: it adheres to the *letter* of the law without any consideration for the *spirit* of the law.

Have you ever heard the Greek myth of Procrustes?

Procrustes had a house alongside a well-traveled road in Greece — a strategically placed bed-and-breakfast. Most days, he could be seen sitting on a rocking chair on the front porch of his house, smoking his pipe, welcoming travelers and offering them hospitality.

He was a stout man who seemed affable. His beard was a reassuring, grandfatherly white. His house was neat and well-kept. It looked like a safe haven to tired travelers. Most evenings, there was a guest or two. After welcoming them and providing them dinner, Procrustes showed his guests to their rooms.

Procrustes had a bed in his house that he described as having the unique property that it would exactly fit the frame of whoever slept in it. What Procrustes didn't say was *how* this was the case.

After his guests were fast asleep, Procrustes would enter their rooms and complete his hospitality. A short person would be stretched on a rack until they filled the bed. For a tall person, whatever hung over of arms and legs would be cut off to fit the bed. Everyone was made over to fit the dimensions of the bed either by stretching or by cutting (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, chapter 5).

Procrustes and his bed are the stuff of legalism — all are made to fit, even if it causes them harm in the process. Even sabbath wrongly used can be like that — can cause more harm than good.

But Jesus pushed back against the idea that the sabbath ought to be applied by the *letter* of the law. When confronted by the legalistic Pharisees about his disciples plucking heads of grain on the sabbath, Jesus said, "I think your understanding of the story is all backwards. God didn't create the sabbath just to make one more law for us to obey. God made the sabbath for our benefit. The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:21ff).

The spirit of the sabbath command is for *our* benefit. It's something *we* need, if we want to experience a blessed life. But that blessing cannot be coerced out of us. That's what legalism gets so wrong. It's not for God's sake, but for ours.

The word, "sabbath," comes from the Hebrew word, *shabat*, meaning "to cease." To cease from what? To cease from work — from the things you have to do to keep a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food on your table.

But don't be mistaken: sabbath only finds its deepest meaning in relationship to work.

If someone only rests and never works, we call that lazy. In the Christian tradition, we have actually labeled it as one of the seven deadly sins. We call it *sloth*. The Italians have a phrase: *dulce far niente*. It means, *the sweet doing nothing*. We all need some time when we can enjoy the sweet doing of nothing, but *sloth* is a deadly sin because slothful people grow sickly from overindulging in the *sweet doing of nothing*.

On the opposite end are many of us — *the workaholics*. Did you know that a Baptist psychologist and seminary professor coined that term? Wayne Oates coined the term *workaholism* in his 1971 book, *Confessions of a Workaholic*. When we give ourselves solely to work, we are fooled into thinking that our eternal value is based in what we accomplish here. So much for “saved by grace.” We convince ourselves that we must earn our worth in God's eyes — and Jesus would call that *legalism*.

But the model we were given at the very start of all things was of a God who *worked* six days and *rested* one; who said of his work, “It is *good*,” but who said of his rest, “It is *holy*.” The sabbath rest finds its meaning only in concert with work.

Consider the use of rests in music. A well-constructed piece of music knows how and when to use rests. It isn't notes of music, one after the other with no rests. The best composers know that rests add value and meaning to the notes.

I'll give you an example. Shazia's going to help me, ok? Listen the first couple of phrases of Beethoven's *5th Symphony*:

(Shazia plays it.)

Did you hear it? Dun-dun-dun-duuuun. *Rest*. Dun-dun-dun-duuuuuun. *Rest*. They're like little breaths in the music, little breaks that add to the suspense, the drama, the tension of the song.

But what if we took out all of the rests? Shazia, can you play it without any of the rests?

(Shazia plays it.)

You still get music, but you lose something, too — like some of the tension that one little inhale can provide, some of the meaning. It also sounds like if you tried to play like that all of the time, you'd eventually get too tired and burnout. You see, this is the soundtrack for the *workaholic* — *all notes and no rest*.

Ok, now, Shazia, I want you to play only the rests Beethoven's *Fifth*.

(Shazia plays it, and by it I mean nothing.)

And that is the soundtrack of the *slothful*. No notes, only rests. No work, only rest.

Shazia, can you play it one more time, but this time as written.

(Shazia plays it.)

You see what I mean? Rest and work find their value and meaning in relationship to one another. God has so organized the world that when rightly observed, work and rest are in concert together.

“Work is good, it’s very good,” says God. “But the sabbath is holy.”

This summer, I am going to observe the sabbath. I’m going to cease from working and I’m going to rest. My mind needs it, my family needs it, and my soul needs it. I do not see this as wasted time, as frivolous time, but as a needed breath before the next season of ministry – a rest before we compose the next season of music together.

And I want to thank you, because I have felt your blessing over it, and in so doing, you have made it more than good. You have made it *holy*.

Amen.