

A Sabbath Rest

Matthew 11:28-30

Introduction: "Should" is not an alternate spelling for Sabbatical

In 2018, I was ready for my Sabbatical. I had just finished the oral defense of my dissertation and passed. I was planning on a week of vacation to spend with my granddaughter to celebrate her graduation from High School and then REST.

Then I got word that a pastor was retiring, and the church was going to close two weeks after the trip with my granddaughters. I decided that I "should" be there for these "endings."

The biennial meeting of American Baptists was going to be held in late June. I decided that I "should" be there for that. So, I cut my sabbatical another two weeks short so I could go to the biennial and get ready for camp.

I learned first-hand that "should" is not an alternate spelling for sabbath or sabbatical. In fact, it is the opposite of sabbath rest. It is about obligation, duty, responsibility. We all live with should and obligations. During COVID, pastors took on many more "should and obligations." Cancelling worship, preaching online, keeping a flock together when we don't see each other, on and on.

Today is our sending Sunday for Pastor Dan and Christen. It is my chance to say to hopefully prepare us for this time of Sabbath and my last words of encouragement for my Pastor.

I am honored to be given this platform because, despite my own spiritual weakness in this area, I believe that by taking this sabbatical, Pastor Dan is modeling for all of us a healthier way of living and healthier spiritual practices.

A Culture of Work Shame

I believe that Sabbath and Sabbaticals are spiritual practices that are not just important but essential. As essential as prayer, reading scripture, and breathing. Not just taking in air, but the kind of deep breathing that settles in our soul and settles our soul.

In my new role as Region Administrator, I am following a person who tended to be in the office six to seven days a week. I tell myself that I don't have to do that, but there is that pull to "measure up." The person who calls me out most often on my new work patterns is the person I am replacing. She is saying to me, don't do it like I did. Do this job in a better way.

We live in a culture that for generations has praised and honored those who have a work-life imbalance. I have heard pastors brag about never taking a vacation. According to an article on the website the "Lonely Planet", In 2018, Americans left 768 million vacation days went untaken. Why? Somewhere, some of us use our "vacation bank" as the measure of our self-worth or our worth to the company.

In August, much of Europe takes the month off for vacation. That is in addition to other vacation days. Suzanne Lucas writes in *Inc.* how this practice can be befuddling to Americans. How could a restaurant owner take off for two weeks to spend with their family during the midst of tourist season? She, as a free-lance writer, complains how it is impossible to get anything done in Switzerland during August vacation.

In so many places we hear people bragging about working 12-16 hours a day or working 7 days a week. If we are not careful, we get judgmental of others when they have the audacity to stay home when they were sick or if they used all their vacation days.

Maybe if we took a couple minutes to think about this, we would have to reassess who is not "reasonable." Maybe the greatest benefit of COVID-19 is that it gives us permission to stay home when we are sick or to miss the "sending service" for a beloved son in the ministry.

Living in the Downside-Up Kingdom: The Counter-cultural Challenge of Being a Jesus Follower

Jesus' "contrarian" statements have caught my ear lately. Jesus on occasion would say, "You have heard it said . . ., but I say to you . . ." Matthew 5:43, You have heard that it was said, "you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'

You have heard it said, "Work until you are exhausted, and you will make lots of money." But I say to you, "You were not created for work, you were created to be my child and to love me." You were created to walk with me in the garden in the evening.

Sabbath rest was built into the creation story. A rhythm of work and rest. Work and peace. Genesis 2:2

Sabbath rest was built into the community as the people of Israel left Egypt to be formed as the People of God. A rhythm of work and rest, work and worship, work and peace. Exodus 20:8

Over and over, Jesus and the Pharisees clashed over the Sabbath. Just as we measure our self-worth or our worth to our company or church by not taking vacation, the Pharisees measured their faithfulness to God by how strictly they kept the Sabbath. People can turn even the gift of a day of rest into a competition and a place of self-righteous judgment of others.

Sabbath was even built into the way they viewed stewardship of the land. On the seventh year, they were to let the land rest. Leviticus 25:1-8 In the year of Jubilee, land was intended to return to original owners. Leviticus 25:8

Jesus had a lot to say about sabbath, but he also had something really important to say about rest. Jesus said to his followers,

28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (NRSV Mt 11:28-30)

Jesus never invited us to burn ourselves out.

So, in this season of Sabbatical, can we live a little more counter-culturally?

A Congregational Sabbath

As we come to this time, I have some words you, my church family. Then I will have some words for Pastor Dan.

First, we will need to manage our anxiety. If Katie or the EC are feeling too much anxiety about Dan's departure and proving that they can manage everything in his absence, they forget the first lesson of Sabbath, the world still turns even if you are not pushing. This is a great time to support and bless Pastor Katie, not to compare her to Pastor Dan who has a few years of experience on her.

Some churches develop internal stress and tension around sabbaticals. Power plays, judgmental attitudes, jealousy, I have seen most of it. In the Old Testament, part of the meaning of Sabbath was peace, an absence of war. God will give God's people rest from their enemies.

We know that we lean on Pastor Dan heavily as our pastor and leader, but for the next 14 weeks, the church will not fall apart while Dan is gone. The world still turns. People will still bring their offerings to church. We will still gather for worship. We will still live out our calling to be the body of Christ.

As a congregation, we need peace, healing, and rest as well. We need to rebuild this family. The last two plus years have been hard on Pastor Dan, but they have also been hard on us as a body. Who is wearing a mask? I miss my class. I'm not ready to come back yet. All of those responses are both normal and exhausting.

- A walk in the woods together and alone
- Walking in circles (a.k.a. praying the labyrinth)
- Learn something new
- Laugh together, play together

Lori and the rest of the Sabbatical Planning Committee has done a phenomenal job of preparing activities that are both spiritual/prayerful and full of play and joy.

Along the way, we can reach out to others and invite them not to "doing church" but to being church in prayer and at rest and play.

Sending Out Our Pastor

Dan and Christen, receive this sabbatical as a gift of blessing from your flock. Chris introduced me to Oplatek, the practice of family blessing by breaking the Christmas wafer together.

I wonder what blessing we would individually whisper to you as you go out?

For the next 14 weeks, find joy and rest. Live into shalom/peace. If you have something scheduled and you are tired, cancel it. For the next 14 weeks, do your best to

eliminate should from your vocabulary. Ask not, "should I do this," but "does this give me joy, peace or rest?"

Dan, even as you are stepping away, you are teaching us. You are modeling that sometimes the healthiest thing to do is to slow down. Slow down before we burn out.

One last thing we ask of you before you go. Please send us a picture of yourself around the first week of September. That way when you return, we won't treat you like a first-time visitor.