

Withering Hope / Sabbath Healing
Matthew 12:1-14 Tim Dickau July 10th, 2011

Longing for Rest

Are you getting a rest this summer? As a church, we work hard during the year in seeking to take up this vision of God's renewed world. So we take a break in summer. Even Crossroads meal in August. But if you are new here, be assured that September is coming and there will plenty of places to jump in. I hope you will be considering how you can be participating in our gathered life and work. Survey comes out in September listing many of the ways. Five pages long. I hope you will get caught up in this restoring mission of God, not only in the work we do here together in all the ways we engage our city, but in your work, home. Being part of a church engaged deeply in our culture as part of God's reconciling vision is part of the reason we are here. It's full on. Which is why we encourage folks to take a break in summer.

However, what happens when stopping our work does not lead to rest, or to restoration? What do we do when we struggle to find restoration, even during the times we have taken a break from working? What do you do when you go on holidays and come back feeling as tired and frustrated as you were before? What stops us from finding true rest? What keeps us in this perpetual state of dis-ease? What prevents us as a society from finding peace and rest together? That's the issue I want to talk about today. Here's the question I invite you to sit with and respond to at the end of this talk. What would real recovery look like for you this summer?

A Town Divided

When I was visiting El Salvador a decade while our partners in mission, David and Suzannah Nacho were there, they took us to this great little town called Allegria – translated into English as Joy. I certainly felt joyful when I was there. Allegria is situated in these lush green mountains, covered with coffee plantations. David also told me that they had the best coffee in the world. I'm like, David, c'mon. We live in coffee central right here on Commercial drive. We have some of the best coffee machines, or at least Charlie told me so. Nevertheless, I put the cup to my lips and took a sip, and guess what? It was the best coffee I'd ever tasted. As we sat there in the simple and bright city square, it felt like paradise.

But it wasn't paradise. Later that night, we met Moses, the mayor, and found out that the previous mayor had withdrawn large funds from the city and left the town with a large debt. The result was that they were unable to pay for basic infrastructure needs as a town – roads, health care, etc.. Many people were unemployed and homeless. The town was struggling to recover. We went for dinner with the town council with this young mayor whom Emmanuel Baptist had partnered with them to build homes for some homeless and unemployed families. A great gift. Moses was also working to get rid of that corruption. He had left a high paying job to take on this role and was providing competent, caring leadership to rebuild the infrastructure of that town. There was hope there.

But there was something strange going on there that night as we had this wonderful meal overlooking the lush green hills. There was obvious tension at that table. They were divided as a city council. It was tense. Some weren't talking to others. We felt the tension. When you are divided, rest is elusive, difficult to find, even in paradise.

We know it as a city too, don't we? Vancouver is a desired destination for many tourists.

And why not? But a beautiful city loses some of its shine when you are being squeezed out of it with housing costs. Or when you are considered a “nuisance” because you are poor and living on the street? Vancouver may be paradise for some, but for many it is a place of increasing poverty and even ostracism. How can our city be a place of rest when we are so divided with some living in extravagant luxury and many people living on the street?

Divided families are no picnic either. When your family is divided, at odds with each other, when you are not working together well, resolving conflicts, it’s hard to find rest, isn’t it? I talked with a woman this week who is about to turn 40 years old and the hostility among her family continues to leave her without rest in all parts of her life. When your family is divided, it’s hard to find rest.

The Divided Self

And finally, the same is true within ourselves. When you are divided within yourself, it’s hard to find rest -- anywhere, no matter how many holidays you have. You can stop work and head off to a beautiful paradise, but if you are divided within yourself, rest is elusive.

Paul speaks about this experience of being divided within himself in that passage we read from his letter to the Romans. Listen to his description of the divided self. “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am!”

That describes it well. The divided self. When you are divided, it’s like this battle is waging war inside of us and rest eludes you. You can be seated right in the middle of (paradise) a beautiful park and be preoccupied with war being waged within you. Perhaps, this battle is waging within you today. Perhaps you feel like you are split in half. That division within us can make us wretched. Paul asks, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Division is one of the main reasons rest is elusive – for cities, for families, for each of us individuals. Division deprives us of rest.

Three months after visiting David and Suzannah, I got an e-mail from them. They had just received terrible news. Moses, the mayor of Allegria, this man who gave the town such hope, had been shot, murdered. A couple days later, they found out who did it. It was one of the town councillors whom we had supper with that night; she had paid someone to murder him as he drove home one day from work. When a city is so divided, it can turn deadly. When we are divided within our cities, our families, and yes, ourselves, it can destroy us. So Paul cries out: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Did Jesus Reject the Sabbath?

The text we are looking at today is someone who can. It’s about Jesus and Sabbath rest. The idea of Sabbath in the Old Testament, in the Jewish tradition, was to cease work, to rest, to remember, to eat or feast – in regular rhythms, once a week. Or letting the land rest once every seven years. Or Jubilee –releasing debts and returning the land once at the end of 49 years. Sabbath was about these regular rhythms of rest – but it was the kind of rest that led to restoration. That healed the divisions in society, that brought families together around their common calling from God, that brought people back to their core identity. Sabbath was about

rest leading to restoration. Sounds like a good idea, eh?

The problem then we come to these two texts from Matthew's gospel that we heard earlier is that in both these stories Jesus seems to sit light on the practice of Sabbath; rather than encouraging Sabbath, Jesus seems to lessen the importance of Sabbath-keeping. Twice, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of not keeping the Sabbath laws; twice Jesus challenges their understanding of Sabbath and seems to offer a slacker, more lax interpretation.

Why was Jesus doing that? Was he rejecting OT practice of Sabbath? I propose that Jesus was critiquing the WAY they were keeping Sabbath. In that sense, the passages we look at today teach us how NOT to practice Sabbath. Ways that Sabbath does NOT lead to restoration.

One challenge for us as present day readers of this text is that we might find it hard to understand what all the fuss was about in the first place. It can be hard to understand why people were getting so uptight about a little work on the Sabbath. Let's face it. In our culture, Sabbath-keeping is a lost art, even for many Christ-followers.

To understand what's going on here in this story, it's important to know that keeping Sabbath wasn't a trivial matter in 1st century Jewish life. Keeping Sabbath was one of the key markers of Jewish identity. Who are we? We are the exodus people, those whom God liberated from oppression in Egypt. Every Sabbath, we remember this story. When you live under the never far away heavy hand of the Romans as they did, keeping Sabbath was also a way of declaring hope for God's future deliverance. For Jesus' contemporaries, keeping Sabbath was a symbol of identity and hope in the face of heavy taxation and the threat of violence.

You might compare the symbolic attachment to Sabbath keeping to the American symbolic attachment to their flag, especially say after 9/11. If you ripped down an American flag and jumped on it on September 12th, 2001, you wouldn't have been too popular. You were damaging a national symbol of hope in a time of crisis and attack.

Observing Sabbath law in Jesus' day held a similar type of symbolic value. In Jesus' critique, he's not altogether supportive of where their practice of Sabbath was leading his people. He wasn't exactly waving the flag.

Sabbath Keeping Gone Wrong

What is Jesus getting at in his critique of their Sabbath practice? How should we NOT keep Sabbath? Notice that Jesus references the story about David and his man entering the temple to eat the consecrated bread. This was during a time when David had already been anointed as the true king but was on the run from the ruling king, Saul, who was attempting to kill him. Jesus' reference to David then isn't just about offering a reason why he and his disciples were picking wheat on the Sabbath; it was Jesus' cryptic and almost teasing way of saying, "you don't even see what is going on here. Like David, I too have been anointed in my baptism, I too am the king in waiting. I am the one you have been anticipating in your Sabbath celebrations, and you don't even notice. You are like Doeg, the Edomite, who spied on David and ran off to tell King Saul. You are fixated on the fact we are picking some wheat on the Sabbath but you are missing out on the fact that there is a king standing right in front of you. You are missing the fact that one greater than the temple here. You are missing the reality that the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath. You are oblivious to what God is doing right in front of your faces to bring to fulfillment this promise of Sabbath, this hope of liberation that is now taking root through my

work.

Are We Missing the Work of God in our Sabbath Practice?

I believe that the response of the Pharisees is cause for us to examine our own practice of Sabbath. If we stop from our work, or are diligent in taking a day off, but fail to keep looking for, searching out, noticing, naming and celebrating the creative – and re-creative – work of God in Jesus, perhaps we are missing the point of Sabbath anyways. Sabbath-keeping is not just about ceasing work; Sabbath is about paying attention to the creator's return to renew his creation, it is about looking for, noting and celebrating the restoring work of God. Sabbath is about seeing anew amidst all the difficulties of our lives, that life is about more than just making a living; it is about the call to share in God's reconciliation, to seek healing in our families and society. **Does your practice of Sabbath rest lead to the restoration of this vision for you? If it doesn't, how might it?**

Resisting the Shrivelling of our Lives

In an age of constant connection to the internet, overwork, bombardment of advertizing in more and more public space, the result is so often the numbing of our spirits and the narrowing of our imaginations. Sociologists are now talking about “disconnection anxiety”, fear of taking a break from the internet. Do you have it? Ignoring this practice of Sabbath is going to make it easier to get distracted by all this noise and live oblivious to the ways of God. If we do, our lives will shrink. Are you becoming oblivious to the work of God in your life? In the lives of others? Is your life shrinking? Shrivelling?

If you take a day off every week, but fail to search for, name, and celebrate the creative – and re-creative – work of God through Jesus and by his Spirit, you are unlikely to find rest that leads to restoration. I want to give you a specific challenge tonight for your Sabbath practice. I'm throwing this out first of all to see if I can practice it myself.

First – the stopping/ceasing. I want to challenge you one day / week to turn off your internet, your phones, tablets. Disconnect. I don't find it easy myself to do that. But then the next part is this: replace that time with time spent reading scripture, listening to God, going for a walk in silence.

If we practice Sabbath like this, we will be refusing to have our lives defined and diminished by the constant noise. We will listen to the Spirit, we will look to the creator who has come to re-create us. We will be pulled back into or core identity, our core calling. That's part of what we are seeking to do in our worship, part of why we are seeking to reconnect to Jesus through these stories. If we take up these Sabbath practices this summer, they can be an act of resistance to this numbing of our lives and be the sort of rest that leads to restoration.

Paying Attention to Suffering

In the next story, the Pharisees miss the fact that Jesus is bringing God's healing to the world again. And in this story too, we are alerted to another way NOT to keep Sabbath. Here, we find out what can happen if Sabbath-keeping becomes an excuse to avoid those who are suffering right in front of us. The story reads like a warning to an approach to rest that is about ignoring the world, particularly ignoring its suffering.

When Jesus enters the synagogue, he encounters a man with a shriveled hand. Which becomes an occasion for the Pharisees to test out Jesus' loyalty to the Jewish markers of identity, to see if he was a traitor or not, to see if there was a way to get halt his growing popularity. So

Matthew writes: “Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” At which point Jesus reminds them that they pull a sheep out of a pit even if it is a Sabbath day. How much more so would he pull a man out of a pit on a Sabbath day? Which is what Jesus then does. Matthew tells us: “Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

In Mark’s telling of this same story, Jesus becomes angry at this point at their stubborn hearts. He'd had enough. They were not only missing the coming of God's kingdom through his own work and life, now they were ignoring the people whom God's kingdom had come to restore. Instead of Sabbath being an opportunity to celebrate God's healing kingdom and extending the healing of God to others, it had become a means of ignoring the suffering of others. Sabbath was being used as a weapon to de-humanize rather than re-humanize. This wasn't a Sabbath for humans; this was a Sabbath for no one.

It's almost like Jesus was engaging in social protest by healing this man on the Sabbath, throwing into light how far off their understanding and practice of Sabbath had veered from God’s purpose when they can’t even see this man in the pit in front of them.

One of the ways to assess whether your times of rest reflect the kind of Sabbath keeping Jesus has in mind is whether or not they lead you to be more engaged in the struggle for justice and care for the least, more engaged in God’s restoring mission. Are they?

In thinking about that question, we have found it helpful in our community to distinguish between privacy and solitude. Solitude is the need that every human being has to be alone before God, to listen, to reflect, to remember, to recover. What I just spoke about a moment ago. Privacy on the other hand, is the attempt to push the world away so I can do my own thing. Rest or holidays that focus on privacy tend not to lead towards restoration in my experience. They tend to make us more and more private, more inclined to divorce ourselves from others, and particularly from the suffering of others. Solitude, however, can take us deeper into the heart and mind of Jesus who helps us notice and gives us power to walk alongside one another, and to come close to those whose lives are shrivelling up.

An Unexpected Blessing

Here’s the thing. When I am practicing solitude instead of privacy, sharing in God’s work of restoration becomes more like a gift than a burden.

Let me give a small, perhaps trivial, but real experience I had some years ago. One Sunday a man Jonathan came to our worship at Grandview. This man had been connected to us for a while, he’d had a hard life and wasn't doing so well that day but he decided halfway through my sermon that I needed to be blessed. So he came up to the front, interrupted what I was saying, told me to stand to the side, after which he proceeded to bless me. I have to admit, I wasn't thinking about Jonathan at that point. I was only thinking about how Jonathan was messing up this sermon that I had worked hard on preparing. I wished that Jonathan hadn't come to join our worship that day.

Nonetheless, I stood to the side and let Jonathan bless me, mostly 'cause I didn't want to create a scene. So Jonathan started to bless me. Only he didn't just offer words of blessing, he

offered a very tactile, hands-on sort of blessing. He started at my head, standing as he did about a foot taller than me. And then he began working his way down my body, offering prayers for me and my anatomy. By the time he got to my stomach, I could see that John had no intention of stopping until he'd made it all the way down to my feet, which was making me more and more nervous. It's not every day that someone comes along and blesses your loins, in front of 150 other people. And when he finished blessing my entire body, John went and sat down.

Actually, it wasn't half bad. The truth is I don't even remember what I said that Sunday. I doubt anyone else does either. But I bet those who were there that day remember John's blessing. And I dare to say that Jonathan's blessing led us to experience more about the gospel than my sermon. More about God's desire to restore Jonathan, to see Jonathan as one who can be God's agent blessing, more about the healing touch of God.

Jesus' healing of the man with the shrivelled hand challenges any practice of Sabbath-keeping that becomes about getting away, or being undisturbed by the suffering, the poor, the broken. Sabbath is not just a holiday weekend off; Sabbath is about breaking free from our blindness, opening our eyes to God's world, a world that includes suffering and injustice. Sabbath is about becoming aware of those suffering right next to us.

Real Recovery

What would real recovery look like for you this summer? I think what happens over time in life is that our desire to make a difference in the world, or our dreams for living for the kingdom of God, can kind of shrivel up like the hand of the man whom Jesus met in the synagogue. Perhaps you are here today and there was a day when you had much passion for God; you had dreams for how you could serve God's kingdom,, but that passion, those dreams, have shrunken, shrivelled up to the point that they hardly move you any more. Or perhaps you are here today and have never exercised that passion, never dreamed those dreams because you were afraid.

How is Jesus inviting you into recovering your core identity and calling in him this summer? What would it mean for you to find solitude rather than privacy? To find rest that leads to restoration, not only for you but for those who are shrivelling up around you?

Let's listen in silence for the whisperings of God to these questions now.