



Who Needs a Nap?

TEXT
Deuteronomy 5:12–15
Mark 2:23–27

September 27, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

There is a story in my family that I feel certain is at least partially urban legend, but it is one of my mother's favorites to tell. When I was a young child, it was easy to convince me to take a nap. The problem was, every nap I took was incredibly short. So my parents told me that even if I woke up, I had to stay *in the bed* until explicitly given permission to get up.

I have no memory of this, but apparently I addressed this problem by staying *in the bed* and hollering at the top of my lungs, "Can I get up yet?" My parents, of course, would holler back, "No." And I, the oldest child and ever a rule follower, would reply, "OK."

My parents congratulated themselves on being geniuses.

My mother, however, claims that one day, the system fell apart. After being told to stay in bed a bit longer, I yelled back, "You better not be having fun without me," and I hopped out of bed, and out of my room, to investigate. From that day on, nap time required substantially more negotiation.

The word *Sabbath*, at its most basic level, means "stop" — stopping the work or ac-

tivities that typically fill your days.

Here's my confession: As a child, resting was hard because I worried that I might miss something. As an adult, resting is hard because I worry that I might not be missed. I am sometimes afraid of "Sabbathing," of stopping, because ... what if everything carries on just fine without me? What if it turns out I am really not all that necessary after all?

We live in a world where we are what we do. Human worth by and large is measured in productivity; multitasking is an essential life skill; speed in all things is a virtue; and "crazy-busy" is a status symbol. So when our understanding of self is tied up in what and how much we accomplish, stopping, for even a day, becomes a threat to our very existence.

And I can see in your eyes right now that you are way too well acquainted with what I'm talking about.

This commandment is the fourth in a series of ten. I used to see the commandments as ten distinct instructions — a wide swath of directions offering a variety of moral and spiritual guidance. The more time I spend with them, how-

ever, the more I find them to be woven together so tightly they are pretty much a package deal. To honor or disregard one is, in some measure, to honor or disregard them all.

Here's a piece of what I mean: The only way to honor the Sabbath is to refuse all the other voices in the world that clamor for our attention and our dedication, that tell us we are nothing more than what we have to show for ourselves at the end of each day. In other words, the only way to honor the Sabbath is to refuse to worship idols.

The only way to honor the Sabbath is "to say no to the 10,000 gods who promise to give us life and meaning in order to say yes to the One who has already delivered." And "this is true even when those idols are things very dear to us, like our sense of who we are and why we matter. Idols are [so] rarely made of junk; they are almost always made up of very precious things."¹

Sabbath asks us to instead trust something remarkably radical. Sabbath asks us to trust that even on a day when we are good for nothing, we are still loved, deeply and extravagantly, by the very creator

of the world. Sabbath asks us to trust that, by the grace of God, that is enough: to trust that we are enough.

I think that's where it fell apart for the Pharisees in our gospel reading today. Now some folks make the mistake of understanding the words "Pharisees" and "Jews" to be fully interchangeable. That's not quite right, and it's not quite fair to our Jewish brothers and sisters. All the Pharisees were Jews, yes, but not all Jews were Pharisees.

It might be better to think of the Pharisees as a group of religious officials who, much like oldest children, are big on the rules. They get a bad rap for this. And some of it is earned, but some of it, I understand. They had been raised by the rules, to honor the law above all else. They had been taught that that is what faithfulness looks like. Their insistence upon following the letter of the law was rooted in a good place.

But they were so preoccupied by the mechanics of earning Sabbath, they never managed to see that Sabbath isn't something we achieve. When we get it right, Sabbath is something we receive. Sabbath was made for humankind, Jesus says, not humankind for the Sabbath.

He says this right after he tells the Pharisees a story about David feeding his companions.

And here's the weird thing: He gets almost every detail about that story wrong. He's referencing a story recorded in

First Samuel, but if you look it up, the details are a mess.

For one thing, Jesus says Abiathar was the high priest at the time, but it was really Ahimelech, his father. (I know that error's been bothering dozens of you since I read it the first time.)

Most scholars will just blame these mistakes on the scribes — the ones who copied the gospels over and over again by hand were bound to make a few errors. And maybe that's the case. I'm just not sure I'm convinced.

What if Jesus gets the details wrong on purpose, to draw our attention to yet another inconsistency? Jesus makes a point of saying that David gives his companions the forbidden bread *because they were hungry*. First Samuel will simply tell you that David broke the rules. Jesus will tell you that David broke the rules because there were people in need.

Maybe Jesus wants us to realize that in any story, human need is the detail that will always matter most. Sabbath was made for humankind, he says, and not humankind for the Sabbath. When we get it right, we understand that Sabbath is a gift — a gift that meets us in our places of deepest hunger; a gift that says, among other things, what so many people desperately need to hear: Stop trying to earn your status as beloved, and simply accept that you already are.

You might have heard that the pope has been here in the United States this week.

Incredibly, Pope Francis has captured the heart or at least the attention of the entire world — and with good reason. Maybe more than anyone else alive right now, the pope seems not only to know scripture, but to live it.

He turned down lunch with members of Congress so that he could eat with the homeless.

When a little girl somehow slipped past security and ran toward him to give him a note, he said, "Let her come to me." Yesterday, already in his car on his way out of Philadelphia, he saw a boy with cerebral palsy in a wheelchair. He instructed his driver to pull over, and he got out of the car to go and bless the boy.

Earlier this week, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, Pope Francis spoke for a bit about Sabbath. He has done this before. And to the best of my knowledge, he has rarely, if ever, spoken about rest without also speaking about the practice of remembering — remembering all we have to be grateful for; remembering the way God has accompanied us throughout our lives.

This makes sense for a man who knows his Bible, because the commandments show up twice in the Bible. The first time is in Exodus, when Moses receives the stone tablets.

"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," Exodus tells us, "for in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day, God created rest, and *then* creation was complete."

So *rest*, Exodus tells us, because in your rest, you too will be made complete. Rest, because it means you trust, or at least you want to trust, that you are enough. Rest, because it means that grace is bigger and stronger than you. Rest, because God delights in us but does not depend on us, and that is surely some of the best Good News I know.

The second showing of the commandments comes in Deuteronomy. We've already heard that one already this morning:

"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy," Deuteronomy tells us, "and remember that you were once a slave in Egypt. Remember that God set you free with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

Remembering is the second half of Sabbath. Resting and remembering — they are two sides of the same coin.

Remember how the Red Sea was parted, to allow your safe passage.

Remember the sweet water of Elim, and the promise of God to bring healing.

Remember manna, the bread that fell from heaven.

Remember how you were instructed to gather only as much bread as was needed for one day, and how collecting too much meant it would be spoiled by morning; and then how on the sixth day only, a double portion was allowed in preparation for the Sabbath.

Remember how you learned what "enough" looks like.

Remember how the promise of God is *always* and ever enough.

Remember how once you learn to trust in that "enough," you can rest, free and unencumbered, even in the thick of the wilderness.

Remember who you are, so you can remember what's really important to you.

Remember where you come from, so you can remember where you're going.

Remember, so that when the crazy-busy looms again, you have your wits about you, and you can resist the temptation to sink back into its depths.

Y'all know that I enjoy going for a run now and again. I'm not fast, but I do enjoy it. A friend of mine consistently argues with that statement. "I refuse to believe you enjoy running," he says, "because every time I see a runner on the street, whether it's you or someone else, your faces all look miserable. In fact," he says, "you all look like you are ten seconds away from utter collapse, or possibly even death itself. Nothing about watching the face of someone who is running makes me think, 'I want to try *that*.'"

His skepticism reminds me of the philosopher Nietzsche, who once said something along the lines of, "If Christians want me to believe in their Savior, they're going to have to look a little more saved."

Barbara Brown Taylor, a preacher from Georgia, tells the story of a friend of hers, lost in rural North Carolina, getting pulled over. "I'm so sorry, officer," she said, "but I have been lost for over 40

minutes. I cannot find my hotel anywhere."

The officer gave her a long look and said, "Well, I'm sure sorry about that, ma'am, but what made you think that hurrying would help you find your way?"²

Hurrying will rarely help us find our way. Rest will — and remembering, and realizing yet again what Jesus so often teaches us: that the details of human need are always the details that matter most.

Omid Safi, a columnist for the website and podcast On Being, writes about the dis-ease of being busy. He says, "Any time I ask how someone is doing, the answer invariably comes, 'I am so busy. We have so much going on. I have so much to do. It is a crazy-busy few days.'"

"When," he asks, "did this become the default answer?" He says that in his Muslim culture, when you want to ask how someone is doing, you ask: "Kayf haal-ik?"

That means, literally, what is the state of your heart?

He writes:³ "In reality we ask, 'How is your heart doing at this very moment, at this breath?' When I ask, 'How are you?' that is really what I want to know. I am not asking how many items are on your to-do list, nor asking how many items are in your inbox. I want to know how your heart is doing, at this very moment. Tell me.

"Tell me your heart is joyous, tell me your heart is aching, tell me your heart is sad, tell me your heart craves a human touch. Examine your

heart, explore your soul, and then tell me something about your heart and soul.

“Tell me you remember you are still a human being, not just a human doing. Tell me you’re more than a machine, [more than a set of expectations, more than a case of anxiety nervously pacing the room, waiting for the clock to determine your worth.]

“Settle yourself. Have that conversation, that glance, that touch. [Tell me how God is surprising you, and sustaining you, even now. Be a healing conversion, filled with grace and presence.]

“Take the time to put your hand on my arm, look me in the eye, and connect with me for one second. Tell me something about your heart, because that will awaken mine.”

Maybe that is what it looks like to be saved — to be saved by Sabbath.

¹These words are borrowed directly from Barbara Brown Taylor’s talk titled “Resistance: The Sabbath,” presented at Kanuga Conference Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, as shared in “Resistance: The Sabbath”

³Omid Safi, “The Disease of Being Busy,” posted on www.onbeing.org on November 6, 2014. I took the liberty of using Omid’s words and adding a bit to them. Words appearing in this manuscript in brackets are my additions to his work.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.