

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
II SAMUEL 7:1-14a
PSALM 89:20-37
EPHESIANS 2:11-22
MARK 6:30-34, 53-56
July 21, 2024

A Step Back!

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while!” The twelve had just returned from an exhilarating but exhausting mission as Jesus sent them two by two into the unknown of the larger community to share the good news and perform miraculous acts on behalf of their rabbi and mentor. They preached, proclaiming to one and all a prophetic word of repentance in much the same way, but very different from John, the one infamously known in that region as the baptizer. Call me Mr. John T. Baptist! Yes, their preaching echoed the witness of the throwback prophet who had once mentored his cousin Jesus up until the appointed time when the young protégé sprouted his own wings and took flight like an eagle, setting out on his own as he too began to make quite a name for himself as a local clairvoyant religious celebrity. **Speaking of John, the Baptizer, the Baptist had just been brutally, violently, executed at the hands of Herod, beheaded in a horrific instant, slain at the fickle whims of this incompetent and insecure, most paranoid tetrarch governing Israel. Herod’s sadistic wife, in a fit of diabolical brilliance, used their daughter like a sponge after she exotically, perhaps erotically, danced before her father as a part of his birthday party, some celebration, Herodias making the vile and disgusting request to off John as he unfairly languished in a prison cell. No doubt, the disciples had been permanently affected, traumatized, by this insidious murder, the negative residual that the emotional, mental, and physical toll took on the disciples weighing heavily on their psyches and weighing heavily on Jesus’ mind. The rabbi’s deepest care and compassion for them was paramount, always central to their relationship, the rabbi both accountable and responsible, fulfilling his personal ethic as a sacred trust in managing their wellbeing. Evidently, the disciples were drained! It was time, probably past time, to take a break, to stop, to breathe, to breathe in and breathe out, to exhale, to take a step back. In an internet article titled “The Power of Stepping Back: Why You Shouldn’t Underestimate It”, Kizito Muokebe reminds us that “Productivity is often glorified; Whether it’s in our work, relationships, or personal lives, taking a**

moment to pause and reassess can yield remarkable results . . . Life moves swiftly, and we're constantly urged to push forward. But what if I told you that sometimes the most significant progress comes from stepping back?" Muokebe adds, "The pressure to be perpetually productive is ingrained in our culture. We fear that slowing down might lead to missed opportunities or falling behind. However, recognizing this urge and questioning its validity is the first step toward understanding the power of stepping back . . . Don't underestimate the potency of stepping back. It's not a setback; it's a leap forward. Experiment with it, and watch how it transforms your life." **Yes, it was time for Jesus and his weary band to get some rest and relaxation, time for some sabbath, time to reset, to regain their composure, some energy, yes, to get reenergized, reinvigorated, to gain some perspective and some much-needed equilibrium for the hard days ahead, challenges that always came their way, demands that were always their constant companion. It was time to get in a boat and sail away, leisurely floating across to the other side, escaping the cares of the world and the demands of the crowds, the throngs who followed him with all their many needs. And it is always time, probably past time, for us to do the same. Time to find that place, that sacred space, the rarified air of that ever-illusory sanctuary setting, yes, the relentless pursuit of some much-needed sabbath! We must be willing to take the first step if we are going to take a step back!**

Wayne Muller, in his book on sabbath, declares that "In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea (now, we can get with that one). In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale. We have lost this essential rhythm. . ."¹

I confess to you this morning that this sermon is directed at myself as much as toward anyone else. I am a classic perfectionist, prone to over-functioning in a whole host of ways, an undiagnosed OCD candidate to be perfectly honest. It is a blessing and a curse! For the most part, while these traits tend to serve me well in my personal and professional pursuits, they also haunt and even torment me on occasion. Relaxing is something I find challenging, even difficult. Perhaps my words this morning, along with

¹Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 1.

this true confession, will bring some solace, will resonate with some of you who are highly driven and sometimes just cannot let go and let be. Sometimes, perhaps even frequently, less is more, much more! As I have pondered the state of affairs, the toxically divisive situation consuming our country and rearing its ugly head throughout the world, I am convinced that some, if not much or most, of our civil unrest seems to stem from the stresses and strain, the collective fear and anxiety, that consumes and even manages to overwhelm our lives. Nothing is ever good enough, satisfying enough, enough as enough. For some, Vladimir Putin, and other narcissistically driven authoritarian, dictatorial autocrats, offer an excellent and horrific example, revealing an untapped level, an undiagnosed, psychoses exhibited in all its myriad forms, mental illness sometimes, perhaps oft times, a driving factor, an undeniable force. This evil man is far from alone! Yes, today offers a different kind of sermon, less edgy, less confrontational or in your face, less theoretical. In some ways for me, this sermon offered some sabbath, a mini sabbatical if you will! But in some ways perhaps these homiletical words are even more challenging because they ask us to do what seems so counter-intuitive to what society expects from us and what we have falsely been led to expect of ourselves, the puritanical Protestant Work Ethic still kicking, alive and well, demanding an internal drive that we always make sure we are always in full productivity mode, lest we become slackers, wasting our precious time and wasting our lives, frivolously consumed by our hobbies, whittling away valuable opportunities to do something as we pursue what some would falsely argue are the inane, misspent, shallow, pleasures of this life. Being a workaholic is a façade, sometimes covering up insecurities, but usually masquerading as an altruistic virtue. Laziness must never be tolerated. Rubbish! **As we enjoy these warm summer days, luxuriating in some of the most beautiful surroundings in the world, knowing how fleeting these fabulous days are, I am calling us to seize these precious moments in our lives, yes, the proverbial “stop and smell the roses” speech, to stop and take stock, to find sabbath in whatever ways sabbath works, irony intended, for you, yes, to take a step back.**

The Hebrew Bible in various places admonishes the Israelites to observe sabbath, the Sabbath day expectation strictly enforced, an observance that came with strict requirements even articulated as one of the big ten, not a college sports conference. To this day a most wonderfully warm greeting in Judaism on the high and holy day of worship is “Shabbat Shalom,” wishing someone “a Sabbath of peace,” “a peaceful Sabbath!” Strict rules about what constituted work were carefully articulated, purposefully built into the Sabbath system, these ironclad rubrics ordering this day by design were set apart to honor God. Rules and regs, always perfumed with religious

rituals, were built into the demands that the children of Israel set aside a time that would be dictated and dominated by doing next to absolutely nothing. Even meal preparation was strictly forbidden! It was a good guide! As we all know, Jesus tested, yes, stressed the boundaries of Sabbath keeping, breaking the standard protocols of what had become a time-honored tradition. We all know that he allowed, perhaps even encouraged, his disciples to eat on the Sabbath, knowing that people get hungry even on a day dedicated to the Holy One. I have always wanted to share that with the folks at Chic-fil-a! Jesus reminded his critics, the piously arrogant religious authorities, those who scoffed at his lack of protocol around this issue, that human beings were not made for the Sabbath but that the Sabbath was made for human beings!" We all get the point! Growing up near the city that birthed Chick-fil-A, College Park, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, as a former Southern Baptist we heard and heaped a lot of praise toward the founder of that restaurant chain, S. Truett Cathy. As you know Chick-fil-a is not open on Sundays, the originator of that company a strict biblical literalist who took the Bible beyond the stretching point of credulity. I have always thought Cathy missed the point, as did many of the ancients. Yes, a Sabbath day was needed, a very necessary invention, forcing a discipline that might not otherwise be honored or kept. Sometimes we human types need strict borders to ensure our compliance, but my theological intuition always reminds me that any forced stricture eventually fails to serve the common good. At some point in the journey, we use these covenantal laws to guide us, to embolden and empower us, and to free us to become our better selves. Sabbath is whatever it is that allows us the rest and recovery that we all so desperately need in our lives. And sometimes, that demands of us physical activity that is downright exhausting. For example, for some folks, full bore yard work or detailing the car are exhilarating exercises and keeps with sabbath keeping.

In the Witness from the Epistles in Ephesians today we are privy to another reminder of inclusion as a necessary dynamic, specifically as it relates to congregational systems. The writer describes in a different way, than the more familiar, more popular, verse we read in Galatians (3:28) from the apostle Paul that "There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Elsewhere, Paul reinforced this theme as he wrote to the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 12:12-31), reminding that the body is one but is made up of many members working together in harmony and unity because all have been baptized into one body by the same Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Paul's reminder was that it took everyone to be the church. In our contemporary, postmodern settings, it still takes everyone to be the church, to make church happen, to be a functioning and healthy organism, an ecclesial system that flows

seamlessly, smoothly, at its best diversity on display in its finest form. There is room for disagreement but no room for being disagreeable, conflict necessary to get us where we believe that God would have us to be.

As we read from Ephesians today in this beautifully crafted narrative describing the wonderful gift of diversity, Paul reminds the church at Ephesus, that by design, God's design, that Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles and Jews, the ancient equivalent including all people, were meant all along to be of one accord, one group, yes, one body. This was a most radical notion for the most kosher of people, traditional Jews who had always been taught, by and large, to religiously, or as much as possible, socially distance, to keep to self, to isolate, to preserve the sense of "choseness", to honor their belief that they were by divine selection special among all the tribes and clans of the earth. This extravagant caveat was interpreted as their divine right. Practices such as circumcision, dietary constraints, and clothing restrictions, among other customs, reinforced these vital understandings. Paul reminds his reader then and his reader now that Christ came to break down every wall, every barrier, that divides, every obstruction that separates, that segregates one part of humanity from another, knowing that all people are created in the divine image. Every person is embodied, yes, incarnated with the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ deeply bedded within. All human beings are stamped with holy imprimatur, imbued with the Spirit of God, a spiritual DNA that inextricably links us together, binds us all as one, yes, the tie that binds. Paul says that this relationship, this covenantal expectation, is made sure because Christ is our peace, our shalom. Paul adds, speaking of Christ, "With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divides us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God." I am convinced that without a significant level of sabbath in our lives, individually, and yes, as groups, even as a local missional church, as beloved faith community, that peace, shalom, in all its myriad and wonderful manifestations is never possible. We must find and make peace with ourselves, with our neighbors, with our community, our country, and with our world. When we cannot, do not, get along, we cannot experience peace, we cannot experience sabbath. Yes, they go hand in hand, inextricably enmeshed, hardwired to the max degree! We need a sabbath moment. We need peace. We all need to stop and take a huge breath, allowing the peace of God to be absorbed into our being, to overwhelm us in ways that restore our individual and collective equilibrium, our emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health.

“Come by yourselves to a secluded place and rest for a while!” My hunch is that while this hope proved to be a fleeting delusional fantasy at best, that Jesus was imagining restful pastoral scenes dancing in his head like those delightful settings envisioned in the 23rd Psalm. Yes, Jesus and his disciples desperately needed some green pastures nestled beside still waters, luxuriating in a picturesque tableau, perhaps like what the Irish call “thin places,” places where heaven and earth meet, touching, caressing one another, lush open spaces that could serve to revive, to restore, the soul. We long for cups overflowing with the oil that unleashes its restorative qualities! They needed them then and we need them now because we are like them in more ways than we are not! On that specific day Jesus’ hopes and dreams were dashed, time away not going to happen, the needs too great, the demands too high, yes, just as it so often is with us. Even so, keep your eye on the prize. Do not lose sight of shalom, sabbath! Do whatever you need to do to take care of self, yes, to practice self-care, to stop and find moments of reflection, rest and relaxation, moments that might even lead to transcendence, the subtle presence of the Holy, yes, to take a step back! If we of all people cannot find this solitude here in the Northwoods then who among us ever could? The world and all its contents are restless, in need of a break, yes, needing to breathe, to take a collective breath! The universe and all the mystery contained within it and overflowing from it cries out in travail as globally warming climate change threatens our very existence, all creation desperately needing a sabbath, a breath, as it gasps for air! All of God’s goodness, very goodness, needs an existential inflection point, a pause in the action, and that cease and desist begins in the lives of each and every one of us, you and me, the human creature endowed with the divine spark, no doubt the Holy One as well on occasion taking a sabbath, a much-needed respite on occasion. Go and do likewise!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and invites us to find some peace, shalom, a dose of sabbath, whatever sabbath means for each and every one of us! Amen and amen!