

Called to Sabbath
Luke 5:12-16 and Matthew 14:13-23
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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The two stories we read today are usually stories we read for the action. We pay attention to the healing. We pay attention to how many people were fed. We look for the miracle. We ask questions about what was happening.

But rarely do we pay attention to the first and last sentences of stories such as these. Rarely do we consider those details anything more than transitions as we move in and out of stories seemingly only about Jesus' amazing power.

But, today I am asking us to do something different. I am asking us to pay attention to how these stories end. In fact, how the one from Matthew's gospel *both* ends and begins. In both stories we hear something to the effect of, "Jesus took time away from the crowds and away from the work, and went to rest and pray."

But here's the hard reality...often we don't really *want* to pay attention to that. This is especially true if we understand that as those who claim to follow Jesus, we should model our lives after his.

After all, we live in a time and a place where we are in a hurry to be busy, where a full calendar is treated as an accomplishment. We look down on others who aren't doing much, who aren't constantly rushing from commitment to commitment. We beat ourselves up for having days without a plan, days when nothing is "accomplished". We wear our busyness as a badge of honor.

And yet, so often our busyness gets in the way of our being. Hear that again: our busyness gets in the way of our being. So often our full schedules don't only deplete us physically but spiritually as well. So often we lose sight of who we are and who God created us to be as we strive to meet others' expectations and race against the looming deadlines.

But in both of these stories, stories about Jesus, what we see is that the same person who makes time for others, even crowds of others...the same person who even understands that there are appropriate times to set your needs aside and tend to the needs of others...that person...our Jesus...still makes his time away and his time with God a priority. He lives with a commitment to connection and renewal. And it is that commitment that isn't a bonus left for *if* he has time, but

rather a necessary part of the rhythm of his life *in order that* he can show up for others and be who he needs to be.

So, if Jesus needed to take time away, to go off by himself to a deserted place, to step away from the demands and expectations, to be alone in community with God...who are we to think we need anything less?

And yet, it isn't easy.

And I know that to be true. For many years I shared an annual weekend silent retreat with a group of people from the congregation I then served. It was a practice I had been introduced to during seminary and one that became very important in my life and the lives of others.

And *every year* the week before we were scheduled to go, I wondered why I had made that commitment. *Every year* I looked for an excuse not to go. *Every year* I had at least a moment of hoping that some crisis...nothing major, but something just significant enough...would occur so we could change our plans. You all know by now that I am a lover of winter, but never have I prayed so hard for a snowstorm or even ice as I did in the years when our retreat was in January.

And meanwhile, I knew the weekend would be wonderful. I knew I needed the time away. I knew the more I didn't want to go, the more I needed to go. But, I also knew it was a good thing that we spent 48 hours because it would take me the first 24 to settle in to that kind of silence.

See, what I experienced is that extended silence and attentiveness to God doesn't necessarily fit like a soft bathrobe. It isn't always easy to just slip into. Rather, I could stop talking...I could turn off my phone...I could silence the noise around me, but I still had to confront the noise within myself. And in the silence it was much harder to avoid the difficult truths that I was too often running from.

I often wonder if that isn't part of our obsession with busyness. After all, if we really spend time alone in silence, we might have to face some truths, and that can be difficult.

If we really spend time listening to God, we might have to change our lives.

If we really spend time in the presence of the divine, we might become so invested in this world and in other people and in God's vision of the kin-dom, that we give up things our culture tells us we can't do without.

If we really develop a relationship with God, we might not only feed the hungry and offer healing to those who hurt, but we might also have the authorities on our tails as we make them uncomfortable with the proclamation of God's love.

If we connect deeply with God, we just might become more like Jesus.

Friends, this can be scary.

And meanwhile, it is in the very act of filling our cups, of spending time simply being, of listening to God's call and the truth of our creation...it is there that we become the best of who we are meant to be and it is there that we find the strength and the courage to show up for others.

Remember these stories. It is not an either/or proposition. Jesus doesn't choose time away in prayer *over* feeding hungry people. He doesn't choose a deserted place with God *instead* of healing someone who is hurting. Rather, it is in the balance that life becomes abundant both for himself and for others to whom he responds.

And this isn't only true in these stories. The very creation story...the place where our Bible begins...sets up a balance of work and rest, of exertion and sabbath, of doing and being. And the proclamation of sabbath was never meant to be about restrictions and demands, but rather about the reality that we need time and space that is simply designed for rest and connection, for prayer and renewal.

The stories we read today also remind us that there is not one right way to do this. In one story, Jesus is needing time away, but he delays because the needs of the people are pressing. In neither story do we hear that his time had to be claimed on one certain day of the week or one certain practice. Again, sometimes we bind ourselves to the details and often that serves as an excuse...when we can only practice sabbath at one time or in one way, then if we miss our opportunity we can easily just walk away.

But, what if sabbath rest is always available?

What if we realized that we can experience it by taking two deep breaths whenever the phone rings before we answer it *and* can experience it when we are fortunate enough to be gifted with months or even a year long sabbatical time of renewal by our employers?

What if we realized that we can choose a sabbatical walk in the woods on a beautiful day or ten minutes of prayer at our desk after lunch?

What if we realized that we could practice yoga for more than the strengthening and stretching of our bodies, that it could be a practice of opening our hearts to the divine?

Friends, sabbath opportunities are all around us. God is waiting and wanting to connect with us. The very fiber of our being is craving some silence, some conversation with God, some sabbath rest.

What might your life look like if you chose to make a sabbath commitment?

What impact might such a commitment have on you, and also on the world?

What might you hear from God if only you were listening?

Sabbath...it is a way of life to which we are called. May we choose to engage it, to commit to it, to thrive in the abundant gifts of sabbath. Amen.