

“Come and Rest” – Stephanie Wing, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Are you familiar with something called “the Protestant work ethic”? Well, according to most people, for that we can thank our own John Calvin, the French theologian to whom we trace back our theological heritage as Presbyterians. You might have noticed him in the news lately, as there have been festivities around the globe celebrating his 500<sup>th</sup> birthday, which would have been July 10<sup>th</sup>. One of Calvin’s many enduring legacies is his view of work and vocation. It was a radical change from the Catholic understanding of vocation, which was very narrowly focused on two sacraments of vocation – Holy Orders, as taken by monks, nuns, and priests, and Marriage, as taken by most others. Calvin argued that all work is vocation, and God calls all of us to work. Work is not just a means to meet our material needs. Work is actually a religious duty, and it is our privilege to respond to God by doing our very best in whatever field God has called us to work. Following one's vocation should be a source of joy as we fulfill the purpose that God has predestined for us.

Calvin also argued that we should do everything in our power to achieve the greatest possible success in our particular vocational fields, including the pursuit of wealth. It wasn't driven by greed or the desire for to accumulate material goods. Rather, wealth enables us to continually re-invest in our work so that we can increase productivity and, in turn, be more successful. Hard work and vocational

success were thus a form of spiritual piety and practice. In addition to working hard in professional fields, Calvin also applied the work ethic to social and civic engagement. Calvin believed that Christians are called to transform the world, and so hard work professionally and civically was an important religious duty.

While this is good, it can also be carried to extremes. John Calvin did not just originate these ideas; he exemplified them. Calvin was a notorious workaholic. One writer notes, "From the crack of dawn to the last flicker of candlelight, he studied, he preached, he lectured, he joined and adjudicated debates, he wrote tirelessly, despite migraines, bowel problems, hookworms, kidney stones and eventually pulmonary tuberculosis."<sup>1</sup> He died at the age of 55, leaving behind an unbelievable number of papers, sermons, lectures, extensive commentaries on every book of the Bible, and of course, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The breadth and depth of Calvin's life work is astounding. But what about Sabbath? What about balance? What about caring for all of creation - including ourselves? God established the Sabbath as a day of rest, and we have many examples throughout the Bible showing us how God calls us to Sabbath, not just one day a week, but as part of our orientation in life. There is value in rest.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Steinfels, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/us/04beliefs.htm>

Jesus knew this. I am always struck by the mention in the Gospels of times when Jesus retreats to a quiet place for solitude and prayer. We see clearly in our Gospel reading today that it wasn't easy. As Jesus' reputation spread, people sought him out, and literally ran ahead of him, just for the chance to see him, hear his voice, and perhaps even to touch his cloak. Those with needs for healing pressed in from all sides, and Jesus healed many people. But there were always more just around the corner. His work was never done.

Do you ever feel like there is always more to do, that your work is never done? Jesus calls the disciples aside to a place of solitude and wilderness. The text says that they were so busy coming and going, they didn't even have time to eat. This seems to be the story of our busy lives today. It doesn't really matter what we are doing - there is always more to do. There is always something that we are leaving undone, and yet we work harder and harder, have more meals on the run or from the drive-thru window, and we never seem to complete our to-do list.

We know this isn't healthy, or balanced. We know that we should make more time to take care of ourselves - to exercise, to get enough rest, to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, to nurture our relationships, and to nurture our mind by reading more and continuing to learn new things. We know that we should do these things, and God calls us to do them, but it is still hard to find the time when there is so much that must be done.

Even if we were to feel like our personal checklist is getting covered, the demands of a world in need quickly fill it up once more. We don't have to look far to see the needs that press up against us here in Harrodsburg, in other parts of Kentucky, and of course throughout the country and world. Our church has a long history of reaching out and ministering to the needs around us. We started the Food Pantry here, as well as the Habitat for Humanity Chapter. We collect hunger offerings each month, special offerings throughout the year, and participate in other missions like the collection for flood victims in Eastern Kentucky. But there is always more to be done, always another need waiting just around the corner. That is what Jesus and the disciples encounter. It seems like there is no rest for the weary. It's almost enough to make us give up, to tune out the problems around us, bury our heads in the sand, and focus on our own problems.

But of course God does call us to work and service in the world. Each of us has gifts that God has given for us to use, and the Holy Spirit activates those gifts for service in the world. But God also calls us to Sabbath and to rest. After sending out the disciples on an exhausting tour of teaching, preaching, and performing miracles, Jesus calls the disciples to a place of solitude – literally a desert or wilderness – for rest and fellowship. Though God does indeed call us to action in the world, God also ordains for us times of rest and refreshment. It can be hard for us to heed that call, especially when there is always more to be done.

A Lutheran pastor wrote the following reflection last week: “Pastors are notorious for overworking... When people say, "Pastor Bob is a total workaholic," we all know that this is secretly seen as a pastoral virtue. To work 60+ hours a week is to show commitment and passion. And there's so much work to do, isn't there? How is the church supposed to function without us? Well-meaning friends smile and say that we must take a sabbath and rest. But as a friend of mine once observed... [i]f the sabbath were *only* for rest, we might be tempted to think it serves only to fuel us back up so we can do more work. ... "You *have* to take sabbath," my friend told me, "if only to realize that God's redeeming work in the world actually goes on just fine without you.””<sup>2</sup>

Sabbath is God’s gift to us, not just to give us rest, but also to remind us that God is continually at work in the world, and that all of our activity is predicated on God’s grace-filled acts of redemption in a world full of need. God calls us to action. And God calls us to rest. The work that we do is important, but it is only because God is already at work in the world that we have true Christian hope for healing and mending in our broken world.

Jesus calls the disciples into the wilderness for rest and fellowship. I don’t know about you, but when I think of wilderness, I think of a place with no water or vegetation; a place where the struggle for survival is constant. I think of a place

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<sup>2</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, <http://theolog.org/2009/07/bloggng-toward-sunday-with-or-without.html>

with no road signs, where everywhere you look the terrain is the same, and the way out seems impossible to find. I think of spiritual or emotional wilderness - a place of draught and doubt, a place where one feels completely alone and without any support systems. I think we all go through wilderness like this at certain points in our lives. Sometimes we travel there; other times it seems we wake up one morning and just find ourselves there – hungry, thirsty, and weak.

But the wilderness is also a place of rest, refreshment, and strength. It is a place where we learn anew to rely on God for all of our needs, for direction and protection. When we are surrounded by a whole lot of nothing, the way is cleared for God to minister to us. I heard someone who had just been to a very poor country tell of his conversation with a local preacher there. The preacher said, “In the United States, you have all you need. If you are hungry, you go buy food. If there is no money, there are places that can help. You have no need for miracles, and so you don’t see them when they happen. Here, we have nothing, and so when our needs are met, it is only through miracles. We see miracles every day.” In the wilderness, we meet God in new ways. That is another gift of Sabbath.

God’s refreshment is not just spiritual – it is also tangible. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, God sent Manna and quails to sate their hunger, and made water flow from rocks to quench their thirst. Jesus shared many meals with his followers. He multiplied bread and fish so that a whole crowd was fed.

God wants to feed us, and we continue to be fed at this, the Lord's Table. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are reminded of God's concern and provision for our daily needs. God gathers us together as a community so that we may also support each other through our wilderness journeys. We participate in this meal of Thanksgiving knowing that Christians in every time and place have been fed at this very table. We also remember those who are not gathered with us. Some are sick, or unable to make it to church. There are some for whom the struggle to be here is not physical, but emotional or spiritual. Perhaps there are some in our community who do not know that the Table is set, who do not know that an invitation has been made, or who do not feel the welcome of Christ.

God invites us to eat and drink of the free gifts of grace and forgiveness. God invites us to come and be healed, to be refreshed, to press in as close as we can get, just as the crowds pressed in around Jesus two thousand years ago. God looks upon us with compassion, and invites us to come and rest. Won't you come?