



## Remembering the Sabbath (or Would You Eat at a Restaurant with an Anorexic Cook?)



Jonathan Golden, Ph.D.

Would you eat at a restaurant that had an anorexic cook? Hold that thought a minute.

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8 NRSV).

“Holy,” meaning set apart, separate, distinct.

Over the years I’ve seen a number of clergy who were struggling in their jobs, many of them on the bleeding edge of burnout—emotional exhaustion, cynicism, a diminished sense of personal effectiveness. They felt drained, tired, used up, sometimes simply going through the motions of ministry. That original fire that drew them into the vocation had dwindled to little more than a few dying embers with a thick covering of ash.

In the majority of cases, a common theme running through the stories of these clergy was the lack of personal Sabbath renewal. In other words, when it came to spiritual nurture they were giving out far more than they were taking in.

Consider: for most clergy, Sunday is not Sabbath. Sunday is a work day. The kind of spiritual nourishment and renewal that many church members experience on Sunday may not be happening for their pastors, those whose job it is to see that things unfold as they should and that the organization of church runs smoothly. For pastors, Sunday is work.

Let’s be clear about our terms here. “Sabbath” isn’t simply a day off from work. Days off may be devoted to yard work, house work, golf, time with family, or whatever one finds relaxing. To be sure, most clergy need to be more intentional about taking a day off each week, away from any church-related activity. But taking a day off is not the same as taking a Sabbath.

Nor is vacation time really a Sabbath. Vacation too is important. We need to be able to step away from the job and spend extended quality time with family, renewing the relationships that are important to us. It’s vital for our emotional well-being, but it’s not Sabbath.

Sabbath is what Mircea Eliade called “sacred time”; it is, as

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scripture says, "holy," meaning set apart, separate, distinct, unlike other days. Sabbath is self-transcendent time. It is time apart, time for prayer, meditation, contemplative work, devotional reading, doing those things that strengthen one's connection with God. It is intentional time when we are nourished spiritually through whatever medium works best for us. And as empirical research has shown it can be an effective buffer against the stressors that lead to burnout.

For most clergy, the bulk of their work involves what might be called "horizontal faith maturity"—strengthening the ties within the community, caring for the sick, evangelism, building outreach ministries and nurturing fellowship. All of that is important. Sabbath, however, is more about "vertical faith maturity," transcending the self and deepening the relationship one has with something greater than oneself.

And the pastor who neglects that element of the vocation will not last long in the parish.

It may be surprising to learn that far too many pastors find themselves devotionally malnourished and spiritually anorexic. They expend a great deal of energy feeding their flock through sermons, study groups, and visitation, but they spend far too little time feeding themselves through a weekly day of Sabbath renewal. Spending 30 minutes in the morning reading scripture in preparation for a sermon may be beneficial, but it's not Sabbath. Studying for and leading a Bible study may be beneficial, but it is not Sabbath. Unfortunately for many of the pastors who have passed through my office, that's the extent of their spiritual nourishment. Likewise, taking a day off for golf or yard work—or even a week off to spend time at the beach with family—may be beneficial, but it is not Sabbath.

"But I can't take a whole day for that! I've got too much to do!" All the more reason to take that day every week. Consider it part of the job.

"But I'd feel guilty taking that much time for myself. I'd feel like I was neglecting the church." The church with all its needs will still be there when you're done, only you'll be in a better place emotionally and spiritually to deal with it.

"But ..." We're full of excuses why we can't take that time for ourselves. And the result? Pastors teetering on the edge of burnout, simply going through the motions.

Church members can certainly help with this. Consider the previous question: Would you want to eat at a restaurant that had an anorexic cook? Would you want to attend a church where the pastor took no time for his or her own spiritual nourishment? Encourage your pastor to devote one day a week (other than Sunday) to his or her personal spiritual enrichment. One whole day for Sabbath renewal. Build it into the job description. Allow that day to be set apart and holy—no phone calls, no meetings, no visitation—and then honor it. Indeed, think of it as part of your pastor's job. In the long run, you as parishioner will be better served by it.

After all, how can we really expect them to nourish us if we will not give them the time and space to nourish themselves?

## Still Waters



Mark Larson, D.Min., L.P.C.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul."

Psalm 23 NRSV

I'm beginning this article on my daughter's laptop, sitting in a sturdy wooden chair on a porch elevated over the side of the Jonathan Creek in Maggie Valley NC. The rain is pouring down around me now but I am sheltered by the porch roof. The sounds of the rain on the roof blend delightfully with the rushing water of the creek, less than 15 feet below. In spite of all the rain, I feel downright cozy! Every year I reserve a room at this inexpensive hotel (Stony

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Creek Motel) just for this porch. This porch, the sound of the creek and the totally restful feeling I get here, draw me back every chance I get.

I am on the dinner break of our WNC Annual Conference at Lake Junaluska. It has been a hot stressful day of meetings, listening to speeches, standing and walking. Sure meeting with friends and colleagues in a resort area is nice, but the Conference part *is* work.

I've always loved to be near water. Growing up in Minnesota that was not difficult! My hunch is probably everyone enjoys being near water, though. For years I assumed it was just the visual beauty the aesthetics and natural restfulness of water (be it the beach, lake or river) that was so reenergizing to me. That all is still probably true, but a few years ago I happened to read a science article about water and negative ions. This article showed me that my enjoyment of water is no accident. There are many measurable ways our body responds to being close to water.

Basically, negative ions are produced by water, especially when it is moving. Negative ions also are produced in other natural environments like fields, seashores, lakes, mountains, etc. "The negative ion concentration in the mountains or in a country meadow is typically 2000-4000 negative ions per cubic centimeter. A large waterfall offers around 1,000,000 per cubic cm negative ions in its vicinity. Contrast this with the negative ion concentration of 100-200 negative ions per cubic cm in a typical indoor environment." For an introduction to the science of negative ions and how they benefit our body's energy system see:

<http://healthmad.com/health/health-benefits-of-negative-ions/#ixzz0qle9jbvj>

Negative ions interact with our body's electromagnetic energy system. This interaction benefits our health by:

- \* increasing "blood flow with resultant increased oxygen-carrying capacity to cells and tissues."
- \* improving hormone production which helps the body to heal itself
- \* stimulating endorphins which are mild antidepressants
- \* reducing pain in arthritic joints
- \* removing dust particles and allergens in the air

No wonder we like to be near water!

However there is an ironic thing about this psalm: the Lord has to "make" us to lie down near green pastures. Our Lord has to "lead" us beside the still waters. But isn't that true? It sure is for me. We get so caught up in our urgent business and emergencies that we routinely walk by our sources of rest and refreshment and don't take advantage of them. Sometimes we have to be dragged kicking and screaming to our green pastures and still waters.

So my prayer for you then this summer is: may you follow God's leading to green pastures and still waters. And may you stay there and be restored!

## Summer, Sabbath and Self-Care



John V. Arey, Jr., D.Min.

Summer is upon us, and if the temperatures and humidity levels are indicative of anything, then August has come early and will last a long time. Summer is traditionally a time when the pace of life slows, families spend more time together vacationing at the coast, the mountains, or traveling to see relatives that live in other parts of the state or the country. Backyard cookouts, vegetables and meat on the grill, ice-cold sliced watermelon,

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churning homemade ice cream are just a few of the associations one might have with the word summer. Vacation Bible School, a more relaxing summer attire, a switch to one worship service, the choir taking the summer off, summer revivals, and camp meetings are a few of the associations one might have with the word Sabbath. Walking on the beach, walking in the neighborhood, hiking in the mountains, family picnics, family reunions, eating healthier, eating fresh vegetables from your garden or the local farmer's market, changing diet patterns, taking time off from work, reading a good book, sleeping in on weekends are just a few of the associations one might have with the word self-care.

Do we associate self-care with summer and the Sabbath? Or are those three things separate and unconnected? Self-care should be an on-going process, but for those who have dedicated their lives to helping and serving others, self-care consistently seems to be low on the totem-pole of priorities. It becomes all too easy to say "Yes" to the needs of others while ignoring, neglecting or perhaps worst of all, not even knowing what the caregiver's needs are. Paying attention to what the signs of burnout are is an excellent first step in self-care. At the top of the list would be **denial**. Many who dedicate their lives to the service of others appear to deny that they have limits and that without proper care can literally run out of gas. Often by the time they are aware that they are hitting the wall in terms of caring for others, they are most easily in touch with the second sign – **anger**. This anger may not be acceptable to them because of various internal beliefs that mitigate against expression of this "negative" emotion. So where does the anger go? It is suppressed within the individual, who then may attempt to cope by engaging in **social withdrawal**. As the pressure to continue to perform increases, **anxiety** may become a predominate feeling. Additional suppression of feelings can lead to **depression, exhaustion, and sleeplessness** with an increase then in **irritability**, and **difficulty focusing or concentrating**. As all of these things pile up on the individual, the body as an organism begins to display the signs of this unmitigated stress with various health problems – high blood pressure, headaches, and gastro-intestinal problems among others. Enter summer. It is as though with the onset of summer and its higher temperatures, many individuals will give themselves permission to slow down a little. It is an excellent time to change one's habits, to engage in introspection as to what is going on with oneself and one's life, and to reflect on where one is in his or her walk with God. When under stress and duress, one of the first things that people tend to let go of are their spiritual disciplines, the very things that can help them in a plan of self-care.

Eugene Peterson says it best in his translation of Matthew 11 at the end of that chapter:

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythm of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to freely and lightly.*

The challenge is to learn the unforced rhythm of grace. But in order to learn that, we first will need to give ourselves permission to care for ourselves as much as we seek to care for others. For that to occur, one of the things to pay attention to is limits. Our limits and our limited abilities to be all things to all people remind us that we are both fallible and imperfect. Setting appropriate boundaries or learning to set boundaries is an excellent first step. Without boundaries, first for ourselves and then for others, we are inclined to move towards burnout. Next, paying attention to our emotions and then responding to them proactively as opposed to reacting to them. The latter tends to have us being controlled by our emotions and can lead to feeling out of control. Tired from poor self-care predisposes us to being controlled by our emotions. Finally, developing and then working to maintain a healthy system of support is vital to self-care. Who will care for the caregiver? Only those whom we allow in to our inner circle or those whom we empower to care for us are allowed close to us. Allowing others to care is a position of vulnerability, and often those in a care-providing role are reluctant to be vulnerable. Yet the Apostle Paul reminds us of one of the many paradoxes of the Christian life that there is strength in weakness. Perhaps this was an underlying thought in the mind of Henri Nouwen when he was writing *The Wounded Healer*.

While self-care is an enterprise that we should be engaged in on a continual basis, summer may provide us with the pause or break we need to embark on a deeper meaning of Sabbath that truly involves a change in how we care for ourselves. Such a change, of taking the time to learn the unforced rhythm of grace, will enable us to run the race set before us.