

Opening Prayer: “Oh God of the Sabbath, and the Sabbatical, and the eternal Sabbath rest--- grant us ears to hear and hearts to receive your word for our lives”. Amen.

I begin with a story from January 27th—my last Sunday before commencing a four month Sabbatical from Nutana Park Mennonite Church (NPMC). That Sunday during the noon potluck a congregational member asked about my plans for my time away and I shared some of what might be happening. He then made the statement, “you must be looking forward to it”. The metaphor that came to my mind was that of a soon to be released prisoner who has serious concerns about his ability to function in the real world without the structure of the institution. Sure, pastoral ministry can at times be draining but at least in the gilded cage known as NPMC I know my role and routine; not to mention the food is almost as good as at Osler Mennonite. I fully suspected that come week two of my break I would be considering what crime might be sufficient for the powers at be to send me back to the big house known as NPMC.

In his book *Sabbatical Journey* Henri Nouwen writes the following on the first day of his last Sabbatical. “I feel strange! Very happy and very scared at the same time. I have always dreamt about a whole year without appointments, meetings, lectures, travels, letters, and phone calls, a year completely open to let something radically new happen. But can I do it? Can I let go of all the things that make me feel useful and significant? I realize that I am quite addicted to being busy and experience a bit of withdrawal anxiety.”¹

My initial comments, as well as the Nouwen quote, are connected with our gospel reading for the day. In our scripture text for this morning Jesus arrives in his home town. On the Sabbath he goes to the place of Jewish worship. He leads in that worship by offering a homily on Isaiah 61 in which he lays out a vision given to him. Something is so important about the Sabbath that Jesus inaugurates his ministry on the hallowed day of the Jewish week. Linguistically and conceptually in the biblical languages “Sabbath” and “Sabbatical” are the identical.² Sabbath, Sunday, Sunday School, Sabbatical are about our identity and calling. On the Sabbath Jesus affirms his identity in God’s larger project; he does this by quoting from Isaiah and linking himself to God’s desire for a restored people. On the Sabbath Jesus rests in God’s bigger work. He roots his ministry amidst Sabbath worship—a time set aside for rest and learning.

The early understandings of Sabbath focused on “rest”. When we rest we are forced to remember that our identity is not the sum of what we do. We are

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 3.

² See additional (unspoken) pages of the sermon.

beloved creatures of God not for what we do, but for the fact we are. We are not the stations we fill—executive, employee, farmer, house parent, un-employed, pastor. We are not the mistakes we have made or the successes we have achieved. We are children of God called to remember our identity in the Creator and Sustainer of this world. We are called to remember that the children and grandchildren we watch over are foremost children of God, who is the ultimate parent of them.

I love the children at Osler Mennonite. I was here at the Good Friday service and saw the way in which they embraced the invitation to participate in the evening worship. You are teaching them well, and this tells me that you love them too. Ultimately, however, they are beyond our care and supervision and instruction. They are God's beloved sons and daughters who God will seek after long after our influence and lives wane. We own this reality in our child dedication services, which Osler Mennonite is having next week, and we are invited to acknowledge every Sunday we gather.

Sabbath time invites us to relinquish control: there is one greater than us who holds us, who holds the unfinished tasks of any week, who holds our grief, who holds our hopes, who holds our anxieties, who holds our children. A stream of postexilic theology within Judaism extended the Sabbath even to the damned in hell who might enjoy a respite from their torments.³ This is a blessed commentary to the understanding that those die without knowing Jesus, or the Jesus we conceptualize, might also experience a bit of grace.

One of the primary tasks of Sabbath and Sabbatical is to stop doing and remember the "ground of our being".⁴ If we do not take time to remember the One greater than us who has promised to go with us and beyond us, we will find ourselves in troubled spiritual waters. Maybe this why Jesus begins his public ministry on the Sabbath.

On a personal note, I have been pastor at NPMC for over eleven years and it appears I may be around a few more. Like it or not, I am a long term pastor, and that makes a Sabbatical particularly important. My identity dare not drift too far into being "pastor Patrick". NPMC is not my church any more than it was Anita Ratzlaff's church, or Vern Ratzlaff's church, or Verner Friesen's church. We have been pastors there, yes, but it is Christ's church. Retreating from pastoral duties has given me space to remember this truth. And in like fashion, the people who attend that church dare not too closely identify me with the congregation. Ministries of the church happen because of the people, not the pastors. Ministry happens at Osler Mennonite on account of the people of the church, not Patty. She

³ Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1992), pp 21-22.

⁴ "Ground of our being" is a Paul Tillich term.

is great and everything, but she is not the church. A Sabbath rest from dictatorial tyrants like pastoral types like me give space for the laity to remember this truth.

As one traces Sabbath observance through the Hebrew Scriptures we find that the concept evolved. Leviticus 25, we heard, expanded the idea of rest to the land.⁵ It is this seven year cycle upon which universities and certain churches base their Sabbatical policy: work six years and take a year leave so that the fertile field does not get run down. Then we come to the educational dimensions of the Sabbath which really gained momentum in the post-exilic times. The Sabbath was not simply made for rest, it was made for education.

Reading the scriptures became a primary focus of Sabbath rest. The Jewish communities in 3rd century BCE Babylon read their entire bible in Sabbath worship over the course of the 52 Sabbaths. The Palestinian Jewish communities of the same era read through their complete bible in public worship every three years⁶; which is similar to the intent of the Revised Common Lectionary. With this background it makes perfect sense that Jesus is teaching in synagogues and that people are coming to synagogues with the hope for instruction. Sabbath and Sabbatical are about education in a space of rest.

A primary focus of my Sabbatical study has been family. I joined my immediate family for several weeks in Kansas visiting aging uncles and aunts along the way; some of whom I will not see alive again. My parents are growing older. The days are surely coming when the quality of their living will be greatly diminish. I needed to hear from them what they are learning about life and death at this time. Maybe there would be something I could impart to them; maybe there was something for me to learn. Before the time of final leave-taking found us, I wanted to spend some quality time with my parents. I report that my time with parents fulfilled my hopes for this Sabbatical leave. We watched John Wayne on the Hallmark station; we took in several rounds of NCCA tournament games; we played countless games of Scrabble—the point was being together. Patty and I typically visit our relatives after high holy seasons—Christmas and Easter and such—and we are typically tired. On this occasion I was able to invest in my parents. I offered them the best of who I am, and this was good for us.

And then there are my brothers. My two brothers and their families live in the same area as my parents. I confess that there has been some distance between my brothers and me; no animosity or anger, I think, just distance. I felt drawn to simply spend time with them; allow space to hear their thoughts and hopes as well as share mine. This happened. We were able to laugh together and “make sput”.

⁵ The back half of Leviticus 25 extends Sabbath rest to the economy; a topic beyond the scope of this sermon.

⁶ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (volume VII), edited by Gerhard Friedrich, translator & editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 17.

And when you can laugh and tease together it is my sense that you are in a good place. As our parents age we will be able to face their challenges better on account of the time I have spent with them. Thank you Sabbatical!

It is interesting that in Leviticus 25 (parts we didn't read), the notion of Sabbath and Sabbatical is expanded to what is called a year of jubilee. Every seventh cycle of seven years—the 49th year—there is a year of Jubilee in which debts are cancelled and property returned to ancestral households. I am in my 49th year, so I figure it is biblically ordained that I would return to my ancestral house. I had hoped that with a little schmoozing, and maybe a little luck, my debts might be cancelled. I was happy leaving Kansas knowing that any interpersonal debts had been absolved, but the parents did send a gift to assist with the mortgage. I thank my parents for the example they have offered me on how one might live a good and generous life, and I recognize that I and many of our Mennonite organizations have benefitted from their financial stewardship and generosity. For this I am grateful.

Not that spending time with family was not fun, but I also had some fun on this Sabbatical. I like nature and I enjoy walking, so I planned three different weeks in three different National Parks doing just that: Prince Albert National Park, Grasslands National Park and walking on the Bruce Trail in Ontario. Patrick, I have learned, is a more agreeable person if he gets his daily walks. Patrick prays better when he is walking. So I walked. On a good day, be it in Kansas or Saskatchewan or between, I walked 8-10 miles a day. This is what my body and spirit crave, so I walked.

I also value reading. At this point in my life most of my reading revolves around my professional responsibilities. I am not suggesting that trolling through the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to be drudgery, but that eight volume series has never been nominated for a Giller Prize. I planned to take some time for reading in fields beyond my field.

Patty says I should also mention service. My father and I joined an NPMC Mennonite Disaster Service effort in Puerto Rico. I also assisted with the move of a refugee family which this congregation sponsored. And I was site supervisor of the MDS project on Coy Avenue in Saskatoon, which is the place we live. These service events are important experiences and worthy of their own sermons. I will simply say that our spiritual health benefits from being present with those on the margins: financial, social, cultural. God teaches us things in these encounters which we might not otherwise learn. Jesus counselled us that Sabbath, Sabbatical, might entail ministry to animals under duress. There is something very Sabbath like in service.

I recognize that not everyone has the opportunity to take four months away from their professional or domestic responsibilities. My introduction to the term

Sabbatical came to me from my brother, while I was in seminary, who complained bitterly about the Sabbatical leave of his pastor at that time saying, “no one pays me for **not** doing my job”. Sabbath and Sabbatical can happen, though, in smaller ways in each of our lives. I offer three examples, from many examples, out of a Wayne Muller book entitled *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*.⁷

The Shabbat traditionally begins with the lighting of a candle. When we begin our days, when we begin our holidays, when we begin worship—lighting a candle can be a way of offering any time as sacred time. In seminary I had a professor, Marcus Smucker, who always began his day this way. That was before dealing with us, the lot of unruly seminarians who thought they knew more than they did and were sure of it. “God have mercy on us all”, I would guess he prayed as he lit the candle.

Walk in nature. We do not yet fully understand the importance of our relationship within creation. What we do know is that nature has some capacity to heal us.⁸ I have been privileged to walk in some amazing areas this spring. Please take time to walk in our parks this spring and summer as you are able: along the Saskatchewan Rivers, in the Church Hill basin, where-ever. It is good for you and the community. Creation often affords direction and healing that we can not imagine.

Wayne Muller also cites friendship as a part of Sabbath. We need people in our lives, and most friends will respond with an e-mail, a call, or a visit when invited. Sabbath is not only about rest and education, it is about relationship. A part of Sabbath and Sabbatical is making time for important people in our lives.

We have reached the conclusion of the sermon and I am not certain how to conclude. For many reasons my time apart from my congregation has been bittersweet. At a personal level I echo Henri Nouwen’s sentiments of being happy and scared at the same time. What I have trusted, however, is the presence of God which goes before us. I have been guided in the very important relationships within my family of origin. I have been guided in reflections on my ministry at NPMC. I have been guided in thoughts as I seek to be the best husband and pastor’s husband I can be. Without Sabbath, without Sabbatical for some, this space of reflection does not exist. I do not know what the next years will bring for me or you, but Sabbath practice invites us to lay even the unknown on its altar. So that is what we will do. We will do this trusting the one who loves us and cares for us and never forsakes us. Amen.

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⁷ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), pp 21, 81, 118-119.

⁸Paul Hanley had column in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* entitled “Dose of nature just what the doctor ordered” in which he detailed the ways nature contributes to physical health and healing (May 21, 2015 Section A page 9).