

# *Do-Be-Do-Be-Do*

## Second in a Summer Sermon Series ~ Sabbath Living

July 8, 2007

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: <sup>2</sup>a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; <sup>3</sup>a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; <sup>4</sup>a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; <sup>5</sup>a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; <sup>6</sup>a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; <sup>7</sup>a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; <sup>8</sup>a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

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Sabbath living. That's our topic this summer. How to balance our doing and our being. Again, I want to express my gratitude for Wayne Muller's book on *Sabbath* which is my primary resource for this summer sermon series.

Last week we looked at the origin of Sabbath. The Genesis account of creation suggested that on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, God exhaled and created Sabbath. We all practiced breathing in and out, inhaling and exhaling, and finding rest and peace and tranquility on the "out breath." We remembered that candle lighting is part of Sabbath traditions and the practice for this past week was lighting a candle, either at meal time or prayer time or anytime during the day and taking time to exhale and give thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World in our lives. How did your practice go? Did you take Sabbath time to light a candle?

This morning I want to look more closely at the rhythm of being and doing. The author of Ecclesiastes understood this rhythm well. He captures the many rhythms of life. Birth and death. Planting and reaping. Breaking down and building up. Weeping and laughing. The grief of loss and the joy of celebration. Silence and noise. Love and hate, war and peace. It's all about being and doing.

If we look to creation itself we can learn from its wisdom. Any perennial plant teaches us about the importance of dormancy. Every perennial has a resting period. It is the dormancy that maximizes the plant's strength. Similarly, a seed experiences dormancy. During its resting stage, it will not grow, no matter how favorable the environment. In similar fashion, when mammals hibernate in winter, their body temperatures drop and their hearts beat very slowly. (Muller, *Sabbath*, p. 58).

When we were in Scandinavia 2 summers ago, we concluded our trip by spending several days in the Lapland area of Finland. There we visited a fabulous museum that explored life in that region. I found myself drawn to the exhibit about the habits of the bear. Now I want to let you in on a personal secret. For many, many years, my "pet" name for Jay has been "Bear". What I found out was that the bear has the good fortune of being able to hibernate and sleep through the entire winter.

It stocks up all summer, gorging carbohydrate rich berries and other foods to put on weight. It can gain as much as 30 pounds per week. In the fall, it prepares its den to form a nest with leaves, twigs and other plant materials. Once a bear hibernates, it's fur and stored up fat allows it to doze for many months with a body temperature of 88 degrees F. It's heart rate drops from well over 100 beats a minute to as few as eight beats a minute. In the spring, a well rested bear resumes its active life. The bear lives the rhythm of being and doing so well. My bear has much to teach me!

Nature herself has so much to teach us. After my auto accident last fall, I was so anxious for my broken hand to repair itself. It was awkward not having feeling in my fingers. The hand surgeon told me that for the first month after an injury, the nerves rest. They do nothing. Thereafter, they repair themselves an inch a month. Sure enough, November passed and nothing changed. Then December, January, February, March, April and by May I had feeling in all of my fingers – even out to the very tip. Rhythm of resting and healing. Being and doing.

Jesus models the importance of this rhythm in his ministry. Can you think of times when Jesus needed to take Sabbath time for himself?

Would you turn in the pew bibles to Matthew 14: 23? Would someone read the verse? What had just occurred? Why would Jesus need to rest?

Now let's turn to Mark 1: 32 – 37. Would someone read that passage? How does Jesus model Sabbath living for us?

Another example is found in Luke 5: 15 – 16 where it reads “But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.”

Didn't you like last week's story that I shared in the Children's Moment? It was titled *Jesus Day Off* and it was about Jesus taking a day off. He played Frisbee with his halo. He did cartwheels in the desert. He went swimming and had a picnic. And then, like so many of us, he felt guilty about wasting precious time. But God showed him that not only had his Sabbath living refreshed him, but it had given new life to everyone and every place where he had been. Being and doing. It's all about the rhythm of motion and rest.

Jesus even rested in death. Like the seed that lies dormant before growing and bearing fruit, so Jesus lay dormant for three days. Without this dormancy, the resurrection of new life would be impossible.

So why don't we get it? Why can't we be like the seeds and the plants and the animals and like Jesus, our Savior? Wayne Muller in his book on *Sabbath* suggests that our reluctance to rest is our fear of the emptiness that we will discover and uncover that lies within us. He tells the story Elaine, a well-respected therapist, who came to him for counseling. As a woman from an abusive family, Elaine had for many years struggled, grown, and overcome great sorrow. Now she was very strong. She was proud of what she had become. And while she had achieved professional success, she felt it was now time to explore her inner landscape.

In spite of her significant career accomplishments, Elaine experienced a nagging emptiness. For some people, emptiness can feel fertile and spacious, alive with possibility. But others feel emptiness as an ache, a void; something painful, in need of being filled. When we are empty, we feel

unhealed; when we are unhealed, we can feel unworthy. Muller sensed that Elaine was uncomfortable and afraid of her emptiness.

“Tell me about your sense of worth,” he said. She began by recounting her triumphs and successes, and her growing sense of personal and professional self-esteem. He stopped her. “I am not speaking about your self-esteem, which I am sure is strong, considering all you have done in your life. I am asking about the quiet times, the nights before sleep, the silent moments of the day when you are alone, when you are not a successful professional.”

Unexpectedly, Elaine wept. Silent sobbing tears, for a long time. Muller had touched an emptiness that felt like a wound. It was deep inside her and it frightened her.

This is one of our fears of quiet, Muller concludes. If we stop and listen, we will hear this emptiness. If we worry that we are not good or whole inside, we will be reluctant to stop and rest, afraid we will find a lurking emptiness, a terrible, aching void within nothing to fill it, as if it will corrode and destroy us like some horrible, insatiable monster. And so, if we are terrified of what we will find in rest, then we refuse to look up from our work. We refuse to stop moving. We quickly fill all the blanks on our calendar with tasks, accomplishment, errands, things to do – anything to fill the time, the empty space.

Can you relate to this fear? I know that I can, as your pastor. I know that part of my constant “doing” is my fear of the terrible things that I will feel in the quiet. My busyness is part of my defense mechanism so that I won’t have to feel the pain and the grief and the sorrow that is an intrinsic part of my profession.

But Jesus teaches us and God promises us that it is in the very void, the very emptiness, the place of quiet that we will feel the company of the angels who will minister to us. It is in the stillness that we can breathe in the grace and love and acceptance and forgiveness and hope and encouragement of God and then, with God, exhale and rest and relax and be refreshed in the moment of peace and tranquility. God’s love is unconditional. And we can never experience this extraordinary gift of grace until we are quiet and still.

Sabbath living demands times of quiet and silence. It is in these moments that we come home to God.

Whenever I go to a Roman Catholic mass, whether it be for a wedding or a funeral or any other occasion, I find myself waiting for one particular line that is, for me, the Sabbath moment in the liturgy. Everyone speaks this line together and says, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. But only say the word, and I shall be healed.” And by acknowledging my need for Jesus’ love and grace and healing touch in my life, I feel the peace that passeth all understanding. It is a peace that only God can give.

Unfortunately, too often we get caught up in our doing and forget the importance of simply being, of asking God for healing and wholeness and peace. And when we live without listening to the timing of things – when we live and work in 24 hour shifts without rest – we are on war time, mobilized for battle. Oh, we are strong and capable people, proving that we can work without stopping, faster and faster, electric lights making artificial day so the whole machine can labor without ceasing. But remember: No living thing lives like this. There are the greater rhythms that govern how life grows: seasons and sunsets and moonrises and cycles of seas and stars. There is high tide and low tide.

There is full moon and new moon. Rhythm is built in to God's creation story, and we are part of the natural rhythm that God has created (Muller, p. 69).

Donna Schaper, in her book *Sabbath Sense, a Spiritual Antidote for the Overworked*, suggests that Sabbath moments which cause us to pause and rest and restore our relationship with God are like "margins" around the pages of our days (p. 63). Think about formatting a letter or a document on the computer. You decide how wide the margins will be at the top, bottom, left and right sides of the paper. Now transfer this notion of formatting to the concept of Sabbath living. Without margins, life gets too crowded. Everything runs into everything else. Our life needs space on its pages and between its pages.

In many religious traditions, the ringing of a bell calls the community to prayer. It is an intentional way of setting margins in the day to day routine. The picture on your bulletin cover is called *The Angelus*. Millet painted ordinary workers in a field, pausing at noontime when the church bells are rung. You can almost hear their breathing, their finding God in this moment of Sabbath pause. Benedictines order their whole day around prayer periods. The bell tolls, calling the community to prayer, for an early morning vigil, a mid day prayer, evening prayer and night prayer. Muslims are called to prayer 5 times each day. All work ceases and ancient prayers, spoken aloud, rose like fragrance to the skies. When monks enter an ashram and sit in silence, it is only when the bell is rung that meditation begins. The bells in our own bell tower call us to worship and invite us to be in prayer for one another and for God's world. Many of our church committees begin their work with the ringing of this prayer bowl. When it is rung, time becomes consecrated and our work becomes worshipful work. Weaving Sabbath moments into the daily routine takes intentionality.

My suggestion this week for a Sabbath practice is to choose something that you do several times in your day and use that common act during your day to serve as a Sabbath pause. Obviously, for most it won't be the ringing of a bell. It can be the telephone or your cell phone ringing or whenever you cross a threshold or put your hand on a doorknob, or before you check your e mail or before you eat or drink. You choose the act and let it be like the ringing of a bell that calls you to a Sabbath pause. Whenever your act arises, simply stop, take three silent breaths – inhale God's life giving energy and exhale peace and tranquility; and then answer the phone or open the door or cross the threshold or check your e mail or begin to eat.

God longs for us to be mindful and intentional about our relationship with the one who is our Creator, our Companion, our Source of life and love. So respond to this God who loves you unconditionally and use your Sabbath pauses to rekindle that precious relationship. May you be blessed with Sabbath living. Alleluia. Amen.