

*Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."
For many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat.*

■ Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

"Come Away With Me"

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OK—confession time. This week, how many of you a) ate a meal in the car, b) ate a meal standing up in the kitchen, c) ate a meal at your desk while working, or d) skipped a meal because you were too busy? If you did any one of these, then Jesus invitation to the disciples is also your invitation today: *come away with me.*

In our culture, busyness is a sign of productivity and importance. Someone said to me recently: "If you want something done, ask the busy person" because if they are busy they are busy for a reason—they are responsible and efficient. These days we drive fast, eat fast, talk fast. We are accessible to work 24/7 with our cell phones, black berries. But this busyness is really an idol. Because we are so busy, we don't have time for relationships, for God, for savoring life.

Spiritual writer Marva Dawn in a new book about Sabbath (*The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World*) makes the case that pastors (and I would add that this applies to any of us who seek to follow and serve Christ) should not be overcome with busyness. That is a worldly rhythm, not a kingdom rhythm. I think she is right. Busyness communicates that not having enough time for people. Relationship is nourished in the soil of time and presence.

The counter to the busyness of life is something that has been around for millennia. It's called *Sabbath*. Sabbath is a time when we rest, when we intentionally carve out space for God in our lives, space to listen, to pray, to notice God and the people around us. With Sabbath time we reorder our lives so we might remember who and whose we are.

Jesus knew that the disciples needed a Sabbath when they returned from the mission he had sent them on. The text says that they were "coming and going and didn't even have time to eat." He invited them to come away with him, to rest, pray, eat, restore their souls. Jesus had done this himself before, retreating to an uninhabited place to spend time in prayer. Before he began his public ministry he spent 40 days in the wilderness fasting. And again, after his first miracles, Jesus withdrew from the public eye to rest and pray. And as a faithful Jew, Jesus would have regularly kept the Sabbath, too.

Rabbi Martin Siegel, the Rabbi Emeritus at Columbia Jewish Congregation in Columbia MD has said that the Sabbath is "an island time." He explains that originally there was a place where God dwelt—in the temple in Jerusalem. But when the temple was destroyed, the place for the presence of God was removed from the world, and so the observance of Sabbath became even more significant. Because there was no place to experience God, there was only time, time that was set-aside, sacred, a time to

experience God and allow God to once again dwell in the hearts of God's people.

Traditionally on the Sabbath we were forbidden to work, because we were to follow the example of God who rested on the seventh day of Creation. Lauren Winner, who was once an Orthodox Jew, but is now an Episcopalian, writes about Jewish/Christian spiritual practices that we share, but that we do differently in her book, Mudhouse Sabbath. She writes this about the Jewish Sabbath: (p. 5-6)

It is easy to look at the Jewish Sabbath as a long list of thou shalt nots: don't turn on any lights; don't drive; don't cook; don't carry a pair of scissors anywhere at all (for if you carry them you might be tempted to use them, and cutting is also forbidden on Shabbat); it's okay to carry a stone or a sweater or a scarf, but only inside your own house, not out onto the street and then into the house of another; don't plan for the week ahead; don't write a sonnet or a sestina or a haiku; don't even copy down a recipe; and while you are allowed to sing, you shouldn't play a musical instrument, and of course you mustn't turn on a radio or a record player. What this boils down to (and boiling is another thing you cannot do on Shabbat) is do not create. Do not create a casserole or a Valentine card or a symphony or a pot of coffee. Do not create anything at all, for one of the things the Sabbath reprises is God's rest after He finished creating.

In our neighborhood there are many Orthodox Jewish families, and every Friday and Saturday we see them walking from their homes to the synagogue. Most of the women have their heads covered, and many of the men wear wide brimmed hats. They walk down the street, arm in arm, slowly, deliberately. They are not the least bit showy or arrogant, but they are obvious. In a 24-7 world of a busy, suburban Washington, DC neighborhood, their conscious, public observance of the Sabbath stands out. And seeing these observant Jews reminds me, as a Christian, that I, too, am commanded to observe the Sabbath. I might not observe it in exactly the same ways, but I, too need to make more time in my life for God.

One of the fundamental differences between Jewish and Christian Sabbath is the day we observe for Sabbath and why. Our Sabbath is Sunday, the first day of the week, because that is when Christ was risen. On the first Easter morning, Mary went to the tomb in mourning, and was met by the comforting voice of her beloved friend. So, as Wayne Muller writes: we are to enter the Christian Sabbath with "a willingness to be surprised by unexpected grace, to partake of the moments when the creation renews itself, when what is finished inevitably recedes, and the sacred forces of healing astonish us with the unending promise of love and life."

Slowing down. Making space to connect with God. Breathing. Noticing creation's complexity and beauty. Nurturing relationships. This is what the Sabbath is about.

But Sabbath is not just free time. It's not necessarily a beach vacation or Sunday afternoon nap (although that kind of rest and time with family is also essential and sacred). If we idolize busyness in our culture, we idolize free time just as much. We all want it, need it and yet we can't see to get enough of it. Even you retired folks know

what I am talking about. Homer Dennewitz said he was taking a vacation, and his son asked “why are you taking a vacation—you’re retired!?” But he’s a busy man with church and community responsibilities. Tom told me that this church had more active 90 year olds than any church he had ever served, and it’s true! Even retirement doesn’t necessarily mean that we will have enough leisure time, and it certainly doesn’t mean Sabbath. Sabbath is intentional, sacred time.

We need to reclaim God’s commandment to “observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.” Popular culture has started to buy into the idea of sabbath, but it is sabbath with a small “s”, sabbath that is more about us, our wants and desires, and less about God. Again, Lauren Winner writes: (p.10-11)

When we give ourselves over to God as part of the rhythm of our day, or week, or year, we honor God. And when we honor God, when we allow God space to seep into our hearts, minds, souls, we are then renewed to keep God’s word. In Sabbath time we are given God’s strength in which to rest our weary, broken-hearted selves, to be fed, and nurtured and built up again to face the world. And to be bearers of Christ’s peace to others.

Without Sabbath, it is possible to believe it is all up to me. Sabbath reminds me that ultimately kingdom work is God’s work, and I am just an instrument. Ceasing from work reminds me who is truly leading and working. Without Sabbath, it is also possible to get a savior complex and believe the world cannot survive without me.

Just like us—every where we go, we are met with people. Their needs, desires, agendas. We are met with things to do—obligations and responsibilities. And some things we need to do right now. But other things can wait until we have the spiritual strength to deal with them. The Sabbath is about priorities and about who is the center of our lives, the source of our strength.

And although Jesus regularly observed Sabbath, Jesus regularly broke the Sabbath, too. When there was someone in need, a person who needed healing or comfort or healing. When there were people who were lost and confused, Jesus didn’t allow the Sabbath to keep him from people and from their needs. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” Jesus says in Mark (2:27). And this got him in trouble with the rule-keepers. But it wasn’t that He didn’t believe in the importance of the Sabbath, just that sometimes there were things that were more urgent. Regularly keeping Sabbath helps us to determine our priorities and keep balance. It helps us discern whether we are in service to the Lord or service to ourselves or someone else. Are we living out our purpose and call, or just keeping busy.

So how do we live into Sabbath time in our hurried, over-scheduled world? Try this—do it in little ways, at first. Begin here, this morning. Try and place all thoughts about where you are going to lunch or everything else you have to do this afternoon out of your mind for the rest of the worship service. Then, later this week, when you are eating a meal standing up in the kitchen sit down, bless your food, and then eat. When you are driving in rush hour traffic, turn off the radio and experience the silence. Listen for God

in your breath, look for God in the world around you. Or when the alarm goes off in the morning, take a minute or two before you jump out of bed to thank God for your sleep and for the new day before you. And you probably have your own ways of slowing down, too, just be sure and use them.

So I pray that we all would find ways this week of finding Sabbath. It might not be a whole day in the beginning, but if you can find just a moment or two to remember who and whose you are, well, that will be a start. May God bless you this week with Sabbath rest. Amen.