

Death by Suburb sermon series
Sabbath: You're Doing a Timeout!
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There are many things that Amy has learned about me since we met a few years ago, and I hope that most of them are good enough reasons to keep me around. But I know there are a few quirks about me that probably drive her just a tiny bit crazy. Like, for example, my need to be on time. Now, most of the time that's a good trait. No one who is a decent, God-fearing human being would be OK with showing up late, right? So, if we are invited to a party and the host says the party starts at 7 p.m., I like to show up at 6:55 p.m., just to make sure we're on time. Amy has tried to convince me that it's not culturally acceptable to show up when the party starts, and the look on the hosts' faces when we knock on the door at 6:55 p.m. has confirmed that. "Oh, you're here...already!"

Today, we're continuing our "Plastic Jesus" sermon series, in which we're looking at some of the core values of a suburban spirituality, things like productivity and comfort and efficiency, and comparing them to the life Jesus calls us to live. Do we seek to authentically follow the way of Jesus, or is he just a mascot for us as we pursue other values? In a world where everything is scheduled and we get impatient when the microwave takes too long, do we have time to deepen our faith?

Back when the Israelites had escaped slavery and passed through the waters of the Red Sea into the desert wilderness, God knew they were going to need a little guidance to help them figure out how to live a life of faith apart from their captivity. Just because they were free didn't mean they could do anything they wanted, right? So, through Moses, God gave them laws to help them know what was acceptable and not acceptable. There were hundreds of laws, but God put the most important ones in the top 10, things like not killing and not lying and not worshipping idols.

Most of us do pretty well with those, don't we? Sure, we may slip up from time to time – hopefully not with "Thou shalt not kill"! - but for the most part, we are commandment keepers. Well, except for one. Any time I'm with a church group studying the ten commandments and I give them a pop quiz to name them, there's always one that gets left out. That's probably because it's the one we consistently break, probably on a weekly basis. "Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy."

Maybe we don't pay attention to this one because it's the only one Jesus doesn't reaffirm in the gospels. He says it's important to honor our parents and not commit adultery, but he actively breaks the Sabbath himself as a protest against the extreme rigidity of the Pharisees. They were guarding the letter of the law, but Jesus says, "Hey, if someone needs to be healed or is hungry, I'm not waiting a day to help them."

I don't know about you, but I wish Jesus would have added, "And if there's a really important email that needs to be answered or a kid's soccer game, it's OK to break the sabbath for those, too." We're far removed from the blue laws and family traditions that protected a day of rest. So now, unless you work for Chick-fila or Hobby Lobby, the concept of a day off work doesn't exist.

And folks in spiritual suburbia like it that way, even if they complain about how busy they are. In a culture that values productivity and immediate accessibility, taking a sabbath is not only irresponsible, it's wasteful. We take pride in our busyness, as if that's

a testament to our worth. The more productive we are, the more we matter. That's such a backwards way of determining someone's value, isn't it? I find it so funny that people who have a lot of money but no time, we call rich, and people who have a lot of time and no money, we call poor. That's messed up. But that's the way it is in spiritual suburbia, so we see taking a Sabbath, not as holiness, but as laziness. We simply can't afford to take time off.

And even when we do, we expect our time off to be productive. "I better come back from this vacation well-rested!" But how often do we need a vacation from our vacation? Erin Wathen, a Disciples minister and former intern here at Crestwood, tells a great story about her family on vacation. She was getting her kids ready to walk to the beach, and she made sure to check in with them about going potty before they headed out. Her son assured her he was good to go, but couple blocks into the walk, of course, he had an urgent need to pee. So, Erin let out a sound of exasperation and grumpily turned him around to march him back to the restroom. And he looked at her and said, "Mom, why are you mad? We have all the time we need."

We have all the time we need. Sure doesn't feel that way, does it? It feels like there's far too little time for us to accomplish everything we need to do in order to be productive, and if we can just have a little more time, we can get caught up and empty our inbox and be finished with all our work. But, deep down, we know we'll never be finished. There's never an end to being productive.

And that has its consequences, doesn't it? The Chinese language uses pictographs to convey meaning. For example, the pictograph for "crisis" combines the symbols for "danger" and "opportunity." Do you know what the pictograph is for "busy?" It combines the symbols for "heart" and "death." There's a reason that Americans are more economically successful, have the fastest pace of life, and have the highest rates of heart attacks and obesity. Productivity has its consequences.

We also need to recognize that our lack of Sabbath time has consequences for others. In spiritual suburbia, we are, at our core, consumers. And others have to produce so that we can consume. As much as I really want a large waffle fries and sweet tea on Sunday, not being able to consume those things means someone doesn't have to produce them. Part of our calling as Sabbath keepers is to be mindful of those who labor and to work for justice in extending rest to all people.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence." Being in a constant state of busyness is not a badge of honor we wearily wear; it's a threat to our very existence, a constant drain on our soul.

That's why God institutes the concept of slowing down, of stopping, of resting. Think about it...did God need to rest after six days of creating the world? Of course not! God is God. But God modeled the need to rest because God built that into our spiritual DNA. God took the time to step back from all the work God had done and simply enjoy it, to get some perspective to see what God had done. And God called all of it "good." This time of rest was so important, that God equated not resting with murdering and stealing and lying. The Hebrew word for "rest" can be translated "to exhale." We can't continually inhale. At some point, we have to exhale. The Sabbath is our exhale, our liberation from the incessant, urgent need to be finished.

God built this need into the entire creation. There's a concept in farming of letting a field lie fallow. That term has a pejorative connotation in spiritual suburbia. The example sentence given in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is, "There were too many promising ideas lying fallow in the company." But farmers know the importance of letting a field lie fallow, to be unproductive for a season. During that time, the soil is allowed to restore its nutrients so that it can be more productive in future harvests. God has built that into the cycle of life. We have all the time we need.

I know it doesn't always feel that way. I know it feels like taking time away will only make life more hectic when we plug back in. But the truth is the work, the responsibilities, the demands – they'll be there whether you take a break or not. And, if we can be really honest with ourselves, we are not so important that those things can't wait for us while we lie fallow.

So, what does this look like in real life, when everything encroaches upon our Sabbath with no respect for God's call to honor the Sabbath? How do you find Sabbath when the soccer games and dance competitions don't honor the commandment? It's hard. You have to make choices. I know one family that takes a season off from any sports so that they can have that uninterrupted time together. Another family allows their kids to participate in activities every other Sunday so that they still have time together for church and relationship-building. There's no right answer here. Our culture is not going to give you the space to lie fallow. You have to make an intentional effort to claim it, to follow God's commandment.

For some, a full day of rest isn't feasible. So, they take sabbath moments, a half-day here, an hour in the morning there. And what do they do during that time? Nothing. That's the beauty of it! They lie fallow from the need to be productive, the need to be needed. They stop counting emails and steps and things checked off the to-do list. They live out Gandhi's wisdom that "there's more to life than increasing its speed."

Here's the truth we live with in spiritual suburbia: It's always time for something. Time to get to work, time to show up at the party, time to be productive. But in God's creation, we have all the time we need. Not taking that time has its consequences; it's the "heart death" that comes from not exhaling. This week, give yourself a timeout from being productive and let God restore your nutrients. You'll have plenty of time to be busy later. But for now, exhale. Lie fallow. Rest.