

Advent Midweek Service

December 4, 2019 + St. Andrew Lutheran Church + Katherine Museus Dabay

Psalm 46; Luke 10:38-42

Idea and prayers from “Preparing for Christ’s Presence: An Advent Midweek Series” in *Sundays and Seasons: Year A, 2020*, by Elizabeth Rawlings, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2019) pg. 26-27.

In the name of the +triune God in whose presence we wait, the Holy Parent, fulfilling the promise; the Holy Child, waiting to be born; the Holy Spirit, lighting the way. Amen.

Here’s your lesson in Christian discipleship for tonight: Do less.

God wants you to do less.

God *commands* you to do less.

How does hearing those words make you feel?

Last week Bishop Emeritus Gordy told a few of us a story about one of his friends, a fellow American who was sent to Spain to oversee a big project. I can’t remember exactly what the project was – designing and implementing a complicated program, or creating some big piece of machinery – something along those lines. Anyway, it had taken the United States team about 15 years to complete this project. The company was hoping that because the U.S. team had already created a model to follow, doing the same project in Spain would only take about 10 years.

So this American friend of Bishop Gordy arrives in Spain to oversee this project with a team of Spanish workers. And he starts talking about how they have a ten year deadline, and he’ll expect them to work late if they need to in order to complete each step on schedule, come in on weekends from time to time, whatever needs to happen to get this job done by the deadline. All the kinds of things we’re used to hearing at work, right?

But his Spanish team? They said no. No way. *No hay tutía, señor.*

See, the people in Spain have a totally different work culture and keep a totally different schedule. They start work around 10am, or even a little later. Then around 2 in the afternoon, they take a three hour break. They come back in to work for a few more hours, and then head home. They go to bed around midnight. They end up working something like a 35 hour work week.

Which of course did not sound like nearly enough work time to their American boss. But a Spanish friend explained to him: that time off is untouchable. The evenings, the afternoon siestas, the weekends – that’s precious time. That’s family time.

The American boss realized he couldn't change the culture of his employees, so he had to work with the Spanish schedule. And, no, they didn't finish the big project in 10 years.

They finished it in five.

What?

It seems counter-intuitive that working less time could lead to getting more work done. Yet a lot of research has backed up what we see in that little anecdote from Spain. Things like "daytime workouts, short afternoon naps, longer sleep hours, more time away from the office and longer, more frequent vacations...[boost] productivity, job performance, and health."¹

This kind of research should remind us of something that the scriptures say: that God designed us not only to work, but also to rest. That's why God commanded us to rest, and to make sure anybody we have power over gets an opportunity to rest, too. It's the third commandment: "Remember the sabbath day [which originally translated to "the day of rest"] and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath [a resting day] to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:8-10).

Really think about that commandment for a second. A lot of times we hear it and think, "Right, we're commanded to go to worship on Sunday. Which, yes, we should do, and, yes, it's a tradition to worship on the holy day of rest – but it's not what the commandment itself is saying. It's saying *you need to rest. You are required to rest, and it's a holy thing you do not only for yourself, but also for God.*

Why does God want us to rest? Why does scripture go so far as to call it holy?

The first time the 10 Commandments appear in scripture, it says we are supposed to observe a holy day of rest because God rested on the 7th day of creation – and now God has set that day apart as holy. We're supposed to observe it in honor of God the Creator (Exodus 20:11).

The second time the 10 Commandments appear in scripture, they give a slightly different reason: Hey, Israelites, remember how God brought you out of slavery? That's a sign that God doesn't want you to work non-stop. God commands you to honor the freedom God has won for you by taking a break and enjoying yourself (Deut. 5:15)!

¹ Tony Schwartz, "Relax! You'll Be More Productive," *The New York Times*, 9 February 2013.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/opinion/sunday/relax-youll-be-more-productive.html> Accessed 3 December 2019.

So, God commands us to rest because rest is good for us. It makes us healthier, more peaceful, and stronger. It's also good for the people in our lives: if we're happier and calmer and healthier, we share those same qualities to the people in our lives (instead of all the anxiety and stress that we so often share with one another).

And God commands us to rest because rest is also good for our relationship with God. It's a way of remembering and worshipping. The 10 Commandments tell us that observing holy rest helps us remember what God has done for us by creating the world, freeing the Israelites from slavery, and freeing us from slavery to the world, sin, and death through Jesus Christ. Psalm 46 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." And in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encouraged Mary and Martha to sit still and be with him, even when there was other work to do. Times of rest can help us re-center on God. We slow down enough to pay attention to how God is with us in this moment of our lives. In times of quiet and stillness, we can listen for God's words of love and grace and better hear God's call to us.

Mary Oliver put these ideas about the sacred importance of rest into poetry in a poem called "Today." It goes like this:

Today I'm flying low and I'm
not saying a word.
I'm letting all the voodooes of ambition sleep.

The world goes on as it must,
the bees in the garden rumbling a little,
the fish leaping, the gnats getting eaten,
And so forth.

But I'm taking the day off.
Quiet as a feather.
I hardly move though really I'm traveling
a terrific distance.

Stillness. One of the doors
into the temple.²

2 Mary Oliver, "Today," *A Thousand Mornings: Poems*, (New York: Penguin, 2012).

Let's take a moment to be still now, entering into that holy place of rest and attention to God. Please join me in reading responsively the prayer on the small slip of paper, and then we'll be silent together for just a short time. Maybe spend this stillness thinking about what it is that prevents you from taking time for holy rest – and what you have the power to change so that you can take more time to rest.

In the hustle and bustle, in the kitchens and the malls, **it is hard to feel still.**

Our to-do lists are long; **it is hard to be present.**

We are called to stillness; **we long to be still.**

What can you let go of, that you might rest?

What can we not do, that we might be present with Christ?

[Time of silence.]

Ever-present God, in this time when busy-ness is exalted and it seems there is so much to do, keep our focus on you. May we let go of those things that add stress or distract us so that we may sit in your splendor, even for a moment, and be present to that which gives us life. In the name of your Son, Jesus, for whom we wait expectantly. Amen.