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Hallowed Rest

Genesis 2:1-3; Matthew 11:28-30

I served in youth ministry for sixteen years before coming to seminary. Success in that field is often measured by what you are doing, how many kids are coming, how busy you are. Success looks a lot like big events, big attendance, and very little sleep. Youth pastors know they are successful when they are exhausted.

I first heard Dr. Nate Stucky speak on this ministerial exhaustion at an Institute for Youth Ministry forum. Nate is a quirky Mennonite minister whose dream child was jokingly dubbed the Farminary, a name which eventually stuck to the 25-acre seminary farm. He has a dry sense of humor and is usually wearing a button-down, dirt-smudged khakis and boots made for the mud. That day, he came into the room and lined up rubber ducks on the tables.

And then he issued a warning. Ducks are like youth ministers. All may be calm on the surface, but their feet are frantically paddling. This is not the way to minister. This place of exhaustive busyness. This is the way to burnout. Rubber ducks used as a cautionary tale.

But here we are, paddling away at a pond we were actually gifted for enjoyment. As though there is a prize for how efficiently we get from one side to the other. As though that's supposed to be our goal.

But what if we are in fact made for something else?

And what if we can't really understand that something else until we stop the frantic paddling?

What if in order to embrace this something else, we must put down our business and enter into Sabbath?

What if we are called to rest?

In the beginning, God breathed the universe into existence, speaking light, molding humanity from clay. And God created these first peoples in the image of the Divine. God told them to be fruitful, to eat, to coexist with creation, and to care for it. And when God saw all God had created living together, God declared that connection very good.

But then God did a curious thing. God did not tell these people to get to work. God did not command them to begin the caregiving labor.

God instead declared a day of divine rest. And this day was more than good. It was holy.

God did not demand that these brand new peoples earn this hallowed rest. They were not expected first to put in a full week of toil, slogging away at their duties in this new creation, finally collapsing, depleted, and exhausted on that seventh day.

No, their rest was unearned. Their rest came before the what's next. It was a gift to rest with God.

Rest freely given and holy.

So what are we to make of this rest that looks a lot like grace? What are we to do with this seeming nonsensical invitation to lay down our burdens without first amassing a resume — proof of the hard work we have done?

Can we actually stop working? Can we really stop paddling? Why does that terrify us?

Perhaps because our culture insists that we are worth only what we produce, that rest must be earned. We must work for a year in our jobs before we are granted a vacation — a vacation we are often too fearful to take because when we return, the work will have piled up.

Perhaps because our churches are often only deemed successful and impressive when they have 24/7 programming, and non-stop events, and multitudes of committees and activities. When churches think they must function as though Godliness is business.

But that's not what this Sabbath invitation says. Instead, it invites us to lay down the frenetic pace of work we fear must define us. To come to God without earning that place first.

This is rest, divinely consecrated, is hallowed by its proximity to God. In Sabbath, the veil between heaven and earth is slightly lifted and God invites us into the rest which is already woven into the fabric of our created spirit.

Abraham Heschel explains:

Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.¹

This Sabbath rest is counter-cultural. In it, reject the pressure of business and claim our Divine worth as paramount. This is a holy rebellion.

And we desperately need it. We simply cannot find balance without intentionally seeking this Divine connection. The world is just too loud. We need the silence of the Sabbath moments to hear our Creator's voice, which is constantly reminding us that we are so much more than what we produce.

We need this holy space to be reminded that in God's love, we are enough, that it is safe to rest.

¹ Abraham Heschel, *Sabbath*

Sabbath isn't ours to create or curate — it isn't something we frantically DO.

Sabbath, just as it was at the dawn of creation, is still an invitation into that which God is *already* doing. Sabbath exists because it was declared by God, it's a Divine sanctuary in time, and God is already there, waiting for us to enter in.

So Sabbath is more than simply taking a Sunday afternoon nap (although that's a great start).

Sabbath is more than the generic absence of activity. Sabbath is intentional connectivity to our Creator. One day a week, we not only stop working, we intentionally spend time with God. In the Gospel of Luke, there is a story about the sisters Mary and Martha in which Mary, instead of being distracted by the work being done, chose to, “sit at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.”² In our Sabbath rest, we rebel from our slavery to production. And, like Mary, find a way to sit in the presence of the One who claims us as we are.

Sabbath rest shifts our perspective. It changes how we see ourselves, how we see creation, and how we see God.

It is a place of super saturated sacredness - where everyone wishes the best for the other, where joy is the measure of the day, and all is seen through the eyes of love.³

² Luke 10:38-42

³ Abraham Heschel, *Sabbath*

You see, Sabbath is not something that exists within an individualistic vacuum.

Connection is woven into the fiber of the Sabbath space. It is there, we are reminded that we are always in the presence of the cloud of witnesses.⁴ And in this hallowed place, we all come before our Creator who reminds us of who we actually are: God's beloved, not because of what we have done, but because we are God's own. There's no hierarchy there. No Competition. No place for divisions. We are all simply equal in our belovedness. Just as we are — because we are God's.

Sabbath is a gifted balm for weary souls — healing for our hearts which are so often ravaged by the world that insists our worth is tied to production. The same world that so often insists we must be divided, segregated, fighting over grace as though it is bound by scarcity.

The time we spend in Sabbath dismantles these lies, weakening their power. In Sabbath rest, God's voice becomes the loudest, God's truth the most compelling voice we hear. God promises us that:

It is safe to be blessed with this divine rest

This rest is sacred

It is hallowed

This rest consists of unearned grace

It is a gift freely given

⁴ Hebrews 12:1

And all of God's creation — and all of God's children — are connected

And that connectivity is holy

Sabbath is ruled by the luminosity of love shared between God and God's creation, where world-battered people can bring the entirety of themselves to be healed, to be comforted, to be made closer to whole, within ourselves, and with one another.

Sabbath is the place, the time, we can be reminded that Jesus invites us still to:

“Come to [him], all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and [he] will give you rest.”⁵

⁵ Luke 11:28