

The Non-Purpose Driven Church

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Don't ask about the goal and benefit of the Holy Life. To be without goal and benefit is the Holy Life. —Vimalakirti sutra

Ancient Witness: Mark 2: 23-28

"Tell me," said the jaguar, "why are you so lazy?"

The sloth thought and thought and thought for a long, long, long time.

Finally, the sloth replied, "It is true that I am slow, quiet and boring. I am lackadaisical, I dawdle and I dillydally... I am relaxed and tranquil, and I like to live in peace. But I am not lazy." Then the sloth yawned and said, "That's just how I am. I like to do things slowly, slowly, slowly." (from "Slowly, Slowly, Slowly," said the Sloth, by Eric Carle)

The slow Food Movement began in Italy nearly three decades ago as a reaction to the cult of speed in general and to fast food in particular. Slow foodies extolled virtues of home-cooked meals, traditional recipes and family sit down dinners, seeing the dinner table as a place where local culture is nurtured in the sharing of food, stories and lives.

Since then, there has emerged the Slow Cities Movement, with an emphasis on pedestrian friendly streets, Slow Parenting, allowing kids to enjoy unorganized activities, and recently, the Slow Church Movement, promoting the blessings of quiet time, living disciplined contemplative life and seeing church as a place where real community can exist.

This is unique because so many churches have embraced speed and individualism of the culture. Mega churches are often monuments to achievement and success. You may have heard of the very popular book written by Rick Warren, a pastor of one of those mega churches, *The Purpose Driven Life*. My sermon title today is kind of a playful take off on this.

Now please hear me, I'm not against goals or having a sense of purpose. But by itself alone, this leads to stunted spiritual development. And this appears to be a universal insight among all the religious traditions.

And so I'm suggesting that we claim a deeper motivation toward which we strive, one that we hold up for ourselves. Because as good as goals are, and as important as achievement is, all this is still all ego activity. And I'm suggesting that we strive toward something else, that we are driven by something else, that at the most profound level, we are *not* purpose driven.

In the Vimalakirti Sutra of the Buddhist tradition, one passage is translated,

Don't ask about the goal and benefit of the Holy Life. To live without goal and benefit is the Holy Life.

To live without goal is the holy life. Ultimately, we need the practice of shedding our goals and list of things we think are beneficial for greater awareness and deeper levels of communion. This, by the way, is not laziness; it is very hard work. Zen practice is often said that to be without goal, with nothing to attain, you have to work very diligently to sit every day and to strive with great effort all to realize that there is *nothing to attain!* This is the way of “effortless effort.” We aim carefully for the “goalless goal”!

And so we then integrate this contemplative awareness that we gain from our worship, meditation and spiritual practice to the rest of our lives. Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote,

I confess it takes me a little longer to do the dishes in mindfulness, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Each second of life is a miracle; the dishes themselves and the fact that I am washing them are miracles!

Living mindfully, fully present, with nothing to attain requires that we slow down. We have a meditation group, a satsang, here at LSC that is based on Eknath Easwaran's eight point method for leading a spiritual life. Isn't that wonderful? I can't tell you how much I like that. And wouldn't it be wonderful if we can really integrate this sensibility into the whole life of this community. And I want to point out that point number three in his program is “Slow Down.” Easwaran wrote,

I made my first decision in this country: no one is going to make me run. I will walk, I said to myself, at the same old bullock-cart pace of three miles per hour—in an emergency, four. I will keep the sensible and life-prolonging pace that prevails in rural areas of the world. I have maintained it ever since, and I believe I have acted as a bit of a brake on the speed of those around me.

People say that modern life has grown so complicated, so busy, so crowded that we have to hurry even to survive. We need not accept that idea. It is quite possible to live in the midst of a highly developed technological society and keep an easy, relaxed pace while doing a lot of hard work. We have a choice. We are not mere victims of our environment, and we don't have to go fast just because everybody else does and urges us to do it to. (Passage Meditation, p. 93)

Easwaran quotes Meher Baba, a modern mystic in India, we said,

*A mind that is fast is sick.
A mind that is slow is sound.
A mind that is still is divine.*

And so, it seems to me, we value this stillness and motionlessness. This is a priority. And we try to bring it into the rhythm of our lives.

There are so many things I love about our covenant here—our blueprint—our DNA—as a congregation. And this sensibility I’m talking about is reflected in the covenant that affirms that we are not just about action, about doing, about striving and goals. But we are also about contemplation, and this swims against the current of our culture. And so to nurture this, we make a promise to be “a womb.” I’m excited about exploring what it means to live into this, embody this, more and more. Perhaps it might mean resisting the pull of the domination of action and business, setting aside Sundays as a day of worship, learning and reflection with no committee meetings or business, for example! I just throw that out there as something to think about.

Part of what I’m doing is taking an unconventional look at a basic idea in the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the book of Genesis, the ancient myth says that God set aside a certain amount of time of rest as holy and sacred. The scripture says that even God rested: “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because God rested from all the work God had done in creation” (2:3). Here we have a glimpse into what it means to be *whole persons*. God models this Sabbath wholeness; it’s a gift for our well-being. “But,” as Barbara Brown Taylor said, “we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command.”

In Deuteronomy, Sabbath as a day of rest from labor was also a reminder of God delivering the people from the oppression of their taskmasters in Egypt. Sabbath is a sign of God’s desire that people are not mere cogs in a machine; it is a sign of God liberating people from a life of mere drudgery and toil.

Part of Sabbath, then, is about justice. It is about treating all people with dignity and not exploiting them for their work. The notion of Sabbath is also more than just personal wholeness, it involves a concern for providing rest for family, strangers, workers, animals and the land. “Hallow the Sabbath” means to hallow one another, to hallow the cattle, to hallow the earth. It is a statement about human relationships. It’s not just individual completeness, but completeness in families, communities and society. In a world that is organized and centered around tasks and results, Sabbath emphasizes the value of relationship—with our children, with each other, with God.

Sabbath is the experience of being able to trace our deep connections and make them bolder. Time stands still, suspended, and we feel our connections with humanity, with creation. It is to be aware of our unity.

After the industrial revolution our world changed and labor eventually saw the need to set some limits. For example, the 40-hour workweek was established. Better working conditions, safety laws, pension funds for retirement, abolition of child labor all followed.

These are just some of the ways that even society has recognized the need for rest, and the need for time for personal wholeness and for family wholeness. Even society recognizes this need. Just look at all the talk about stress management and stress seminars. Human beings know that

we do not live by bread alone and that we need time set aside to rest, to integrate, to center ourselves—and that *all* people deserve this.

But lately, the American worker has been losing ground in this area. Many have felt the pressure of stagnant wages, cuts in benefits and demands to work longer and harder. Parents have less and less time to spend with their families, sometimes working two or three jobs.

So a part of us knows the truth of Sabbath, (not the law, the spirit) yet we resist. As individuals, we often stoke our egos and strive for achievements at the expense of Sabbath. As a society we deny Sabbath to others by denying living wage jobs and make lives difficult, harsh and without much rest. In our ancient witness today, we read that Jesus said, “Look, Sabbath was created for you, for your own well-being. Trust me. It’s not there for you either to manipulate or ignore.”

But it’s difficult to practice Sabbath in our world today. And much of this we impose on ourselves. Many of us feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. Wayne Muller describes it well:

It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: “I am so busy.” We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath—this has become the model of a successful life. (Sabbath: Remember the Sacred Rhythm of Rest and Delight, 1999).

“In returning and rest you shall be saved,” wrote the prophet, “in quietness and confidence shall be your strength: (Isaiah 30:15). Writer, Frederick Buechner, said,

We return to our deep strength and to the confidence that lies beneath all our misgiving. The quiet there, the rest, is beyond the reach of the world to disturb. It is how being saved sounds.

And so Jesus said, “Come unto me all who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). This is what the idea, the spirit of Sabbath is about. And we see Jesus, the model of human wholeness, was always withdrawing, stopping and reflecting. He would take breaks with his disciples, and he would say, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (Mark 6:31).

Even though Jesus practiced Sabbath in his own living, there were many instances when he was accused of the opposite—of disregarding the observance of Sabbath. Many accused Jesus of breaking the law and undermining the Tradition, but Jesus was reinterpreting the tradition (as we are called to do, too), and he clearly thought he was following its spirit. This is part of what I’m talking about—what does it mean to follow the spirit of Sabbath?

For Jesus, remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy meant bringing life into the Sabbath Day, and so he did acts of healing and compassion on those days, too. But it meant *injecting Sabbath time into all of life*, and so he took time to rest, pray and reflect on more than just the seventh day. Jesus integrated Sabbath time into his days and moments *as a way of living*. And so, simply making space for supper together each day can be a way of practicing Sabbath time, for example. The spirit of Sabbath is to live a balanced life.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said,

(Sabbath) is like a palace in time... In Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness of time.

And so we stop—and roam through this palace. Heschel, in fact, suggests that the meaning of the verb, *shavat*, is “to be complete.” So the command “to rest, to cease, to desist from work, to let go,” contrary to our culture, asserts that human beings become complete not just by doing, but *by non-doing*, by rest. Sabbath holds these two ideas of rest and completion together.

I need to add that Sabbath rest is not mere relaxation or ordinary rest; it is about resting *in the Divine*. It is about trusting in a Reality that embraces us when we are resting. It is to be still with a clear intention; it is to be quiet and listen. It is to experience and enjoy life without guilt, to celebrate what is beautiful and good with gratitude and wonder, without thinking you should be doing something. You know after all, it’s often pointed out that we’re human *beings*, not human *doings*. It is good to stop and focus on our truest essence regularly.

Sabbath invites us to take joy not in what will be or what might be, but to take joy in what *already is*. It is to savor the simple pleasures of life and of God’s love and acceptance. I like to think of it as practicing living in the “sufficiency of grace.” We often say that God’s grace is sufficient for us, but how often do we actually live this way? Sabbath time is to say we don’t need to achieve anything; we don’t really need to produce results; we don’t need even approval or respect from others. There’s only one thing we need, and we already have it: Sacred Presence.

The spirit of Sabbath is to slow down, to stop and say that life itself is miraculous and beautiful, and to “find it good,” that God is present at the heart of each moment and that nothing is more important.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: (from Wendell Berry’s book, *Sabbaths*)

*Six days of work are spent
To make a Sunday quiet
That Sabbath may return.
I comes in unconcern;
We cannot earn or buy it.*