

The Fourth Command: Permission to Rest

July 3, 2016
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Have you ever felt what I felt, this past week? I'm sure you have.

I was sitting on the little deck behind our house. My day had been long. Not a bad day, mind you, but busy. If I'm honest with myself, there were probably one or two low-level, smoldering, work issues that preoccupied my thinking. And my sermon wasn't written yet.

But now it was about 11:00 in the evening, I had a glass of wine, and I was trying to pull myself together, get some perspective on my day, and relax. But I couldn't. I was—I'm not sure how to describe it. Anxious? Rattled? Out of psychic breath?

So I was sitting there, feeling this way, and I began daydreaming. What would calm me down—for the long-term, I mean? I imagined living close to some lively village north of Peterborough, perhaps. I'd be the pastor of a tiny church. I would live in a cottage beside a slow-moving stream. There would be bird feeders and wild flowers and huge oaks. I wouldn't work overtime and I would read and write to my heart's content.

Just daydreaming. But my anxiousness, the way I felt out of psychic breath, rattled even, wasn't very nice. And feeling that way, for me, isn't uncommon. I was out of sorts.

I am willing to bet that my experience, the other night, is one that nearly all of you can identify with, at least occasionally. Most of us live lives that are packed with the regular upsets and anxieties that go with living in a bustling, busy city like Toronto. We drive our kids or grandkids—if mom and dad are too busy—to soccer and hockey and karate classes. We hurry up and wait trying to drive up Bayview Avenue to the 401, only to merge into a bumper on bumper mess. Bosses or industries or the clock make demands on us beyond what families should have to endure. Term papers have to be written, doctor's visits made, birthday cakes ordered, church committee meetings attended, grocery runs made, and healthy dinners cooked. We stumble out of bed too early and wrestle away with our day, only to fall exhausted back into bed far too late. And if we do find time to have that glass of wine on the porch, no wonder we're a bit anxious, rattled and out of psychic breath.

Is there a solution?

Maybe what we need is more leisure? But I wonder if that is truly so. In modern Canada, a lot of us don't enjoy our leisure so much as we're busy with it to the point of exhaustion. Do we play tennis or work on our backhands? Do we have a relaxed weekend at the cottage, or do we fight traffic for hours each way, so that we can paint, mow, fix, shop, cook and slap away at no-see-ums? We suit up in professional-looking spandex skiwear/bike wear and swimwear because we don't want to seem—well, amateurish, as if we just fooling around for fun. We take

our leisure seriously, after all. I'm reminded of an Atlantic Monthly article from a few years ago that said, "Sunday, once the day of rest, has become merely one of two days of what is often strenuous activity." The article went on to explain how people in our culture have made themselves slaves to the weekend in such a way that there is no rest anymore. We get out of bed on Monday mornings, if anything, even more tired than before the weekend.

And so, on Tuesdays or Wednesday nights after the weekend, if we haven't fallen into bed exhausted, we sit on our porches a little bit anxious, rattled and out of psychic breath.

What do we do about this surfeit of activity; lives that are whirlwinds of important work deadlines, essential kid activities, and frustrating traffic or transit delays? And what are we missing out on—most?

I'm fascinated that among all the other weighty concerns that the ten commandments address—murder, idolatry, sexual unfaithfulness, greed, envy . . . that among all these other dire, moral issues the ten commandments give us permission—no, since this if from God, apparently—the ten commandments strongly encourage us to take a real break—every week—and instead of being busy with leisure—really, truly rest. Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the Sabbath is Holy to the Lord, and on it you shall not do any work. Not just leisure, but holy rest—that's the Biblical prescription for what ails us when we sit on our porches—anxious, rattled, and out of psychic energy.

And there is no finer example of the sort of rest than the story of Martha and Mary. Here's the context.

Our scripture begins with a question. The lawyer wants to know, "What must I do in order to inherit eternal life?" The answer, in two parts, is: (one) "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and (two) "Love your neighbour as yourself."

"Ah, but who is my neighbour?" The lawyer wants more than this summary of the law that Jesus has just provided. This lawyer wants a concrete application. So Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable fleshes out the meaning of the second of the two commandments, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Being a Good Samaritan is a lot of work, and it involves risk, and it can wreck your day—but that's what loving your neighbour takes. But where is the practical application of the first commandment, to love God?

This practical application is the story of Mary and Martha. Luke is using a common literary device of that time, called *inclusio*. You can see how it works on the slide I'm showing you. Luke has Jesus deal with the first part, and the second part of the great command in reverse order, like this: First part of great command stated, second part of great command stated, second part of great command explained—the parable of the Good Samaritan, and then, finally, the first part of the great command, "Love God," illustrated by the lived parable of Martha and Mary.

And how does one love the Lord, then, "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all you mind?" Well, like Mary, you set aside the household tasks

that burden and busy Martha, and you sit at Jesus' feet. You listen to him while sitting and relaxing. In fact, this resting and focusing on Jesus is the great thing that makes the second, loving neighbour, possible. Taking holy rest is prelude to really living. Holy rest is an antidote to the business that we all struggle with.

Now, when I was younger and perhaps within your memory too, the way we used to sit at Jesus' feet was pretty narrowly defined. It had to be on Sundays. So you didn't shop on Sundays, or mow the lawn, or spend the day in the car. Instead, you went to church—twice sometimes, in my case. You took Sunday afternoon naps, never played organized sports, and didn't stop at restaurants when you did have to travel on Sundays. Some of my friends were not even allowed to ride their bikes on Sundays, and the only reading material allowed was the church magazine, the catechism, or the Bible.

We have long ago moved away from this strict interpretation of Sunday rest, of course. We eventually realized that the rest offered in the command was not met by keeping a legalistic set of rules that left most of us, especially if we were under the age of about 15, very unhappy. It was the right thing to do away with all that Sunday rest legalism and invite some leisure in.

Furthermore, I'd be the last person in the world to say that people shouldn't go skiing or golfing or to the cottage on weekends, instead of going to church. We have a saying here, at Lawrence Park, "If you're here, we're glad; if you're not, we bless you!" I like that attitude. No guilt church attendance and golfing! Your pick.

At the same time, we need more—or perhaps less—than leisure to live a balanced life. We need time for reflection. Time to ponder the mysteries that hem our lives in. Time to cultivate gratitude for the plenty we have in a world of want, peace in a world torn apart by war, terrorism, and crime. We need time to pay attention to, and sometimes patch, our foundations. We need a time and place to grow our appetite for social justice, equity, and the least and last who live on the fringes of our lives. Time to embrace, and be embraced by, others who care about these central human values and aspirations. Time to rest at Jesus' feet and be swept away by his holy care and concern for God and neighbour. In our text, Mary has chosen the better part because she takes time to put all that busy daily stuff aside, in order to love God by focusing on Jesus' words as he explains the meaning of her life.

So, when you get the chance, lay your burdens down, forget the boss, free up your weekend from that long list of "to-dos" and come to church and rest. Listen to a prelude and sermon. Reflect with us on the meaning of life and its mysteries. Wonder whether Jesus' way is the best way. Be with friends who share your curiosity about God. Or, if you can't come to church, join our Monday spiritual direction and reflection group, where members rest their souls for an hour or so in guided reflection and silence. Or, if you can do neither, pick up a book on centering prayer, or mindfulness, or prayer, and free yourself from the ravages of the rat race just long enough to get in touch with the divine in each of us. Make a daily or weekly habit of such practices and they will point you in the direction you should go and offer a refuge from the

anxiety and restlessness that are so much a part of our lives. Such practices—such rest—will give you psychic, spiritual rest.

Listen. The first and greatest command is that we love God. Not in the abstract, but by taking time to attend to the words and example of Jesus. Don't do it because I've told you, "you must." Do it so that through the centuries the stories about Jesus can nevertheless reach out to you and say, "welcome," and "I loved you first," and "I will give you rest."

Mary's story is one told in praise of idle hands and a spiritually curious heart and mind, a story told in praise of divine rest. Seek it, practice it, and you will realize that such holy rest is its own reward.