

**Regent University Faculty Retreat
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Sabbath Living

Appreciation for Annual Faculty Retreats:

Over the years, I've attended many faculty retreats, the past 20 at one institution. I've heard presentations on a wide range of topics, most of them quite valuable; e.g., writing across the curriculum, strengths-based education, integration of faith, learning, and living. At a faculty dinner much like tonight's event, one retreat speaker, whom I will never forget, delivered a 39 point speech with handouts. (In case you are wondering, please let me put your mind at ease. I do not have 39 points to make.) You might think that, after having participated in so many annual faculty retreats, I might be bored with them or simply tired of attending them. Not so! My appreciation has actually deepened. Universities are places of diversity – sometimes even divergence – of professional concern. Annual faculty retreats provide an opportunity for reconsidering what we have in common. They provide opportunity to engage in a dialogue about matters of mutual concern. So over the years, I have grown very interested in the nature of what we have in common and the content of our dialogue about matters of mutual concern.

My Topic:

Tonight I want to speak to you about **Sabbath Living**. In all my years in the academic world, I have never heard a guest speaker –much less a guest speaker at a faculty retreat – address the topic of Sabbath Living. Perhaps this is because for academic professionals it sounds too much like a sermon topic. I'm also confident that Sabbath Living does not initially strike many of you as the type of topic that will galvanize you and propel you into the new academic year with unbounded energy and enthusiasm. It's not that sort of topic, and I'm not that sort of speaker. But having worked for many years in the academy, I am convinced that Sabbath Living is a timely topic for many Christian scholars, including those of us who have gathered here this evening.

What Makes the Topic Timely?

Partly it is the changing nature of the academy. I am a native of western Montana. One of the luminary scholars from that part of the country is the late Norman Maclean, author of the celebrated novella *A River Runs Through It* and for many years a distinguished professor of literature at the University of Chicago. McLean grew up in my home town, Missoula, where he was tutored in reformed theology, literature, and fly fishing by his father who was a Presbyterian minister. In the 1920s, Maclean studied at Dartmouth College in Hanover. During the summers he used to return to western Montana where he worked for the U.S. Forest Service and where in the summer of 1922 he and his father built a cabin at Seeley Lake, Montana. For much of his professional career, he returned to that cabin during the summer months. Both the cabin in its isolated wilderness setting and the summer away from urban life and professional pressures at the University of Chicago, afforded McLean an opportunity to write, think, reflect, and re-center himself.

If McLean's experience was in any way typical of an earlier generation of American scholars, it certainly is no longer typical. The time has long-since vanished when universities virtually shut down during the summer months, when their students went away to work at summer jobs, and when their faculty (like MacLean) retired to quiet places to gather themselves and consider reflectively what their lives and careers were about. Increasingly, universities today are very busy places during the summer months. Many universities – including Regent – operate on a 12-month cycle. As a result, faculty time and energy are engaged with a level of intensity not generally seen during the early and middle decades of the 20th century. The question then arises as to how faculty will find time to engage in the kinds of activities that, in earlier days, allowed people like Norman MacLean to gather themselves and to make sense of their situation.

From ancient times, Sabbath has provided just such opportunities. It should come as no surprise, then, that Sabbath Living is a timely topic for contemporary Christian scholars.

Impediments to our Task

But there are impediments to thinking anew about Sabbath living.

- **Our Own Orientation to Task.** Universities attract not only well educated but also highly motivated people. It's fashionable to label highly motivated people as "Type A" – tense, driven, possibly even aggressive. Whether this is an accurate label, I am not prepared to say. In any case, well educated and highly motivated people are often task oriented. And this seems true of many university faculty. But intense focus on task can also leave one feeling at odds with the rhythms traditionally associated with Sabbath Living.
- **The Tyranny of the Urgent.** An activity is urgent if you or others feel that it requires immediate attention. Urgent activities include crises, pressing problems, and deadlines. Questions about how to incorporate Sabbath rhythms into one's daily life do not fall into the category of the urgent. In a certain respect, incorporating Sabbath rhythms into your life is more like learning to eat a well balanced diet or getting the right amount of exercise: important but not urgent. In the face of urgent things that confront us in daily life, it is easy to succumb to the urgent at the expense of the important.
- **The Burden and Relevance of Sabbath.** Most Christian scholars are certainly acquainted with the biblical concept of Sabbath rest. But Sabbath is viewed by some as tedious. Some of us grew up in churches that treated Sunday (the Christian Sabbath) as sacrosanct: no TV, no comic strips, no sports, no shopping. In short, no fun! Partly because of what we have seen or heard over the years, Sabbath has become at best an occluded ancient ideal that seems to have little relevance today, even to most Christians.
- **Misconception of the Relationship between Sabbath and Work.** Among people who still value Sabbath time, I find a common misconception: Work (especially work for God) is paramount; Sabbath is a time of rest in order to prepare us to work more effectively and efficiently.
 - Example: We've all heard variations of an old story dating back to the 19th century or earlier about workers – they may be farm works, riverboat works, or some other group of laborers – who were able to accomplish more in six days of work, taking one day each week for rest, than others who work at the same tasks

but who worked all seven days of the week. The lesson of the story is clear: taking a day of rest – a Sabbath day, if you will – makes you a more productive worker.

If you don't believe this thinking survives into the 21st century, consider the following example.

- Example: In his famous book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey identifies the seventh habit as “Sharpening the Saw.” The habit involves renewal in four main areas: physical, mental, spiritual, and social/emotional. Sharpening the saw is the metaphor Covey has chosen for this kind of renewal that makes one more effective in all other areas of one's life. In a certain sense, renewal in these aspects of our lives sounds like the kind of restorative rest we might expect from Sabbath keeping. If so, I suspect that Covey has misconstrued the relationship between work and Sabbath Living. For instance, listen to the way he articulates the underlying principle of the habit of sharpening the saw, “Production (results) requires development of Production Capability (resources).” This language reinforces the preeminence of work. Even the metaphor – sharpen the saw – reinforces the preeminence of work. I own five acres of land, which I must mow periodically. I own a full-sized tractor and two large riding mowers. From time to time I sharpen the blades on these machines. Now, do I sharpen the blades for the purpose of mowing more effectively, or do I mow the grass on my property for the purpose of sharpening the blades? Of course, the first alternative states the relationship correctly: There is no value *per se* in sharpening blades; it is strictly an instrumental activity in preparation for the more important task of mowing the lawn. For Covey, renewing oneself physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially/emotionally is fundamentally instrumental in the same way. It is a process of preparing to do something else. But Sabbath Living, though it certainly has some beneficial consequences, is not strictly instrumental. The primary purpose of Sabbath Living is not to make us more rested and therefore more effective workers, even if it turns out to have that consequence. This is evident in the way the Scriptures describe Sabbath keeping. The Sabbath points to an eternal order of the world. In the words of Jürgen Moltmann: “The Sabbath is not there for the sake of the work; the work is

there for the sake of the feast.” Sabbath is the pinnacle of creation. It reminds us of our ultimate concerns and our place before God.

If we are going to give Sabbath Living the place it deserves in our lives we will have to overcome the understandable, perhaps predictable, misalignment of the relationship between work and Sabbath rhythms.

Preliminary Theological Considerations

The Scriptures have much to teach us about Sabbath Living. Given our time constraints this evening, I will comment on only two themes that appear in the Scriptures:

- 1) Although keeping Sabbath commanded in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 and was required for all Jews in order to be in right standing with God, the New Testament unambiguously inaugurates a new understanding of Sabbath. In his Epistles, Paul makes clear that Sabbath, like other external signs of piety, is insufficient for salvation. “Therefore do not let anyone judge you . . . with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” The correct understanding of Sabbath is modeled and taught by Jesus, who responded to those who would make a fetish of Sabbath observance, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”
- 2) In the Scriptures, Sabbath keeping is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for salvation; it is a *spiritually enriching practice*. In this sense true Sabbath Living does three things for us.
 - a. It develops our relationship with our creator. Our friend and colleague Miroslav Volf is correct in reminding us that we are gifted and called to work. But we should not let this truth overshadow the fact that being made in the image of God means first and foremost that we have been created to enter into a relationship with our Creator. The relationship, not our work, is primary.
 - b. Sabbath Living is, at least in part, a community activity. As such it draws us into and strengthens our relationships with fellow human beings.
 - c. Sabbath is for renewal – physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional – but not simply as a means to becoming more efficient or effective in our work. The refreshment is partly to prepare us for

work, but primarily to broaden our vision of who we are and what it means to be a human being made in the image of God.

Sabbath Living as the Integration of Two Kinds of Time

Now, for me, Sabbath Living is best understood as the integration of two ways of living in time. For purposes of explaining the kind of integration I have in mind, I borrow a couple of terms from the Presbyterian writer and pastor, Eugene Peterson: *Chronos*-time and *Kairos*-time. Both terms derive from Greek words (*chronos* = time; *kairos* = gift)

- *Chronos*-Time: Duration; undifferentiated units of time as marked by a clock or a calendar. It is popular to criticize this conception of time. But it has been highly instrumental in the development of Western life as we know it today. One of the most colorful examples of the importance of time calculated as undifferentiated units appears in the historical problem that mariners faced in determining longitude at sea. On July 8, 1714, during the reign of Queen Anne, the British Parliament established the Longitude Act. This act provided a prize of “£20,000 pounds for a method to determine longitude to an accuracy of half a degree of a great circle.” (Given the circumference of the earth, half a degree is a long distance, a fact which shows the desperation of the times.) John Harrison solved the problem by building several clocks capable of keeping time accurately at sea. His prize winning clock, called H-4, was finished in 1759 and tested at sea in 1761-62 on a voyage to Jamaica and again in 1764 on a voyage to Barbados. Clearly, *chronos*-time has been and will continue to be important to technological progress. But it does not represent the only legitimate way to think about time.

- *Kairos*-Time: Time viewed as a gift or an opportunity. Consider certain occasions in which we focus more on the nature of the event than the strict passage of time.
 - e.g., falling in love
 - e.g., reading a good book: David McCullough’s *1776*.
 - e. g., conversing with a trusted friend
 Notice that efficiency and precision are not primary features of opportunities like these. Also, the units of time are not undifferentiated; rather, they are qualitatively differentiated.

Three summary points:

1. Sabbath living is essentially *Kairos*-time. However, in today's complex world, which is so integrally tied to clocks, calendars, and schedules, Sabbath living cannot be viewed as a stand-alone phenomenon. It is best thought of as the integration of the two kinds of time.
2. Unless Sabbath living is experienced as the integration of these two kinds of time, it will either find no place in our lives or (if it does) it is likely to be regarded as a burden or a distraction from what is urgent and compelling in our everyday lives.
3. Integrating these two kinds of time actually makes it possible for Sabbath Living part of everyday life, not just a Sunday event.

For most of us, successfully integrating *chronos* and *kairos* time involves several other acts of preparation and follow-through:

1. Being deliberate

Dorothy Bass: "The Christian practice of receiving the day begins with setting aside a part of each day for attention to God. This piece of time leans deliberately into the wind, grounding us to resist the forces that hurry us on to distraction." *Receiving the Day*

2. Attentively attending the practices you choose to engage in.

- The opposite of distraction is attention.
- Again, Dorothy Bass: "Frequent and regular acts of attention are anchors for the practices of receiving the day." *Receiving the Day*

3. Trying not to bring an agenda to the practices. Allow yourself to be available to the moment, the person, or the event.

- Annie Dillard, "Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow. You catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall." What Dillard describes as placing one's cup under the waterfall, is essentially an act of being available or receptive to an opportunity that can bless and enrich one's life.
- Another way to put this principle is called "integrity in the moment of choice." E.g., my grandson Jayden asking me to read to him at a time when I had other things to do. I put him off, saying (somewhat disingenuously) that I would read to him "in a minute or two." After asking me two or three times, he quit asking. In my willingness to forego the urgent (the task I viewed as deserving immediate attention), I failed to take advantage of a *kairos* moment. By succumbing to the urgent, at

the expense of the important, I lacked integrity in the decisive moment of choice.

4. Being on the lookout for ideas to stimulate your imagination

I'd like to close with some examples from my own experience. But a couple of points are worthy keeping in mind. First, none of the things I am about to share are quick fixes. They are practices that I have become comfortable with and that I enjoy. These are *my* practices. They may or may not work for you. But perhaps they will pique your imagination.

Some of My Practices:

Practices that restore the self and open us to God's presence

- Meditating on passages of Scripture as a way of moving beyond myself. E.g., Psalm 19, the prayers of Paul, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I sometimes do this when I walk. Regent is a good place for walks.
- Arrive at the office a little before most other people and take a few minutes to welcome the day. Often I ask myself: How do today's events fit in with my larger set of priorities? And often I try to begin the day with the affirmation that this day is truly a day that the Lord has made.
- Reading about the way God has called other people over the past 20 centuries
 - Augustine, *Confessions*
 - Dorothy Sayers, "Vocation in Work"
 - Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*
- Paying attention to the historical church calendar

Practices to develop community with colleagues

- Lunch with department faculty every Tuesday at 11:00 a.m.
- Reading Group every other Sunday evening

Conclusion:

I leave you with these ideas – briefly and incompletely presented as they are – because I am convinced that, over the long haul, we cannot flourish as scholars and teachers unless we first flourish as persons, and over the long haul incorporating Sabbath rhythms into our daily routines is integral to our flourishing as persons.

The practices associated with Sabbath Living don't justify us in God's eyes and are not necessary for our salvation. But they have a way of refining us, maturing us, and giving a clearer vision of the ultimate meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross as well as his resurrection. The practices that constitute Sabbath living – like other ancient spiritual disciplines – orient us to respond to God in gratitude and faith, and to our fellow human beings with compassion and understanding.

Blessings on you, my colleagues at Regent University, as you embark on a new academic year! May the peace and restorative rest of God accompany you in every facet of your personal life and professional work.