

The Extraordinary Gift of Ordinary Time

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The period of the church year between Pentecost and Advent is sometimes called “ordinary time.” It is called “ordinary” because there are no special days like Christmas or Easter toward which it points and no special themes on which it focuses. The lectionary readings for the Sundays of this period of ordinary time offer a greater variety of subjects and themes for the preacher than the more focused seasons offer.

This period of “ordinary time” begins during the months of summer when we are encouraged to step out of our ordinary routines. Summer is supposed to be extraordinary time when we relax and reflect and do the things our ordinary schedules do not allow. Summer is daylight saving time when an extra hour of sunlight is snatched out of the ordinary day and given back to us as a gift for the evening. Summer is vacation time when we escape the ordinary routine for a week or two to be refreshed and restored before we jump back into the rat race again.

The preacher looking for themes to explore during the Sundays of “ordinary time” need look no further than time itself, ordinary time, the routine, day to day, moment by moment way we use time and are used by it. We find occasions to include work time in our preaching. With Labor Day, we even have a holiday, if not a holy day, around which to drape this interest. Thought about work time has a solid foundation in our theological tradition, especially in the doctrine of creation and in the emphasis placed on “secular calling” by Luther, Calvin, and other reformers of the sixteenth century.

The summer months seem an appropriate season to explore another segment of time which seldom finds its way into preaching, that is, leisure time. We seldom, if ever, explore leisure time in our preaching. There are many reasons why leisure time has not been treated as a fit subject for Christian preaching. Some may not consider leisure time as a subject significant enough for preaching. For them, work is the only really significant activity. If leisure has any value, it is as something which prepares us to work or rewards us for work already accomplished.

Even if we consider leisure time a significant subject to explore, it is not evident that there is any foundation for the subject in either our theological tradition or in the biblical record. The use of leisure time was not a problem and seldom a possibility in the culture from which the biblical writings arose. The same could be said for most of the centuries when Christian theology was being developed. Leisure time is a modern phenomenon and the use of leisure time is a modern problem.

As a result of this reluctance to explore the meaning and worth of leisure time, a theological and ethical vacuum has developed. This vacuum has been filled in two primary ways. Either we have allowed the meaning and character

of leisure time to be defined by hedonism without the benefit of any ethical or religious foundation, or we have taken the principles of the much maligned "protestant work ethic" and used them to form an equally aggressive and competitive "protestant play ethic." Gordon Dahl described the latter in his assessment of the "leisure oriented society" of the 1970's. Dahl wrote, "most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship."¹

While we may not find a specific biblical reference to leisure, there is a strong biblical theology of time. That is where we must begin any exploration of the meaning of leisure time. The first and foundational affirmation is that God created time. The "creation hymn" that introduce Genesis affirms that, before the universe was created, God created light, separated light from darkness, called the light Day and the darkness Night and thus created time. Time is God's gift to the universe and, because it is God's gift, time is holy. The great Jewish scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, explains the development of the theology of time in the Bible as follows: "holiness was gradually shifted from space to time, from the realm of nature to the realm of history, from things to events."²

Not only did God create time but God also created the Sabbath for rest. Rest was a positive creation, not just the absence of work. In fact, rest has a special place in creation. God blessed the Sabbath and sanctified it, making the seventh day the *only* object of creation to be called holy. Heschel goes so far as to say that it took the creation of rest before the universe was complete.³

The creation of the Sabbath established rest as a reality with value in its own right. The value of rest is not determined by what it contributes to our ability to work. The purpose of rest is not to offer us a reward for work. Karl Barth had an interesting way of making this point. He cites the creation of human beings on the sixth day, and the creation of the Sabbath on the seventh day to say that the Sabbath was created on the first day of humanity's existence. Therefore the human race proceeded from rest to work rather than retreating from work into rest.⁴ Both work-time and rest-time have value. Both assist us in fulfilling the divine intention for ourselves and for all creation.

Likewise, rest, as well as work, assists the human creature in reaching the full potential of the divine image with which she/he is stamped. Not only does God work but God also rests, as the writer of the "creation hymn" makes clear (Gen. 2:2). The keeping of the Sabbath is based on the conviction that God rested on the seventh day of creation (Ex. 20:11). That conviction is taken one step further in the discussion of the Sabbath in Exodus 31:12-17 where it is said: ". . .on the seventh day [God] rested and was refreshed." Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that the word which is translated "refreshed" is a verb form of "nephesh" which means "soul" or "life" and literally means that God rested in order to get God's soul back. The strong implication here is that the work of creation impoverished God and God *needed* rest. So in rest, no less than in work, the human creature is following the example of God and is seeking to fulfill the divine image.

In creating we see a rhythm of work and rest set into motion by God's own authority and written into the basic structure of our being. Pastoral theologian

Wayne Oates hears this rhythm in our very heartbeat. He points out that the heart cycle is timed from the end of one contraction to the end of the next contraction. Within that cycle there is an exertion phase called the systole and a period of rest called the diastole. In other words the heart rests in rhythm with its exertion and this rest is an essential part of the heart's cycle.⁵

Work and rest are two parts of the same cycle of time which need to balance one another in such a way that together they form the rhythm of life. But what is it that rest needs to balance? When the burden of work is physical exhaustion, that is easy to answer. Rest is a period of inactivity which enables the body to replenish its energy and regain its strength. But the stress and strain of life today is much more than physical exhaustion. It is emotional strain and mental stress and spiritual fatigue. So rest must provide something deeper and more diverse than inactivity. And if rest is to make a positive contribution to the rhythm of life it must provide more than an escape or a momentary diversion.

The theological development of the meaning of Sabbath provides us with an understanding of rest which is deep, diverse, and positive. Sabbath/rest, which is the term being used here to indicate this deeper understanding of rest, includes restoration from exhaustion, freedom from compulsion and coercion, and relief from restlessness and endless competition.

The Sabbath was given for refreshment from the exhaustion of labor which even God needed. This is still a primary contribution of sabbath/rest to human life. In the Deuteronomic decalogue (Deut.5:12-16), the keeping of the Sabbath is tied to Israel's experience as slaves in Egypt, making this probably the first labor rights legislation in history. Sabbath/rest is a time for the refreshment and renewal of body, mind, emotions, and spirit. It is a time to get our "nephesh" back.

The Sabbath gave working people an alternative to lives governed by compulsion and coercion where mere survival was the goal. The Sabbath gave them a time to exercise their freedom before God, to remember their identity as children of God, and to develop their God-given gifts. Not every job that economic necessity requires us to perform is a true vocation. Not every job allows us to develop our talents to the fullest or to fulfill God's will for our lives. Sabbath/rest provides us an occasion to explore all our gifts, an opportunity to fulfill God's will for our lives, and the freedom to experience our true vocation.

The Sabbath was given as a reminder that life does not depend upon our striving but upon our receiving life as God's gift.⁶ In our "dog eat dog" society which lives and moves by competition, much of our leisure time is also governed by the rules of competition and directed toward the goal of winning. W. Gunther Plaut writes: "If the Sabbath is to have any significance it must confront one of modern man's greatest curses, his internal and external unrest. The unrest arises from the fact that today he leads life without goals and, as a consequence, that he is involved in competition without end."⁷ Sabbath/rest provides some balance by reminding us that there is more to life than what we earn or win. Sabbath/rest offers us an invitation to form a new kind of human community in which cooperation is the rule, in which emphasis is placed on receiving instead of striving and in which success comes through service.

Starting with the affirmation that rest is a gift from God with value in its own right as a foundation, and using sabbath/rest as a model for that gift, it is possible to develop an outline of, at the risk of sounding pretentious, what one might call a theology of leisure time. What follows is intended to be merely suggestive of a few of the implications of sabbath/rest for our attitudes toward leisure time and the ways we spend it.

Sabbath/rest provides a model with definite implications for what leisure is *not*. From this perspective, leisure time is not primarily reward for hard work. And the way we spend our leisure time is not justified by how much it is deserved, as in: "I earned this vacation and if I want to sit at home for two weeks and watch reruns of 'Gilligan's Island' while the rest of the family is bored stiff, I deserve it." Leisure that is modeled after sabbath/rest is more than this.

If it is modeled after sabbath/rest, leisure is *not* merely free time. To define leisure as simply free time leads to the expectation that nothing worthwhile takes place during leisure time. It tempts us to assume that we bear no responsibility for how we use our leisure time. It allows us to avoid our responsibility by claiming we have no free time. It is true that the most effective people in our communities and in our congregation have little free time. They do not have enough time to do all they try to do or feel they should be doing at work, at home, in their community, and in their church. But this does not mean that they have no leisure time. Sabbath/rest reminds us that all time is free in the sense that all time is a gift from God. And no time is free in the sense that we are responsible to God for how we use it.⁸

If it is modeled after sabbath/rest, leisure, is *not* merely diversion or distraction. The so-called "leisure industry" has built a multibillion dollar business on the premise that people are looking for diversion and entertainment in their leisure time. The church has also developed leisure ministries or retirement ministries designed primarily to entertain. Diversion and entertainment have some value in the short run, but they offer no long-term rest or strength or refreshment. Diversion is often nothing more than feverish activity by which people burn themselves out. The consequence of that is deadness rather than refreshment.

By contrast leisure that is based on the sabbath/rest model is a creative and liberating experience. The word leisure comes from the Latin "*licere*" which means "to be permitted." Leisure time is not free time. It is *freedom time*. It is time to transcend the economic necessity of earning a living in order to really live. It is time to rise above what one *has* to do in order to do what one *wants* to do. It is time to explore new possibilities within ourselves, within our families and within ourselves, within our communities in order to develop further the image of God with which we are stamped. Leisure is a time for celebrating God's gift of life, and God's gift of space, and God's gift of time. Leisure time, no less than work time, is time for us to glorify and enjoy God.

Al Wells points toward the potential of leisure time as he describes the seaside cottage he has enjoyed through the years. He urges others to seek such a place for themselves, ". . . some place families can take time to know each other, do things together, put down roots together, have fun together; some

place to feel solitude, to hear deep calling unto deep, to get close to God's real world, to renew commitments to larger issues, to get close to God."⁹ It may not be possible for everyone to have a place like that. But it is possible for everyone to have a time like that. Such a time is an experience of the gift that the Old Testament called sabbath/rest. Any time one can experience that in the ordinary routine is a sacred time. It is an extraordinary gift.

NOTES

¹ Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 12.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (NY: Farrar, Strauss, & Young, 1951), 79.

³ Heschel, *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977), 228.

⁵ Wayne E. Oates, *Your Right to Rest* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 29f.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 35.

⁷ W. Gunther Plaut, "The Sabbath as Protest: Thoughts on Work and Leisure in the Automated Society," in *Tradition and Change in Jewish Experience*, ed. A. Leland Jamison (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 176.

⁸ Dahl, *Ibid.*, 60ff.

⁹ Albert N. Wells, "Thank You, Sea'scape!" *Monday Morning*, 21 Jan., 1991, 22.