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Greetings in the name of the Lord!

Our scriptures this week were from Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 and Genesis 2:2-4a.

Connie Rouse a former journalist for the South Carolina United Methodist *Advocate* wrote, “What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? - - Is it simply going to church? - - I have discovered that some of the unholy moments can occur in the church, especially on Sunday mornings . . . It can’t be as simple as not working on Sunday, because ministers, choir directors, Christian educators, and youth pastors ‘work’ the hardest on Sundays . . . God created perfection and then stopped to rest in holiness. That divine resting concludes the creation. Sabbath belongs to the created order.” (*Upper Room Disciplines 2008, pg. 151*)

For those who were part of the Lenten Book Study *Un-Glued*, you may remember in chapter 11 when Lysa Terkeurst wrote, “The Bible makes it very clear that we are to pursue rest. Literally we are to hit the pause button on life once a week and guard our rest. Guard it fiercely. Guard it intentionally. Guard it even if our schedules beg us not to.” She goes on to say, “Where there is a lack of rest, there is an abundance of stress.”

During this ‘shelter-in’ time, Dan has been working diligently on our lake house, often 7 days a week. About a month ago, I declared he was not working one day. He was going to relax. He was surprised; but found it was important for his body, mind, and soul to rest. It’s the same for me. When I work 7 days a week, I get overly focused on work and overlook caring for myself. It’s a tendency I’ve had since I was young. My step-dad used to say, ‘You’re burning the candles at both ends, again.’

A couple of years ago, J. Robert & Marilyn Renick gave me a Lena Vista UMC’s newsletter. That’s where they attend while residing in Florida. The pastor listed a variety of things in which we lead in the world. I updated a few stats. ‘We lead the world in watching an average of 35 ½ hours of TV and 24 hours of social media/week. We lead the world in anxiety disorders. We lead the world in civilian firearms; as the US has more guns than people. The list goes on, but the point of Rev. Pam Childs’ article was, “We are not #1 in taking our vacations.”

“We are the worst vacationers in the world . . . Throughout Europe some countries give up to 25 minimum vacations days that employees MUST take, with one year of employment. European workers take every one of them. Many Australians enjoy a minimum of 6 weeks of vacation yearly; some receiving ‘Vacation Bonus Pay’ to help cover the costs of being away.” Finland, Brazil and France offer 30 days and the employees take them all! It’s part of the culture.

Far too many people in the US have hundreds, even thousands of vacation days they have not taken. Since the cost for companies paying this out, as people retire, has been enormous, some companies, hospitals, and the federal government limit how many days they will pay out at the end. For 10’s of thousands of workers, they leave hundreds of thousands of vacation days on the table. I used to do that too, and they didn’t carry over. A pastor ‘year’ is July 1st to June 30th, and the policy is ‘use it, or lose it.’

Yet if we take vacation time, we still tend to work from our computers and cell phones, as a way to stay connected to work, in case they need us. We don’t disengage. With the ‘stay at home’ order, there is a new struggle as millions of people work from home wondering: how do I separate work from home and from personal life, so I can actually rest, be on vacation, and have Sabbath time at home.

When most of us think of taking some time off or a day of Sabbath, our first reaction is often guilt – we don’t have time, we have so much to do. For many of us, our rhythm of life is at a hectic pace. So we seldom consider the reality that God created us as creatures that need time to revive. We eventually get it, when we are so spent, so emotionally distraught; we crack, get physically ill, or spiritually dry. We figure it out, when we can barely putting one foot in front of the other, and that’s when we’re in trouble.

The Bible is clear we are to set aside time to revive; yet contemporary Christians pay little attention to the Sabbath. Our understandings tend to lean on what we are not allowed to do, such as don’t shop, don’t go to the movies, don’t go out to eat or mow the yard. Years ago, most communities had ‘Blue Laws’. Back then, the “Blue Laws” in Pennsylvania prohibited the professional baseball games from beginning until after 6 p.m. on Sunday.

The fourth Commandment reads, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither hire your neighbor; neither shall your son or daughter, your servants, your animals, or the immigrants work. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the

Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” This important Commandment is the bridge between our faith in God and the righteous ways we are to treat one another.

Since God is not a workaholic; since God is not anxious about the functioning of creation; since God knows that the well-being of creation does not depend upon his endless work – it would make sense for us to model God’s behavior, regarding work in our life. Yet, the deceiver attacks us, reminding us of all we have to do, the endless chores, piles of files, a mountain of planning, and work deadlines that cause our head to swirl throughout the night. With all this unnatural pressure we put on ourselves, it’s no wonder we can’t get a good night’s rest. When we are unable to rest sufficiently, our body will no longer function at its best, resulting in various illnesses, disease, and inappropriate behavior.

Self-care, Sabbath rest, and taking time to breathe in the Holy Spirit may seem unnatural for some of us, since we’ve always worked long, hard hours. Most of us have amazing work ethics – but this can lead to early death and poor decisions. The temptation to live in unhealthy ways is greatest when we are not rested, not caring for ourselves, or taking the needed time to be centered in God.

When the Jewish leadership questioned Jesus on what the most important scriptural law, he quoted the *Shema*: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.” This law is about loving God emotionally, loving God in the ways we think, loving God through our spiritual practices, and loving God through the various physical activities in our life. The *Shema* reminds us that God is the center of our life, not our jobs, not money, not video games, not Facebook, and not your favorite vice.

In Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, found in Matthew 6, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for you will hate one or love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.” It still holds true today. We cannot live in the ways of our culture with its endless desires, the newest and best electronics, endless productivity, and endless restlessness; for it will not fill that ‘God hole’. We must have Sabbath and time with God each day, so God can fill us to overflowing, righteousness, and grace. That’s the only thing that will fill that invisible hole God created within us.

We have always had the option of Sabbath rest; however we are used to crunching it into the one hour or so, when we come to the church building or the 40 minutes on our Zoom platform. Some believe watching a service on TV counts as Sabbath, but most people just watch. They do not participate. They do not praise God. They just watch church. That’s why I’ve sent out the songs and liturgies out to everyone, so we can all participate in Worship. Praising God helps get us centered for Sabbath rest.

God – wants – us - to rest. He wants to make sure we don't get burnt out. God wants each of us to establish healthier lifestyles and rhythms of life. When we don't, we begin going our own way, we begin doing as we please, and the way we think, act, and speak becomes less than godly. Like our clothes that need a good cleaning after work, we need a weekly cleaning so our soul has the freedom to breathe and be free, on the other six days of the week.

In late April, each District Superintendent or their assistant called each pastor to see how they were doing after being in emergency or survival mode for over 6 weeks. Few were uncertain how to have down time, or take time off, with the new ways they were worshiping as a church. Many of them, like me had their vacation plans cancelled. So the Cabinet came up with a solution.

I shared it at our last PPR meeting and then at the Church Council meeting earlier this month. The Bishop and District Superintendents asked that each pastor use at least one pre-recorded sermon, preached by one the District Superintendents, to give the pastor some downtime. The PPR decided we could use one, which I will use next week (it's really good). And since my unused vacation days were being smashed into the last week and a half of June, they decided I could select another one, to cover my last Sunday off, at the end of the month (that sermon is really good too). Then, when I take time off later this summer, we can have a Laity Sunday and by then, someone will be able to run the Zoom format without me.

I plan to re-boot my self-care plan and take the time for Sabbath during my vacation. I know what I need to do, but I have failed miserably, like so many other pastors during this restructuring of our new ways of worship and life. I invite you to also restructure your life for a time of Sabbath rest too.

Dana Trent, faculty at Wake Technical College and *Upper Room* author of *One Breathe at a Time: A Skeptic's Guide to Christian Meditation* wrote, "We are all beginners with the spiritual life – no matter how long, how many years you sit in the quiet with God. Practicing this life is what changes you. [And,] You never master it." She goes on to say, "Let thoughts come - and then let them go . . . Commit to 3 minutes per day. Bring intention to it. If we set 20 minutes to begin, we won't have time. Be consistent; look forward to 3 minutes of time and space, with God. Three minutes will help you be less reactive and more responsive to those you encounter. . . When you meditate in other religions, you leave empty. When you mediate with the Holy Scriptures, Christian meditation, your thoughts are filled with God's loving kindness, to move you towards healing, wholeness, and a better understanding of a life lived for Christ."

God's ways are different. God wants the best for us. When we pause, even for a few minutes, an hour, or maybe a Sabbath day, we will be able to love others more fully. Amen.