

Of course not. Worry won't help us, Jesus says, and besides—God's got everything covered. All of our needs—every one of them—God meets. And, if we need proof, he says, look no further than the birds in the air and the lilies in the field—if God takes care of *them*, Jesus points out, why wouldn't God take of *us*?

All we need to do, Jesus says—all we need to do to ensure that every need is met, before we even voice it, is to seek first the kingdom of God.

All we need to do, in other words, is to serve *God*—not our employers, not our families, not our churches, not our friends. Put God first, Jesus says, and see what happens. All these things will be given to us, and more—if we just focus on God, and what God wants us to do.

That's where Sabbath comes in. Sabbath gives us the space and the permission and the freedom to *experience* God in a deeply personal way. Sabbath helps us focus on what's important so we can stop worrying about what's *not* important.

Because Sabbath lets us focus on the only person who can *really* effect change in our lives, and it's not us—it's *God*.

Sabbath is very difficult for us to do, though, especially at first. Old habits die hard, and it's hard for us to overcome this sense that just we're wasting time by doing nothing—that we could be *doing* so much in this time we've set aside to just *be*. Sabbath seems to be a luxury that we just can't justify for ourselves.

It's not until we realize, though, that "being" *is* "doing" that we begin to understand the Sabbath. We're human *beings*, not human *doings*, and Sabbath allows us to do just that—to *be*. It allows us to spend a little one-on-one time with God, to just *be* with God in the presence of God.

In the weeks since I've returned from my retreat, I have made it a point to incorporate a little Sabbath time into each and every day. Every morning I wake up, I pour myself a cup of coffee, and I settle down with my bible and my devotional books, and I let God lead me wherever God wants me to go in our time together.

Sometimes I'm led to write in my journal; sometimes, God will put the name of a particular book in my thoughts, which leads me to read it; sometimes I randomly open my Spiritual Formation Bible and see what God has to say to me on what-

ever pages it opens to.

And always, *always*, I pray. I pray the Psalms; I pray the list printed on the back of the Communicator; I pray for those whom the Holy Spirit places in my heart; I pray for God to answer specific questions that arise during my devotional or scripture reading.

I do this until I feel a sense of closure—that I've heard whatever it is that God wants me to hear. And then I take off and go roller blading, or for a walk, so I have time to reflect a bit on what I've just heard.

I cannot even begin to tell you what a huge difference this daily Sabbath has made in my life. I feel like I'm more *myself* than I was before—more authentically *me*, somehow. I worry very little, if at all, because I trust that God will provide. And I'm learning what I need to do to make this happen, because I'm taking the time to ask God—in other words, I'm taking the time to seek the Kingdom of God, to ask God how to prioritize my life to make my life as full and complete as it possibly can be.

Last week, the Worship Committee invited you to fill out what was, in essence, a spiritual formation survey. The results are not yet in, but I did want to share with you one thing I learned from reading your responses—that you all have a tremendous hunger to be connected with God—to not only know *about* God, but to *know God*, personally.

As your pastor, I am very happy to see that—but I will also tell you, as your pastor, that it's not going to happen unless you take the time—you *make* the time—to allow it to happen. Because developing a relationship with God is just like developing any other kind of relationship—it takes time, it takes effort, it takes commitment.

God's ready. Are you?

Last Tuesday night at the Session meeting we talked about last week's sermon—about the tremendous growth we've experienced as a church, and what we think God may be calling us to do and be as a result of our growth.

And what we realized is this: We really don't know. We really don't know who God is calling us to be, or what God would like for us to do, or what that will look like, or how best we should get there.

So ... we've decided to find out. And the way we've decided to find out is to commit to a

time of intentional prayer with God every morning—time when we can not only pray for our church, but time when we can also *listen* to what God may be saying to us, not just about the church, but about anything and everything that's going on in our lives.

Session also wanted to become more familiar with different ways of praying to God—different ways of *accessing* God, as it were. And so, in response to their request, I will be teaching a class this June called, "Spirituality 101," where we can talk about different ways of praying and being with God.

I invite you to join us Sunday morning, starting next week, at 9:00 AM. Join us and learn how to structure a Sabbath day; find out how to use your body in prayer; explore different spiritual disciplines designed to bring us closer to the One whom we all yearn to know—our incomparable, sovereign God.

Summer's here, and with it, we've been given a great gift—the chance to slow down a bit and catch up not only with *ourselves*, but with God.

Let's take it. Let's take that chance—let's open that gift—and see where it will take us.

Amen.

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"Slowing Down to Catch Up"

Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
May 25, 2008



Matthew 6:24-34

"Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others."

Matthew 6:24-34

Last April, a few weeks before Easter, a pastor friend of mine called me about some things that were going on at her church. So we talked a little about those issues, and then, all of a sudden, she asked me the strangest question:

“What are your plans for Sabbath renewal?”

I was a little taken aback by her question, not only because of the abrupt way in which the conversation switched gears as a result of the question, but also just because of the question itself—after all, it’s not often that someone asks you about Sabbath.

I thought she was talking about the following Sunday—the next Sabbath, as it were—so I launched into what my plans were for that day, when she interrupted me again—

“No, no, no—that’s not what I meant. What I *meant* was what are you doing for yourself in terms of Sabbath renewal?”

So I thought about that for a bit, and I started telling her about this class I was planning to take this summer out at Lake Tahoe ... and she interrupted me *again*—

“No, that’s *not* what I mean. What I mean is *what are you doing for yourself in terms of spiritual renewal?*”

So I thought about it for a minute, and then I told her. “Nothing.”

At which point she encouraged me to really start thinking about this—she wanted me to really give some thought as to what I could do to get away and just spend some time with God. She even suggested this place up in Wisconsin she’d heard of, this pastor’s retreat place that was designed for just this purpose—to give pastors the time and the space to reconnect with God the way we should (but often don’t).

So I looked into it, mostly just so she’d stop pestering me about it, even though I didn’t really see the point. After all, I reasoned, I spend time with God every day—I read my bible, and I pray, and I attend prayer groups and bible studies, and of course I spend a lot of time every week writing a sermon. Surely the fact that I spend most of my waking hours on all things spiri-

tual means I don’t need a separate Sabbath time to focus on God—right?

Wrong. As it happens, I just couldn’t be more wrong about that, which I discovered after spending a week at the end of April at the exact same pastor’s retreat place my friend recommended to me. Because what I discovered there was this:

Sabbath is different. *Sabbath* isn’t about *doing*—instead, it’s all about *being*. It’s all about setting aside some time dedicated to doing nothing but *resting* in the presence of God.

And therein lies the secret to Sabbath, as it were—Sabbath is all about *rest*. It’s all about shutting off your computer and your cell phone, and turning off your TV, and not running errands, or cooking, or doing any one of the million and one things that seem to make up a typical day for us. Sabbath is about tuning *out* these distractions—these distractions keep us from hearing God—and tuning *in* so we *can* hear God.

Sabbath, in other words, is one of God’s greatest gifts to us—the gift of spending time with God.

I was driving on the Norwood Lateral the other day and I saw this giant billboard for (I think) Panera. It features two women sitting at a table, smiling and having a conversation with one another over a cup of coffee, and the caption on the billboard says this:

“Sometimes you have to slow down to catch up.”

Sometimes you have to slow down to catch up.

Truer words were never spoken. How many of you, today, feel overwhelmed with all that you have to do? How many of you are worried that you can’t get them all done? How many of you are all stressed out over your job, or your relationship, or your children, or your parents, or your future? How many of you have trouble sleeping at night because of this? How many of you feel as though life is moving so fast sometimes that you just can’t keep up?

Times like these are times we need to just *slow down* ... as the billboard says, we have to *slow down* so we can catch up.

In other words, times like these are times for Sabbath. They’re tailor-made for Sabbath, in fact, because Sabbath is a way for us to *intentionally* slow down. Sabbath is a way for us to check in with God to see, maybe, if what we’re spending our time as God would have us spend it. Sabbath gives us the time and the space to be quiet and still long enough to hear what God has to say to us, about us.

Sabbath, interestingly enough, is *not* an optional activity—it’s a *commandment*, one of the original Ten Commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai so long ago. Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, and it’s the *longest* commandment of all of them in terms of number of words used to give it. Here’s what God has to say about Sabbath in Exodus:

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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it (Exodus 20:8-11).

There it is ... 89 words and four full verses dedicated to describing what Sabbath is, and why we should keep it—and yet, of all the commandments, this one seems to be the one we gloss over the most. Those of us who would never *dream* of, say, murdering, or stealing, *routinely* ignore God’s *command* for us to take one day a week and rest.

Why is that, do you suppose? Why is it that even though God has not only given us permission to take some time off, but *demand*ed that we do so—why is it, do you think, that we don’t do this?

I’ve been thinking about this a lot ever since my Sabbath retreat a few weeks ago, and I have a theory about this. And my theory is this:

We don’t observe the Sabbath because we don’t think we need it—because we think we can go it alone. In other words, we think that *we* have the power to make things happen. We believe, with our good Protestant work ethic, that the harder we work, the holier we are. We’re convinced that success and

happiness is ours—if only we’re willing to work for it.

So that’s what we do. We work hard, because we believe in our heart of hearts that working hard means that we’ll achieve our goals—whatever those goals may be.

And somehow—somehow, in this process of working so hard—somehow, we forget all about God. Or, if we think of God at all, we consign God to the leftover time we have after everything else is done.

What’s wrong with this picture? It’s the exact *opposite* of how things *should* be. Working hard is not the problem—I’m not advocating here that we should all quit our jobs and forget about our responsibilities. But what I *am* advocating is for us to admit that we need God’s help to make our work meaningful and worthwhile. We need to acknowledge that we don’t have the power to accomplish *anything* on our own. We need to concede that joy and happiness are *God’s* purview—not ours.

But we don’t. And so, when things don’t work out for us quite the way we envision them, despite all our hard work, what do we do? We work *more*. Instead of increasing our time with God, we do the exact *opposite* of what we need to do—we *decrease* our time with God. We work longer hours, we work harder while we’re at work, and in the process we exhaust ourselves to the point where we barely have enough energy to do all this work.

So instead of feeling *less* overwhelmed, we feel *more* overwhelmed—more *worried*. About everything.

We worry about whether we’re working hard enough. We worry what people will think of us. We worry that we don’t have enough money to pay our bills. We worry about not saving enough for retirement. We worry that our grades won’t be good enough to get us into a good college or graduate school. We worry so much we even worry about *worrying*, don’t we?

But we don’t have to. We don’t have to do all this worrying, as Jesus reminds us in the passage we read this morning from Matthew. After all—what will worrying do for us, he asks. Will worry add any time to our lives? Will worry help us to do what we need to do? Will worry help clothe us, or feed us, or accomplish any of the things we worry about?