

Sabbath: Increasing Our Strength of Soul

Psalm 138

The Word Of The Lord

Before leaning into our scripture I would like to take a moment and express a few thoughts as we begin our summer Sabbath together. **First**, thank you for your trust. Those of you who I don't know me very well yet may be thinking about now, "Just what have we gotten ourselves into this summer?" On the other hand it has been a pleasure getting to know many of you over the last 3-4 years in Session Retreats and in the Spring lecture series last Spring. So, we have a good foundation upon which to build this summer. Thank you for your trust.

Second, thank you to the Lilly Foundation for providing funding in the Sabbatical Grant for a Sabbatical Pastor. This will allow your Associate Pastors to continue on with their already full ministries without adding too much to their plates. I'm already enjoying serving with them and your fine lay leaders.

Third, I have some aspirations for this summer. I hope to get to know you, to learn your story and discover who you are. As you know I work professionally as a leadership coach and life coach and used to work as a therapist in addition to being a minister, so I love to talk with people about their journey. Let's get together and swap some stories this summer. Another aspiration is to advance the Fort Hill Faith Practices. And, here's the first way I can contribute to that...the first person who can recite the 7 Fort Hill Faith Practices to me from

memory will receive a free ticket to worship at Fort Hill Presbyterian Church for next Sunday! Yes, that first lucky person will receive a reserved front row seat in worship all summer long.

As you can tell, I look forward to enjoying life with you this Summer.

Now to our theme of Sabbath and Scripture. Pastor Laura introduced Sabbath to us last Sunday in the midst of that worship service which was packed with nearly everything. You may remember her saying "**Sabbath is anticipating and participating in God's restoration of rest and justice for all people. Drawing us into Sabbath is part of God's healing of this world and setting it right.**" She said a mouth-full with those 2 statements.

Sabbath is a beautiful part of our faith that brings out the richness and texture of this most excellent way of life called the Christian Faith. Sabbath functions for us like the rest placed just so in a flowing symphony. Sabbath is like the jog between intervals run on the track. Sabbath is like the last hush of winter before Spring's explosion of blossoms and blooms. These great bursts of energy and accomplishment don't come without the flip side of life...appropriate and fitting rest. Sabbath is like God stepping back after 6 days of creation and reflecting on God's work: "It is good, it is very good."

Yes, Sabbath is a beautiful and necessary aspect of a life well lived, of a life centered in the Way of Jesus Christ.

Yet, before we move too far into Sabbath, or heap too much praise on the practice of Sabbath, I have to ask you and me, Just what do we **really think** about Sabbath? How do we actually **feel** about Sabbath?

It's a nice concept and we are glad to talk about it at church, but what's our perspective on actually practicing Sabbath?

Well, do others know how busy we are? Are you aware of the To Do list in my calendar or in my phone, we think to ourselves? Not ticking things off our lists one day each week....Perhaps chick-fil-a can close on Sundays and sustain their business model, but we are far too busy for that.

Perhaps you are like me, bringing some ambivalence to this Summer Sabbath emphasis. Perhaps you are like many of us and find this whole idea of Sabbath raises questions for you. Yes, it's a nice thought, but actually living as Sabbath people? That would be quite a spiritual discipline. And many of us are not even sure Sabbath is a worthwhile spiritual discipline anyway.

So this, our ambivalence as busy people unsure about this entire Sabbath discussion, makes me very eager to unpack the meaning of Sabbath with you. Perhaps this is a timely

discussion. Perhaps when the students are ready (you and me), the teacher appears (God). I imagine we are going to have some really good substantive conversations this summer. And this summer I won't be just preaching to the choir....I'm aware of my own ambivalence and some resistance to this Sabbath idea. The Scripture today presents our first growth opportunity, one that's quite personal for me.

In preparing for worship, I was pleasantly surprised to see the lectionary designate Psalm 138 as one of our scriptures for today.

It's been some time ago now...maybe the summer of 2008, when I came face to face to Psalm 138. At that time I was in conversation with a spiritual mentor, describing how my personal Bible reading and devotional time had become stale and dry. I was going through the motions, but didn't seem to experience much spirituality. My mentor asked me describe my practice. So I described how I tend to read through a book in the Bible, checking off each day how much I read. Or I would use a devotional book, trying to cover a certain amount of material in each sitting. My spiritual mentor listened, and then observed, "Mark, you are more focused on accomplishment during your devotionals than you are focused on God." OK...what? "Mark you are so caught up in checking off how much material you covered that you are missing the point. The point is being WITH God, listening to God, not accomplishing something to make you feel religious or accomplished."

BOOM. The Proverbial two-by-four struck me between the eyes.

And then he went on, "So here's what I want you to do. This Summer, I want you to read a Psalm, choose any of them, but then read the same Psalm every day. After you do that, come back and see me."

Strange. But OK. I can roll up my sleeves and accomplish this the first day. Psalm 138, done. But then the second day, and the third day...Psalm 138 again. That first week the light bulb slowly came on...my tendency was to bring my personality and my belief system to my devotional time, trying to accomplish as much as possible, rather than being with God. This assignment from my wise spiritual mentor forced me to confront myself...the part of myself which was preventing God's voice from breaking through. After the first day Psalm 138 was read....this opened the door for me to step back, relax, and be with God.

God is not some THING to be accomplished. God is some ONE to be experienced.

So here we are on the brink of a summer wherein we will focus on Sabbath. For many of us, practicing Sabbath, strangely, is no easy thing. When we start engaging Sabbath practice, our latent objections and hesitations rise up and speak up. Our culturally formed belief systems which are contrary to Sabbath practice rise to the surface and argue with Sabbath. This

assignment from my spiritual mentor brought me into direct confrontation with an unhelpful belief I carried which was, "A person's worth is directly proportional to that person's accomplishments."

Now before you consider me terribly immature, consider with me what our culture, our good ole get-er-done American can-do culture, teaches us. From our earliest days we are inundated with messages from all around us about accomplishment. We learn that grades in school are important and we need to achieve. We learn we are measured by grades and tests and batteries of tests. And then we enter the work world and learn that only the driven will succeed.

We had a high school graduation in our family this past Friday, with our youngest graduating along with her peers. The talk from so many people caught up in graduation exercises and activities focuses on how much one has accomplished in their High School career. Nearly everywhere, American culture values accomplishment over most anything else. I suspect that may be true in an accomplishment oriented University town like this, filled with people who are accomplished people. This week, with the tragic deaths of designer Kate Spade and Chef Anthony Bourdain we have to wonder how much living in such a driven culture contributed to their despair.

So this assignment to BE with God, rather than accomplish FOR God runs right into the driven-ness of American culture. My spiritual mentor knew I needed to learn to live in faith and trust, engaging with our God who is gentle and gracious rather than a taskmaster who wants to drive us to despair.

This Summer, as we pursue this Sabbath practice, other beliefs from our culture which we may have unconsciously accepted into our belief systems will rise up. In fact we will encounter at least one each Sunday.

So, this morning, I want to leave us with one sentence from Psalm 138. After looking, I've not found this particular phrase anywhere else in the entire Bible.

“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” Psalm 138:3

You increased my strength of soul....

People who can step back, People who can lay it down, People who trust God enough to stop and worship and listen and be with God and family and friends. People who step away from self-sufficiency and call on God....

They are the people who find strength of soul.

For those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Those who trust God enough to practice Sabbath,
Those who call on the Lord,
Will discover that God increases their strength of soul.
May we, you and I, become those people with strength of soul.
Through the grace, power, and love of Jesus Christ our Lord,
may it become so. Amen.