

Go Out and Play

July 18, 2021

Trying to get time away

A few years ago, I was having a particularly stressful time at work. There were endless demands on my time, numerous people were struggling, and I recognized myself getting snappy with the people I loved. It was in that snappiness that I knew I needed to do some self-care.

Over the years, I've learned that one of the symptoms in my life that points to me needing to do some self-care is when I'm uncharacteristically short with my loved ones. So, I scheduled a pedicure. It wasn't exactly a Caribbean cruise, but at least I'd have 90 minutes when I wouldn't need to be thinking about budget numbers and faulty microphones and leaky roofs.

I went to a nail salon that I'd never been to before, they had me pick out my polish and led me to a secluded chair. At first, I was thrilled that the TV on the wall across from me was showing soothing nature scenes, rather than the horrible info-tainment shows masquerading as news that so often form the background noise in public these days. But as I settled my feet into the soothing waters and took a couple of deep breaths, preparing to leave the whirring of my brain for a couple of hours, I realized that I recognized the music playing along with the images of babbling brooks and snowy mountain vistas.

The music was all hymns! Now, for much of the population, hymns are probably very soothing, if they recognize the tunes at all. But for a pastor who's been putting in 60+ hour weeks and hasn't had a day off in longer than she can count, it was all I could do to stop myself from grabbing my flip flops and running out of the place. As I recounted to some colleagues, Calgon did NOT take me away!

The Scriptures

In our Gospel lesson today, we read of Jesus taking the disciples to a deserted place so they could rest a while. This comes right on the heels of them being commissioned to heal and cast out demons. They've come back to re-group, and we're told that the crowds that they're drawing now are so intense that they don't even have time to eat.

Have you had days or weeks or periods in your life like that? So full that your time is not your own? Times when there are so many things vying for your time that you feel like you can barely keep your head above water?

Or maybe it's not as extreme as feeling like you're almost drowning, maybe your experience is more like mine, that you find yourself getting a little snippy with your friends or family or even your dog. To this, Jesus says, "Come away with me, and rest." Take some time apart. Rest, recharge, play, renew.

As simple as this sounds, for many in our culture, this is a struggle. There's always something pressing that needs to be done. If it's not the demands of work, it's family and the house and volunteering to save the world from certain peril.

We wear busy-ness like a badge of honor, and have been taught that resting is lazy, that productivity is a virtue, that idle hands are the devil's playground. Indeed, exhaustion has become a status symbol and productivity a measure of self-worth.

But in all four Gospels, Jesus takes time away. He takes time apart from his healing and teaching to pray and to recreate. Even think of that word, "recreate." Re-create. To create again.

God, the creator, understands the need for us to recreate, to re-create, to re-center ourselves. Inherent in Jesus' admonition to rest is the basic human fact that life without rest, without play, without recreation, leads to burn out, disease, and disordered behaviors.

Now, I know that often, resting and playing don't come easily to us. Not only have we been taught that productivity is a virtue, there's also the more malignant side of our hyper-busy culture: the illusion of control, the illusion that the more I do, the less harm will come to me – whether that comes in the form of the more work I do, the more money I'll have, the less likely I'll struggle materially, or the more housework I do, the less likely my mother or neighbors will think I'm a slob, or the more activities I shuttle my kids to, the less likely they'll live in my basement forever – control is often the wingman of busy-ness.

To all of that, Jesus' answer isn't for us to try to do everything. It's rest. In fact, in our passage from Mark today, it doesn't even say that he took the disciples aside to "rest and pray." It just says "rest."

Another barrier folks sometimes have around self-care is that it seems, well, selfish. To that, transgender rights activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha points out that creating systems and policies that allow people to take time to rest and recreate is actually "about collective care. Collective care means shifting our organizations to be ones where people are okay if they get sick, cry, have needs, move slower, start late because the bus broke down. It means creating organizations where there's food at meetings, where people can work from home—and these aren't things we apologize for... Where we actually care for each other and don't leave each other behind."

How to?

Before I was ordained, I had to work a lot of second and even third jobs. I did contract work, organizing major speakers' series for other churches, did seasonal retail work, and for almost a decade I worked with a bureau that sent me out to churches all across the country for a week at a time to preach a toned-down version of a tent revival.

There was one time that the church where I was scheduled to preach canceled at the last minute. I already had requested the week off of my full-time job, so I found myself with an unexpected week of freedom, and my boss lined up a friend's home in Door County for me to borrow. I drove up with books and wine and hiking shoes...and I just couldn't get myself to rest. I was scheduled to be there for nine days, and it took me a full six, just to readjust that mindset that I should be doing something, a full six days not to feel guilty that I wasn't being productive.

Sociologist and storyteller Brene Brown says that, along with being willing to be vulnerable, being able to play is one of the common traits she has discovered among people who live what she calls wholehearted lives. She uses Dr. Stuart Brown's definition of play: "time spent without purpose," and goes on to say that "anything that makes us lose track of time and self-consciousness" creates a clearing in our being. Like powering down an electronic device every now and then, rest and play help us to set things right again. They're not lazy. They're essential to a well-functioning psyche and soul.

Conclusion

Years ago, I took an online course with Brown, based on her book "The Gifts of Imperfection." In the course, one of our tasks was to come up with our top ten "play list." At first, I thought she meant a list of songs, and as a child of the '80s for whom making mix tapes was an artform, I thought this would be a piece of cake. I broke out in a cold sweat when I realized that the assignment was actually to come up with ten things that I like to do to play, ten ways that I like to spend time without purpose, that make me lose track of time and self-consciousness, ten ways of being that aren't productive.

For many of us, coming up with ten ways we like to play is quite a daunting task, so instead I'll challenge you to come up with three. Make a list of three things that you like to do that take you out of the here and now and bring you renewal and joy. She names snorkeling and editing pictures and playing cards. For me, it would be reading and swimming and trying new arts and crafts. For some it's singing or dancing or making music or baking or working on old cars or restoring furniture.

After you come up with your "playlist," your list of three ways that you like to play, I want you to carve out time every week for the rest of the summer to engage in at least one thing on your list. Take time every week for the rest of the summer – to swim or take a walk with a friend or lie in a hammock and find the shapes in the clouds. Protect this time as diligently as you do the time to shower or brush your teeth (which I hope means you'll never skip it!) and let me know at the end of August how actively choosing to take time to play made you feel.

Taking time to play, to rest, to recreate, is not only fun, it's Godly. If those voices in your head are still telling you that you should be getting things done around the house or burning the midnight oil at work, tell them that your pastor told you to go out and play. And then do it.

I look forward to hearing about your adventures and promise you it will be good for the soul! Alleluia and Amen!

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Psalm 89:20-37, Mark 6:30-34
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