

## Going to the Lake May 27, 2007

I recently read an article written by a single mother who had spent a great deal of time and energy building her publishing business in order to be able to support her family and provide for her son and daughter. She wrote that it had been years since she had taken time off with her children, because, like many of us, she had been busy with school, sports, piano lessons, SAT prep, and dealing with an ex-spouse. She said that her schedule was almost killing her, what with all that, along with the eternal traumas of home ownership and appliance malfunctioning.

Now, finally, she had planned a vacation time with her kids, but her son caused her to re-think her life. He simply told her it was too late, and then he went on to say, "For years, Mom, I waited for you to get home from work. I couldn't go to sleep till you got home. I waited for you to stop grocery shopping and working late and never having time." He went on to say that he understood how her work had provided him with a good life with many opportunities, but he still said, "It's too late."

That really pulled her up short and she began to reflect on all the times she had been too tired to read to her children, or too busy to get home before they went to bed. And she remembered—she remembered that things had not always been like that in her life. Coming from a strong Italian family, she had had many occasions in her early life when she had had wonderful times preparing and sharing some delicious Italian cuisine at the home of her grandmother.

After the conversation with her son, she was invited to the home of a rabbi friend whose work she had published. She was a guest at their Shabbat dinner. When the rabbi read the traditional words for such an occasion, it really struck a cord with her. They were the words of our Bible passage today—the words of one of the Ten Commandments.

Our version reads this way: **Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to God, your God...For in six days, God made heaven, earth and sea, and everything in them, and then God rested on the seventh day. Therefore, God blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as a holy day.**

It seems pretty clear that God knows we need a break in our normal routine of work. We need a time off to get renewed and refreshed. This commandment was understood from the earliest times, and it was clear that it applied to everyone in the community; it was truly to be a time of rest, release from labor, for all.

When I think of this commandment and the early understandings, I find myself remembering what it was like to grow up in a small town in

southern Indiana. Sunday was literally a day of rest. No stores were open, and it was a day set aside for fun and recreation. There were family picnics, softball games, horseshoes, and all kinds of old-fashioned activities that were just for the purpose of being together and taking a break from the normal workweek.

Compare that with today, and we can easily see that things have changed radically. Now, mind you, I'm not here this morning to advocate for going back to those early days. Not at all. However, I am here to remind you and to remind myself that it is in the natural rhythm of life to need time off, time for rest and renewal, time away from working all the time. That's part of God's desire for our lives.

And yet, we live in a time and place where that isn't valued by many. You may have seen the figures as I did recently—the figures about work hours and time off in the U.S. as compared to other countries. It has been a trend for several years that American workers are not able to take advantage of all their vacation days. In 2002, the estimate was that workers were not able to take 1.8 days of their allotted vacation time. That amounts to giving back to employers almost \$19.5 billion in unused vacation time.

When time off in the United States is compared to other countries, we fall far behind. European countries like Italy, France and Germany range from 42 to 35 days off per year. Looking across the world at the likes of Britain, Canada, South Korea, Brazil, Japan, we find that not one of those countries averages less than 25 days off for each worker per year. While none of the statistics shows anything less than 25 days off, the U.S. comes in with 13 total days off per year. That's a huge difference!

The reality is that working more days does not necessarily amount to greater productivity. Wise companies know that their employees need quality time away in order to be more creative and more productive. Being in the trenches without a break is not a healthy thing for workers or for employers. We all need to be more mindful of taking time off, of taking our Sabbath, of using our vacation time to get refreshed and re-energized.

I suspect many of us can remember what it was like when school was out in the summer. It was the most freeing feeling I can ever recall having. No more homework; no more early-to-bed nights; just time to play, to catch what we called "lightning bugs," and do what children are naturally inclined to do—to play. Certainly there were those little chores to do, and maybe a summer job to hold down when I got to be a teen, but as a young child, usually we had a lot of freedom just to be.

I'm not sure that happens all that much anymore. Our kids today have major commitments to sports teams and to summer camps and things like that. While there are many benefits that come from all those things, I'm wondering if we don't miss

out on a lot of other positives that don't come with structured activity. I think we miss out on the opportunity to learn just how important it is to be able to take a break, to do things like lounging by a lake, watching the water, going fishing, or just sitting on a swing swaying in the summer breeze.

Well, here we are on the brink of summer. What are we going to do about all that this summer? It seems to me that this would be a good time for us to rethink how we're going to spend the months ahead. How can we find ourselves in the place where Michael Cunningham was when he wrote, "What a thrill, what a shock, to be alive on a morning in June!"

How can we get to the place where we will take a Sabbath time to rest and appreciate the world around us in the way that the French writer Andre Gide tried to do. He said, "I should like to enjoy this summer flower by flower..." What would it be like for us to enjoy the coming summer flower by flower?

A while back, I clipped out a column by David Waters out of the newspaper. In it, he talked about exactly the thing I think we all need to consider for this summer. He said that he and his wife wanted their family's summer vacation to be different from the way it had been in the past. Instead of just *going* on vacation, they wanted to *be* on vacation. They chose to call it a Sabbath vacation.

Waters cited something Eugene Peterson, the translator of the version of the Bible called *The Message*, had written about Sabbath. Peterson said, "There are some things that can be accomplished by God only in a state of (Sabbath) rest." (From Peterson's writing in *Weavings*.) Peterson went on to say, "The work/rest rhythm is built into the very structure of God's interpretation of reality. The precedent to quit doing and simply be is divine."

Whoa! I have to tell you that those words hit me right between the eyes! You see, I'm really terrible about taking a Sabbath. In fact, I'm part of a group of pastors from across the country that meets together and part of our meeting time is to hold one another accountable for the parts of our lives that are out of balance. One of the pieces they constantly challenge me on is this very thing—taking a Sabbath.

I say that Monday is my day off, but I seldom really take the day for rest and renewal. You know what that's like, I'm sure. There are always things that need to be done around the house, and then there's email to catch up on, and a large part of that turns out to be work. Or there are meetings that get scheduled that break the day apart, and well--things just don't work out.

I know that I have to learn to do better, and I'll bet I'm not the only one here who needs to do that. The thing that struck me about Peterson's words was that taking the break from work is holy time. We can be neither faithful nor creative nor energetic if we are constantly at work. We all must

learn to take those days off and to take our time to *be* on vacation, and not just *go* on vacation.

I have a hunch that, if we really were on vacation, we'd find it to be invaluable in our quest for renewal and a sense of peace at the center of our being. We could really be the kind of people God created us to be.

If we really were to *be* on vacation, we just might come to understand the words that theologian Frederic Buechner wrote in *Wishful Thinking*. He said, "For the moment there is nowhere else you'd rather go, no one else you'd rather be. You feel at home in your body. You feel at peace in your mind. Sometimes it is only when you happen to taste a crumb of it that you dimly realize what it is that you're so hungry for you can hardly bear it."

So, OK. I'm making a commitment to you that, this summer, I'm really going to take my days off, and I'm really going to *be* on vacation. How about you?

Closing:

Henry James said, "Summer afternoon—summer afternoon...the two most beautiful words in the English language." This summer, I hope and pray that's true for you and for me.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.