

## Summertime July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009

I suspect that some of us are familiar with the George Gershwin song from the musical, *Porgy and Bess*. The song “Summertime” begins with the words, “Summertime, when the livin’ is easy...” Some of us may even have a remembrance or two from our childhood when it was really like that. I know I do.

It seemed that the day school was out for the summer was the best day of the year! No more homework, no more having to get up early to get to school, just time to ride bike, go swimming, play outside, catch lightening bugs at night, go on picnics. It seemed as though the whole pace of life for everyone changed dramatically as soon as summer arrived.

I even remember the same sort of feeling from my teaching days. Frankly, I’m not sure who wanted school to be out more—the kids or the teachers! Every day until the end of school got harder and harder, and everyone got more and more restless, just waiting and anticipating the liberating feeling that happened when school was out for the year.

That seems like ancient history now, but it wasn’t all *that* long ago. Nonetheless, things are a lot different today than it was then. Teachers spend their summers in school getting additional education for licensing or training for special teaching approaches. Families tend to make sure kids don’t have a single moment to get in trouble, signing them up for camp and various sports activities and lessons. For most of us, the pace of summer is different, but probably no less hectic, than at any other time of the year.

The same thing seems to have happened in ministry, too. I recall that, in the early years of my ministry, summer really was a bit of a slower time. A lot of the programming took the summer off; a lot of people were gone on prolonged vacations, and it just seemed as though the pace was a bit slower, and quite a bit more relaxed. Some of the pastors even had an occasional opportunity to play a game of backgammon in the late afternoon. And the clergy team of which I was a part at the time took a couple of hours one or two afternoons a week to ride our bikes together—in preparation for our yearly bike ride to Bloomington for Annual conference, a ride of almost 80 miles.

And then, 5-6 years into full-time ministry, that all seemed to change. It was though there was a radical shift from one summer to the next, and that ensuing summer was filled with folks with serious illnesses, tragic accidents, unexpected deaths, and people needs that had not taken the break they often had taken in the summers. The pace was just as busy and hectic as it had been in October, or March, or May.

I’ve tried to figure out why and how this summer pace changed, and I really hadn’t been very successful until I got into reading a book I’ve just finished. It’s by Dalton Conley, University Professor of the Social Sciences and Acting Dean for the Social Sciences at New York University, and it’s entitled *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* His subtitle is somewhat intriguing: “How We Got From the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, Blackberry Moms, and Economic Anxiety.”

Conley is not talking specifically about summertime in his book, but he is talking about the fact that our work has managed to invade almost every avenue of our daily lives to the point that there is little differentiation between work and leisure. In fact, he has coined the term “weisure” to represent this work/leisure combination. His basic premise is that not only do we feel as though we need to be working when we are ostensibly supposed to be having fun, or that we are obsessed with the sense of needing to be everywhere at once, but that our homes are more like work, and work is more like home.

I’ve certainly seen that come to pass in my own life, and I would guess that many of you have, too. I virtually live in my office at home, and that’s where I prepare sermons, keep up with email, return calls, and do the work that full-time ministry requires when we’re not with the people we serve. Relaxing at home seems to be out of the question, because there’s always work to be done, and we’re all mostly readily accessible to answer our cell phones or touch base on the internet.

Even vacation time isn’t held sacred by many of us. There’s really no space or distance that phones and the internet cannot cross, and we are always within reach, or so it seems. Now that certainly isn’t all bad, and I wouldn’t want us to think of it that way.

However, I do believe there is a significant downside to today instantaneous connections, and that is the inability to separate

work and play to the point that we can truly relax and renew, and this sense is only heightened when we think back to a time when it was easier to separate ourselves from work and take a fresh, clean look at the world, at our lives, and connect in a new way with our families.

As I was trying to figure out how to do some correctives in my own life, and perhaps share them with you all, for whatever they're worth, before this summer is history, I decided to check online to see what worthwhile suggestions for enjoying summertime I might be able to find. To be honest, I had to stop and laugh, because the first couple of listings I found when I 'googled" the keyword, summertime, were these: "Enjoy summertime cookouts without acid reflux," and "Enjoy summertime while protecting your skin." I couldn't even find a real shred of play or fun or relaxation imbedded in anything I read—only those cautions and warning about acid reflux and skin damage caused by the sun!

If I couldn't find anything really helpful online, I had to look elsewhere, and so I began to reflect on the Bible passage I had chosen for today. It's from Luke's gospel, and tells of the mental and physical exhaustion of the disciples, and how Jesus counseled them. This is how our brief verses read: **The apostles rendezvoused with Jesus and reported on all that they had done and taught. Jesus said, "Come off by yourselves; let's take a break and get a little rest." For there was so much constant coming and going that they didn't even have time to eat.**

Jesus urged the disciples to take a break and get a little rest, and I believe he had good reason to do so. He knew the fatigue that working nonstop can cause, and he knew some of the frustration that his friends inevitably experienced when they didn't meet with a warm reception or a successful encounter. In their work, and in ours, it's important to take a break, and get some respite from it, because that's the only way we can recover from our fatigue and be once again fresh and innovative and energized.

Taking a break to enjoy summertime, or wintertime, or springtime, or autumn or even to enjoy just a few minutes here and there can make an incredible difference in how we live and work! It gives us the opportunity to play and explore and dream and open ourselves to the unexpected surprises that we might experience if we allow enough space.

Play is one element that's essential for us to re-capture. Jerry Seinfeld said: **"It's good to play, and you must keep in practice,"** and so it is. Being able to play takes our minds off the heaviness that could surround and encumber us if we let it, so we have to take advantage of every chance to we get to play—whether that's with our pets, or our kids or grandkids, or to play a sport, or to play the piano, or to play cards or play a game. We need those diversions to relieve us of some of our stress, and give our minds a new context in which to function.

It's good to allow time to explore new and different things. If we can't afford to take a vacation this year, maybe it's time to explore some of the things that are right here in our city, or in our state. If we just pay a little attention, we'll find all kinds of things—from free concerts in the park, to art festivals, to state parks—well, the list is endless. This might just be the chance we've been looking for to look into something that we've "been meaning" to do. It can stretch us and refresh us.

Sometimes, you know, it's perfectly OK to do nothing. That's something we sometimes have trouble with, feeling as though we're wasting precious time, or not accomplishing what we "need" to get done. I was talking with someone the other day who shared that she had a really tough time even considering the possibility of doing nothing, because she had such a strong work ethic. I could certainly identify with her, but as I thought about it, it occurred to me that we might just learn to work a little smarter and more effectively and accomplish what we need to accomplish, and still find we have time to spend a little time each day doing nothing. You see, when we are doing nothing, we're really opening ourselves to the unexpected surprises we might happen upon; we're seizing the opportunity to dream a little, to paint a different kind of picture than we might otherwise have painted. It's good time, and well worth the minutes or hours we devote to "doing nothing."

As you may have guessed, this is another one of those messages that I'm preaching to myself, and am hoping that there's something of benefit that you might take from it. If not, I'm sorry, but if so, then it's been worth it.

Jesus said, "Let's take a break and get a little rest." Perhaps we need to take his words to heart.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we'll find a way to post a little sign on our door before the summer ends—something

along the lines of "gone fishin.'" Let's take a break and enjoy the rest of the summer!

Have a good summer, and go in peace.

Amen