

July 23, 2023

Sabbath...Rest

Paul Gauche

You can take the girl out of North Dakota, but you can't take North Dakota out of the girl! I was reminded of that in late May when my wife, Nancy Lee and I spent four days with some dear, life-long friends, riding horseback through the Badlands, and the Theodore Roosevelt National Park on the Maa Daah Hey Trail, just outside of Medora, North Dakota. We've ridden with our friends before, but never in a place as vast and beautiful as the Badlands. It was the third morning. We were riding on a high prairie ridge overlooking the valleys and peaks of that beautiful, rugged country. And my North Dakota girl, Nancy Lee looked back at me and asked, "Hey Gauche, how you doing back there?" I took a moment and spit out a couple of sunflower seeds, because when you're a cowboy – even for just a few days, you get to spit. And then I said, "I'm about as content as I've been in a long time." Most of you know me well enough to know that I'm rarely not content. But I hadn't felt rested like that in some time. It was amazing.

Kathy and Matt are really good teachers. There's always something to learn whether you're loading a trailer, mucking a stall, riding up a steep incline, crossing a river, descending into a ravine, traversing along a narrow ridgeline with 100-foot drop on either side, or dismounting your horse and walking the last 100 yards to the barn to let the horses reset while you learn to walk again. I think the big learning for me was the importance of doing something different, taking a break from the usual rhythms of life and work and doing

something that doesn't just fill a day, but fills a soul as well.

We're in a series called "Top Ten." All summer long we're focusing on God's Top Ten – the Ten Commandments – ten essential words of life and direction given to people who were shaped by oppression and lost in despair. Words of guidance, direction, hope, and love were given to people who had no idea who they were, what they were doing, where they were going, or how they would get there. They were not thriving in any way. These were people who had no concept of what it meant to be loved, valued, or treasured. The Ten Commandments were given to help them reframe their identity as people set free to live healthy relationships with one another and God. This week I want to focus on the third commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. It's all about healthy rhythms. Let me explain.

In the early moments of the creation poem, God created rhythms. In Genesis 1:14, on day four, God said, ""Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years..." Rhythms. Two days later, on day six, when Adam and Eve show up in their birthday suits, they step into the kind of dance of day and night, month and year, winter and spring and summer and fall. Rhythms. And then, between the rhythms of the day and the month, God added one more, a rhythm taught not by the heavens but by God's own example: the seven-day rhythm of the week. God could have made a rhythm-less world if God had wanted to do that. It would have been a world without days and weeks and months and years. But in God's

wisdom, rhythms make the world a good home for us, mere mortals who are often in need of rest and refreshment. As those who bear the image of the Creator, we are creatures of rhythm.

But there's a huge plot twist in this story. In his book *Crazy Busy*, Kevin DeYoung pulls the alarm when he writes, "... *it's concerning that our lives are getting more and more rhythm-less. We don't have healthy routines. We can't keep our feasting and fasting apart. Evening and morning have lost their feel. Sunday has lost its significance. Everything is blurred together. The faucet is a constant drip.*" In other words, life today looks less like Eden, and more like Egypt.

By the time we get to the book of Exodus, Genesis 1–2 is long gone. There aren't any weeks or months, seasons or years in Egypt — only to an endless sequence of workdays. God's people were oppressed, living in a world without rhythms. Unlike the restful God of creation, Pharaoh exhibits a single-minded madness for work, work, work. To Pharaoh, a slave's 50-year life was merely a sequence of 18,262 workdays, inconveniently disrupted by the need for sleep. We may not have an actual Pharaoh yelling "Make more bricks!" But hey, we're not that far from oppressive rhythms of Egypt. Not only do average work hours in America exceed that of many other countries, but the boundaries between work and rest have stretched and blurred. We no longer need to go to the office to make our bricks; we just need Wi-Fi. If I'm really honest with you, I may have checked my email a few times while riding Hunter or Johnnie on that high plateau in the Badlands. That's silly. Such is life without

healthy rhythms, a life with no square on the calendar labeled "Rest."

So, how could we begin unlearning the rhythm-less ways of Pharaoh and return to the rhythms of life and more life our loving, creative God baked into the creation? I want to say that being attentive to weekly rest first, best place to begin. We will have far more of everything we need if we practice Sabbath: once a week, slow down, catch our breath. We were made for rhythms; we were made for work and rest. Here are three really doable first steps.

First, Set the Boundary

Rhythms of rest require intentional boundaries. People who do this well are those who schedule it in. If we were to share our calendars with one another, we'd see things included like "Coffee with Barb," or "Dinner with the Andersons," or "Meeting with so-and-so." We schedule things like shopping, or soccer game, or change the oil. What we'd rarely see is the word "Rest." We don't schedule rest because we think we'll do it automatically. But we don't. None of us would write in our calendars, "Do not work" even though God gave that command over a dozen times in the early chapters of scripture. So, set the boundary. But keep in mind, too, that setting a boundary is far easier than keeping a boundary. As soon as we schedule some time to breathe, other things start taking our breath away. But the Third Commandment is an invitation to trust that God's Spirit will give us just what we need once we set down the pen, close the computer, finish for the day. Set the boundary.

Second, Refresh, Walk, Repeat

Have you ever come home from a trip and said, "I think I need a vacation to recover from my vacation!"? It's true: a day off isn't the same as a day of rest. But it's easy to confuse the two: sometimes we pack a day off with so much good stuff like sports practices, home projects, parties – which are all great things, but often leave us more restless than rested. Again, God's own pattern gives us our goal. Here it is in Exodus 31:17: *"In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was ... refreshed."* Following God into this kind of rest requires not only setting boundaries, but also filling those boundaries with genuinely refreshing activities — activities that send us back into our work refreshed in mind, soul, and body, ready to spend and be spent for the good of others.

What would that look like for you? Again, maybe scheduling some time alone, just write it into your calendar. Take a walk. While I was writing this my watch buzzed. It was a Mindful Moment from my Headspace Meditation App. It simply read, *"Go for a walk and leave your phone behind. Notice how much you notice with your head up!"* So, you know what I did? I took off my watch! I set it down. Then I left my phone on my desk and went for a walk. You know what happened? I ran into Sherry who told me a wonderful story of what was happening in her life. If I had not heeded the prompt to take a walk, I would have missed Sherry and her story! Go for a walk, read some poetry, get your bike out, sit by the lake, listen to some music, write a note, cook a meal. Any of those things will bring refreshment to your soul.

Third, Worship

And, of course, you can embrace the one activity that always rests at the heart of refreshment: worship. Before God gave Israel the Third Commandment, God gave them the first: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."* The Sabbath is rooted in the reminder we are to allow God to have the primary place in our lives. The implication is that when we really rest— if we really want to find refreshment in the Sabbath, and not just a day off — discover Jesus in a brand-new way.

Two thousand years later, Jesus is still giving us the invitation that follows a similar pattern: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" - Matthew 11:28. Ultimately, rest flows not from a weekly pause, but from a Person. Unlike Pharaoh, God has no need for storage cities and oppressed laborers. God looks not first for menial workers but for meaningful worshipers, and God calls us not to Egypt but to the Eden of Himself. For good reason, then, many Christians seek to join their weekly day of rest with their weekly day of corporate worship. If we can do the same, that's great. If not, we can at least find some special way to say with both our hearts and our lips, "Jesus, not Pharaoh, is Lord" — and then live it out.