

“It’s Complicated!”

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April 11, 2010

Genesis 1:26-2:3

Mark 4:35-41

The movie **“It’s Complicated,”** starring Meryl Streep, Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin, is a hilarious depiction of how life can become incredibly complicated. But we don’t need a movie to tell us that life is complicated. Everyone of us live complicated lives in which we feel like we are forced to run faster, accomplish more and handle more demands than the day before. We talk about the good ol’ days as if there was a day when the pace was slower, when the stress level more manageable, when people took time for one another and when time seemed to be more plentiful. If there ever was a “good ol’ days,” that day died with the Blackberry, the internet, downsizing, 9/11 and 24/7 demands. Life is complicated! If there was ever a day we need to heed God’s call for Sabbath rest it is now.

People are exhausted....like the mother of four who said, *“I’m so tired; my idea of a vacation is a trip to the dentist.”*

God never intended humans to live chronically exhausted. From the beginning, God’s desire was that we would take time to rest and refresh ourselves. God made the point, first, by modeling the behavior God desires for us.... **“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good....And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.”** (Gen. 1:31-2:2) God knew life would become complicated and that we humans would try to pack our days, months and years with far more than we could possibly ever do. God loved us so much that God commanded that we rest.... ⁸ **Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.** ⁹ **Six days you shall labor and do all your work.** ¹⁰ **But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work....For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”** (Exodus 20:8-11)

Did you ever resist taking a nap as a child? When my parents insisted that I take a nap, I can remember thinking that I was going to miss out on something exciting or, on occasion, I thought I was being punished. Just as some of us resisted our parents who understood that we needed rest, so we resist God's commandment to honor Sabbath rest thinking that God is out to stifle and suppress us. We associate Sabbath with restrictive blue laws. We buy into our culture's value system that insists our worth is measured in what we can produce or acquire. And, in today's economy, many are forced to work excruciating schedules just to survive. The more complicated life becomes the more we think we can outsmart and outwork those complications. All the while God is yearning for us to see that rest is God's gift and it is indispensable for God's abundant life. But like any gift, rest needs to be received before we can fully value it.

That brings us to our Gospel reading for today where we see that Jesus appreciated the value of rest. Read Mark 4:35-41....

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' ³⁶**And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.** ³⁷**A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.** ³⁸**But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'** ³⁹**He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!'** Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰**He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'** ⁴¹**And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'** The Word of the Lord.....*Thanks be to God!*

Normally when we read this passage we concentrate on the disciples' fear and Jesus calming the storm, and we hardly notice Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat. Maybe we overlook Jesus sleeping because we prefer our "heroes" to be people of action. We can more easily picture Jesus teaching, preaching, healing, cleansing the temple, walking on water, turning water into wine or raising Lazarus from the dead. When was the last time you pictured Jesus sleeping? "Sleeping Jesus" seems like an oxymoron. We just don't think of Jesus resting...he was on a mission to redeem the world. No time for rest....no time to sleep....get the job done...yet, there he is in the "back of the boat" sleeping even while the boat was sinking!

Life is complicated and we need "*back of the boat*" time to thrive. The "*back of the boat*" is where we take a necessary break from life's complexities and simply rest. It is a time for remembering who and whose we are, and that quality living transcends doing and producing. The "*back of the boat*" is where we remember that God loves us for who we are, not for what we do.

Think about Jesus in the "*back of the boat*" and recognize that, while he rested, he was not preaching, healing, teaching, or otherwise engaging in ministry to others. He was simply being restored and refreshed in body, mind and spirit. Jesus embraced God's Sabbath rhythm that included working/producing/blessing followed by restoration/renewal/refreshment.

Jesus not only made time for himself to rest, he also invited others to rest, as well. On one occasion, when his disciples returned from a mission trip, we read that they, "***gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'***" (Mark 6:30-31)

There are certain church traditions that encouraged followers of Christ to “*burn out for the Lord.*” The thought was that we have only one life to live to God’s glory and we ought to give 150% and wait to be renewed and rewarded on the other side of the grave. I must admit that a certain part of me still, unfortunately, buys into that unbiblical thinking. *However, if Jesus regularly found time to rest from his labors and renew his energy, why shouldn’t we do the same?*

Rev. Eugenia Gamble, Presbyterian Pastor, writes in Horizons magazine, ***“Keeping Sabbath is a sign of trust that God governs the world and we don’t have to work to make things come out all right. Our labor is appreciated, of course, up to a point. Sabbath brings us to that point and asks us to stop and consider that the world is really about God’s work and not our anxious strivings.”*** (Horizons, January/February 2004, P. 36)

Ultimately Sabbath keeping is about restoring our faith in God and love for God by disengaging from our “anxious strivings” and giving our heart, mind, soul and time to God. Gamble sheds more light on the essence of Sabbath when she writes, ***“Sabbath is not really ‘family day’ or ‘recreation day’ or ‘regrouping day,’ as well intentioned as those foci might be. Sabbath is God’s day, the day in which we recognize that we are creature, not creator, and rejoice in that knowledge. When we do that, God transforms us and recreates our inner being.”***

How do you keep Sabbath? Obviously the fact that you are here in worship demonstrates a desire to keep Sabbath. Worship is the hub of Sabbath keeping. But, besides corporate worship how do you seek to restore your faith in and love for God? How do you seek to disengage from your “anxious strivings?” Sabbath keeping is not relegated to one day a week. God desires for us to carve our “God moments” each day for quiet, reflection, prayer, praise, and devotion. My hope and prayer is that whether you use the word Sabbath or not, you will be intentional about restoring your faith in and love for God. Time with God is time renewing your life!

As I anticipate taking a sabbatical, I first want to thank you for this opportunity. Sabbatical, of course, comes from the word Sabbath and refers to the biblical directive to allow the land to lie fallow (rest) during the seventh year, after six years of cultivation. (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7) I am most grateful for this opportunity to take a sabbatical and am looking forward to three months of rest and spiritual renewal. I will actually begin the sabbatical next Saturday and my first Sunday back in the pulpit will be August 1st. Today, following the 10:30 worship, I will share some of our specific plans for the sabbatical. But now I would like to share one reason why I am looking forward to fallow time.

For 37 years I have been serving churches. I have had the honor of serving five unique congregations with my longest tenure being right here at Fairmont--12 ½ years. As I reflect on those 37 years I am thankful for each church and the wonderful people with whom I have had the privilege of journeying alongside. But through the years I have had the tendency of wrapping my self-identity entirely too closely to the church. I eat, breath, drink and live the church. I think about the church 24/7 and seldom emotionally disconnect. I share this as a confession and not as something for which I am proud. Although there have been times in my ministry when I was proud of my extreme devotion to the church, I have, over the years, grown to understand that this identity is not healthy for me or for the congregation. It's complicated. One can become so devoted to church work that God gets squeezed out. Just as God can be squeezed out of our lives by anything we overly devote ourselves to. John Calvin was correct when he said, "*Humans can make idols out of anything.*" It takes more than you might imagine to sustain faith in God while serving in a church setting. It's complicated.

That's why I need to get in the "*back of the boat*" where I can rest from my work in the church so God can do God's work in me. I need to get in the "*back of the boat*" and simply **be** rather than **do**. I need to get in the "*back of the boat*" with my grandchildren who will not be calling me Rev. or Pastor or Doctor but, simply, "Grandpa." (*Go Nuts ...Spinner the Squirrel*) I need to be in the "*back of the boat*" with God who calls me "beloved" simply for who I am and not for what I do or how successful I am in the church.

It's complicated and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to take a sabbatical to renew my faith in and love for God. I received a card from one of our families this past week that expressed my hope for the sabbatical: ***"Enjoy the time away to be with family and friends. You'll remember past experiences that will make you laugh or cry, but will be great for the soul. You'll be in our thoughts and prayers for a safe journey, returning to Fairmont with a renewed spirit."*** And that is my hope as well. From the beginning of this process, I have stated that my goal for the sabbatical is that I might return to ***"finish strong and end well."*** I am most grateful for this unique opportunity.

But this sabbatical is not just a gift for me. It is also a gift to you. I sincerely believe that God is giving you an opportunity to discover who you are *apart from me*. Twelve and a half years is a long time to look at me, hear my voice, and receive my ministry. I believe the next several months will give you the opportunity to more easily discover your own gifts for ministry, allow you to speak your voice in ministry, receive ministry from Denise and Nadia who are wonderfully qualified and gifted, go deeper in your understanding of the Priesthood of all Believers and be guided in new ways through Jesus Christ who is the true Head of Fairmont Presbyterian Church. I believe this sabbatical is a mutual gift that comes at the perfect time for me and for you.

It's true.....life is complicated but as we find our rest in the One who loves us for who we are and as we graciously journey arm-in-arm we will have the strength to weather the complexities and challenges of life. I covenant to pray for you while I am gone and I invite your prayers for Connie and me. May God bless us all! Amen.