

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, this is a weekend unlike many others. This is the weekend that we recognize the task of work and the task of rest around our country. We are called to work, for to work is a blessing. The toil of labor is not easy, and we must find rest from these labors to sanctify the work of our hands. God, we are mindful of our labor and the labor of others. We pray for those who struggle to find labor, who are unable to labor, for those who labor has become more important than anything else. Gracious God, we also seek rest. We pray for those who struggle to find any rest, who must work endlessly to meet their needs and the needs of their family. We pray for those who see rest as a diversion from necessary tasks instead of the calling to make work fully meaningful. We pray for balance, God, the balance that makes life faithful for loving work and reenergizing rest. We pray for justice in work and fullness in rest.

Hear our prayers, O God, for to you we come to discern balance. We seek rest from the burdens of the world that weigh us down. God, some of them we impose on ourselves, and we pray for the courage to set these burdens down. Some of them happen against our will; we pray for the wisdom to respond to them faithfully. Some of them affect our neighbors; we pray for the strength to respond to their needs as they request. Gracious God, may we be healthy, loving people that lift up your name and your ways above all others, as we pray the prayer Christ taught us in His Blessed Name, saying in one voice...

SERMON

When I was young, I was captivated by the Energizer Bunny. On the one hand, the bunny was just funny. On the other hand, it told me what I needed to be. Other people and things would run down, but he would keep going and going and going... He's the hero of

that commercial and, well, life. That's kind of the hero we all want to be. We want to keep going and going and going in anything we do while all of our competitors just break down. Let's face it, more productivity is what we need in the world today with so much to do, so much more places to go. We can all sleep when we're dead, right? So, let's keep truckin' along, keep going and going and going, trying to be more and more productive because if we're like the Energizer Bunny, we'll be more happy, fulfilled, and successful, right?

Let's be more realistic: to be the Energizer Bunny today will get you in the hospital. There's an unspoken rule that the one who works the most, who gets the most done, gets the most prestige and meaning in their lives. Everything is right in the world when you get everything done. In reality, it's a total myth. Productivity is a good thing, but there is an important balance. With the way our world works today, the mentality of the Energizer Bunny, if we make it our own, is nothing less than idolatrous. We make productivity god. The idea of productivity seems as if it were the most important thing, so quantity outweighs quality and the rest of life. But there is space for both; there is space to work well and to rest well. The necessary component is a time, a day where work needs to be left behind to reorient toward faithfulness. It's a word we've heard a lot, but, unfortunately, we don't use it much in the church. It's time to reclaim that word for a new age that needs it.

In the secular world, this is Labor Day Weekend. It is an opportunity to get a breather, to calm from the pressures of the working world. But our working world has gone wayward, and one day in the year is no reprieve. In the Christian world, this time is a reminder of the calling of work and how we must have balance between work and rest. This is something that should happen every week. It is called "Sabbath." Typically, Sabbath has been used as another word for "Sunday," but that's not the most faithful usage. It may

be one set day of the week, but whichever day we celebrate Sabbath, it is something we must do with intention and care. Let us remember Sabbath through what it is, what the scriptures say about it, and through how we might live its principles consistently.

The Energizer Bunny only works when we talk about batteries. We as human beings were created by God for the natural need to refuel. Think about it. We were created for times of being on, for doing, and being off, for resting. It takes place in the most subtle of ways. You need about three square meals a day. It's best to get at least eight hours of sleep a night. These are ways to refuel, but they can be abused. If you eat all day, you will be very unhealthy. If you sleep all day, you miss life. If you spend too much time doing one task at once, you lose focus. We were not created to be little Energizer Bunnies who keep going and going and going and going... We have limits, and it's a hard thing to say and to hear. We have a definite period of when we can work, when we can do, when we can be productive and when we just have to stop for our well-being. That is Sabbath. Sabbath is a way of recognizing limits and honoring them as a part of our God-given existence.

The origins of Sabbath are from the foundations of the world. The Genesis story tells us of God's creation of the world in six grand and spectacular days, from the crafting of the Earth's foundations to the creation of humankind. The week does not end there; the final day is a day of rest, where God saw all was good. This day of rest became known as Sabbath. But that Sabbath was not just for God; it became the peoples' in the Ten Commandments. God modeled a tradition that we carry on. In Jewish tradition, it was a day to observe life in the midst of all the work we are called to do. As Exodus says, God tells the Israelites "you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify

you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you..." It is a time to reorient toward the proper balance between work and life. It was a time to stop work and to be, to recognize God and God's work. "It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed." And there is a wide interpretation on what it means to stop work. Some Jewish traditions will debate this down to the absolute minute question, such as if turning on a light switch violates the law of Sabbath. Then again, the idea of taking away all work for a day has inspired great invention, such as the Crock Pot. If one cannot cook on a day, if you can't work, one has to find a work-around if you want to eat. Necessity inspires invention.

The traditional Sabbath is on the seventh day of the week, Saturday, beginning at Sundown on Friday. That is why our Jewish friends' holy day is recognized on Saturday. But we don't observe the traditional Jewish Sabbath. To some, that means that Sabbath is a dead law. To some, that means Sunday is the Sabbath. After all, we come to God's house on Sunday to recognize the day of resurrection. As followers of Christ, what is the right way to go about it? Do we maintain this Jewish tradition of no work or is there something more?

There is one commandment that Jesus does not repeat in the Gospels; do you know what it is? Yes, it is the commandment to "honor the Sabbath and keep it holy." That doesn't mean that Sabbath is gone. In our lesson from Matthew, we have another situation where Jesus and the Pharisees don't see eye to eye. One Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, the disciples are walking along and picked the heads of grain to eat because, well, they are hungry. Strictly interpreting the commandment, this might be considered work; the disciples are violating the commandment. But are the Pharisees really interested in accountability or just pointing out fault? Jesus does not condemn the disciples but Jesus

uses scripture to back his point. When David was hungry on the Sabbath, he took what was not lawful to eat and ate. I mean, how can you deny someone who is hungry food that is ready and present? Christ says there is something more than just following law. What is the good of following the commandments if there is no mercy alongside?

It's kind of funny that you would try to interpret rules to the one who made them in the first place. Jesus says that he is the "Lord of the Sabbath" and gives it new meaning in his authority. Let's face it, it's no fun to just follow rules for the sake of following rules. That's not what anything in the Bible is for, not to mention the Sabbath. After all, how good is it to be forced to rest? How is that truly rest and rejuvenation? But Sabbath loses its strength when it becomes a rule instead of a graceful principle. We are called to do it and we should want to do it for the good of ourselves and our work.

Let's face it, like anything else in life, Sabbath can either be totally neglected or totally abused. This is a world that lifts up as heroes those who work endlessly, those who literally kill themselves sitting at their desks and churn out paperwork and productivity. It may seem heroic for a while, but when you look at them and their lives, they are broken. They do not attend to their families the way they should. Their health goes downhill. Their attitude is far from loving or joyful. They are broken down, but boy, did they get a lot of work done. In fact, who on their deathbed will ever say, "I regret that I didn't work more." But the balance above all is integral to lend meaning to both. I had a roommate in college who had a great deal of trouble figuring out that balance. While I myself consistently worked to make sure I had adequate time to work and play, I struggled with how he worked his balance. He would usually begin papers after 11 PM and truly burned the midnight oil so he could get them done the next day. As his roommate, I was annoyed at his

time management, but as a friend, I was highly aware of how he was hurting himself with this pattern. He would be absolutely dead tired the next day, unable to concentrate on the work in front of him. He did his work and play, but the balance was totally out of whack.

There's a problem if we are too focused on work that we neglect the importance of life. Work does not make life meaningful, but good life makes work meaningful. That's one side of the coin. But the other side of the coin is the commandment that comes before. "Six days you shall work..." We have to work for a world where all can have this time of rest to be fully whole and faithful. We live in a world where not everyone gets to work and work well. This is an issue of justice. We hear all the time about job creation from every political realm, but there's still too many that go without good work or have to have too many jobs just to make ends meet. This is work, but it's work that has no space for rest, no time for Sabbath because there are mouths to feed and bills to pay. Too much work or too much rest is a problem, and as Christians we must be mindful of this as well.

The importance is there, but how do we do it? Set at least one day aside where you aren't focused on the doing and just be. The question is, how do you recharge and reorient? It might be fishing. It might be just being with family. It might be a hobby; it might be reading or writing or anything else. It might be quality time with friends or finding the time and place to have a good meal, among many other possibilities. We need to drop the idea that it's selfish to take time for ourselves. It is not selfish; it is a time that we pastors call "self-care." But it needs to be away from work, chores, It just needs to be a separation physically and, perhaps more importantly, mentally from the work that we have. No matter whether you are working for a paycheck or retired, this is an important principle

because we all work in one way or another. We talk a lot about what we need to do in and as a church, but this is just as important in what we do and who we are.

We just can't keep going and going and going. We need Sabbath. What day is it for you? Have you set a day aside? Whether you have or not, it was a commandment for a reason. We are taught, consciously or subconsciously, that we must work ourselves to the bone to be validated as people. In the long run, that does not create faithful workers or faithful followers; it creates zombies. God calls us, in all parts of our lives, to balance that honors our own needs and the work we need to do in the world. Work is no good without proper rest, and rest becomes monotonous without work to give it full meaning. So, this Labor Day weekend, take a renewed perspective and commitment to Sabbath, for it allows us to have more meaning in our work for our neighbor and our God. Amen and Amen!