

THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE: Stopping to Breathe (Sabbath).

Mark 2:23-28

Ogden Dunes Community Church

July 27, 2025 The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

Every now and then you stumble across a book or piece of music or a painting so beautiful it takes your breath away. That is the way it was for me the first time I read Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It."

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.

It is true that one day a week was given over wholly to religion. On Sunday mornings my brother, Paul, and I went to Sunday school and then to "morning services" to hear our father preach and in the evenings to Christian Endeavor and afterwards to "evening services" to hear our father preach again. In between on Sunday afternoons...he was anxious to be on the hills where he could restore his soul and be filled again to overflowing for the evening sermon.

Even so, in a typical week of our childhood Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters.

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word "beautiful."

My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.

I love the lines where Maclean talks about picking up God's rhythm: As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.

For there to be power and beauty in our lives we need to learn the art of stopping long enough to let our souls breathe. For there to be power and beauty in our lives we need to pick up God's rhythms and that means Sabbath stopping.

It's obvious, isn't it?

Our bodies, souls and relationships need more moments when we walk along the edge of a river and listen for the voice of God beneath and beyond the water. Our bodies, souls and relationships need more moments when we are just *with* the people we love and care about. Our bodies, souls and relationships need more moments when we just hang out with God.

It's obvious, isn't it?

Psychologists and physicians tell us we are an anxious, exhausted, sleep-deprived people. We move so fast and attempt to do so much we are barely alive. Our calendars are full but somehow our hearts are too often empty. We're surrounded by people but we are too often lonely. We talk about God and read books about God we too seldom experience God.

For there to be power and beauty in our lives we need to learn the art of stopping long enough to let our souls breathe. We need to pick up God's rhythms if our lives are to be deep and real and beautiful.

We are continuing our series on *The Emotionally Healthy Life* and this morning we want to look at the radical idea of Sabbath. The counter revolutionary idea that there will be more life in life if we risk stopping for Sabbath moments in each day and in each week.

Bible scholars are not sure when the idea of Sabbath first became a part of the Hebrew experience. All we know is the people of God began to recognize the importance of stopping. Breathing. Playing. Hanging out with God. They began to do that very early in their existence.

It was one of those things that set the Jews apart from other tribes. Other nations. Sort of the way single-class high school basketball and euchre used to set Hoosiers apart from the tribes living in Ohio or Illinois or Michigan. We used to be known for those things: single-class high school basketball. And euchre. (And maybe breaded tenderloins.)

The whole idea of Sabbath set the Hebrews apart from other nations. The Jews would stop one full day every week. Or they would stop for Sabbath moments in the middle of every day for the soul breathing experience we call "prayer." The Jews would just stop. Throw a party. Hang out with the family. Make dinner time go on forever. Take a walk. Play with their friends. Rub shoulders with God.

When their children would ask, "Why do we stop when other people don't?" the elders would point the young ones back to the story of creation in Genesis 2. You know the opening verses of that chapter (TNIV): *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

God has made the light and the waters and the sky and plants and stars and animals and men and women. It's just amazing. But there is still more to do. You know that, right? Creation is never done. I'm sure God would tell you Creation is like housework or gardening: it's never done. There is always something that needs to be tightened or loosened. Always something that needs to be brought to an end or something that needs to get started. Even after God has made the light and the waters and the sky and the plants and the stars and the animals and men and women there is more to do. But God stops.

We're not sure why God stopped.

Genesis doesn't make that clear.

God stops. God rests.

Stopping Long Enough to See (and Smell).

Why does God stop?

I believe God knew you've got to stop if you are going to keep your ability to see the wonder and mystery and glory of life. God wants to soak in the beauty of the world God has made. God doesn't want to miss the miracle of it all. And to really see the wonder of life and creation and blessings of God requires that we stop.

There is an interesting line that keeps getting repeated in the 1st chapter of Genesis. The writer of Genesis, at various points in the creation story, says God looked at what God had created *and saw that it was good*.

God stops to look at the dry ground he has made by pulling all the water together and *God saw that it was good*.

When God sets the stars in the sky, and when God hangs the moon out there just beyond the earth, God leans back, looks at what he has made, stands there in the light of the stars, *And God saw that it was good*.

God makes the wild animals. He looks up at impalas and brown bears and giraffes and buffalo and squirrels and God smiles. Genesis says, *And God saw that it was good*.

You've got to stop, you've got to rest, if you are going to see it all. Really appreciate your life and blessings. When we keep grinding away, when we keep saying "yes" to every activity or opportunity or good task that needs to be done, we lose the ability to see.

One of the enduring mysteries of my life has been the source of a particular fragrance. When I was a student at Duke, I would park my car behind the engineering building and walk through the towering pine trees that border Duke Chapel, and there would be the smell of the pine needles. But the smell that really caught me, the smell that I began to associate with the new kind of relationship I had with God, was something else. I couldn't figure out what plant was producing it. When the magnolias were in bloom, or when we would walk through the Duke Gardens, I would go around sniffing the different plants. I'd bend down, inhale, and shake my head. "Nope, that's not it," I'd say. Puzzled that this one particular fragrance -which I couldn't manage to describe to others- so intrigued me.

There is that one particular fragrance that reminds me of Duke. Of my journey with God. I've been to places all over North America and Europe where I would catch the scent of that fragrance, and I could never -for the life of me- figure out what was producing it. Where it was coming from. I'd slow down and say to Sharon, "Did you smell that?" She'd say, "What are you talking about? Can you describe the smell?" And I couldn't. I couldn't describe the fragrance of the mystery plant.

Guess what?

First United Methodist in Bloomington had plants bordering their sidewalk along 4th Street. And those plants are the plants that produce the fragrance that would reach me when I would enter and leave the Divinity School at Duke. I was stunned, one morning in Bloomington, when I was walking along and the smell of those plants reached me. I stopped. I looked down. And I saw a row of simple, green plants -with not a blossom in sight- bordering the sidewalk that were exactly like the shrubs outside the seminary in Durham.

It was a sweet moment.

I stood there on the sidewalk, people walking by, and I smiled. Like a person carried away by some private joke the rest of the world wouldn't understand. I stood there and I nodded. It was another piece of confirmation that I was where God needed me. Every time I walked down the sidewalk on 4th Street those plants would remind me of my journey with God.

Do you know something?

I often would move so fast that I often walked right past those plants and never even noticed them. The smell they give off, their fragrance, was wasted on me.

Because I had important work to do. I had appointments to keep. How sad is that?

When we refuse to stop, when we keep going, when we are all about producing, we lose our ability to see -or notice the fragrance of- blessings.

So God stops.

God looks it all over.

God delights in the beauty of it all.

Just Hanging Out with the One You Love.

My second hunch about why God stops is simply that God likes to hang out with us and just be. Just play. Genesis 3:8 tells us God would take a walk in the cool of the evening, after the heat of the day had begun to dissipate, and he was looking for Adam and Eve. You may think God had an agenda when God went looking for those two but I like to think God enjoyed nothing more than hanging out with Eve and Adam.

When you love someone you give them the gift of time. That's a part of what the Sabbath is all about. We give the gift of time to God. And God gives us the gift of God's presence. A day of Sabbath or Sabbath moments in the middle of a day, when we stop to pray or breathe or read a passage of scripture, is an opportunity to just hang out with God.

It's a pretty radical step, this keeping of the Sabbath. This idea of stopping in the middle of the day for a Sabbath moment of prayer or scripture. Stopping for God when the rest of the world wants us to keep moving, keep producing, keep working, keep busy.

That's how we know we matter, right? That's how we know we are important: we're busy. Our calendar is full.

When you love someone you give them the gift of time. If we love God we are commanded -this is in the Ten Commandments, you know?- to give God time. Set aside time for God.

God wants to hang out with us. So God rests. God stops. God puts down God's tools and pours a glass of sweet tea and sits down with us. "What's up?" God says to us. "How you doing? Do you know how much I love you?"

The Four Parts of Sabbath.

Peter Scazzerro, in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Life*, has a whole chapter on Sabbath as one key to a healthy life.

He reminds us we were built as creatures who need one day a week to take care of chores, and then we need another day each week to stop. Breathe. Worship. Play with God. Hang out with friends. One description of it is a "no obligation day."

Scazerro, this New York pastor who went through his own crisis because of his own need to keep producing for God without a break, says we not only need a day of Sabbath but we need Sabbath moments in the middle of every day.

Sabbath, Scazerro says, involves four things.

First, Sabbath is stopping. Just stopping. That is a radical, counter-cultural thing to do in this busy, “what have you done lately to prove your worth?” culture. Just stopping. I once lived in a parsonage whose backyard bordered the church parking lot I never felt like I could stop in that backyard, just sit in a chair and stare at the sky, or stretch out on a blanket, because people would think I had lost my mind or was lazy. I imagined people would come over and ask, “Are you okay?” Or think, “Don’t you have things to do?” Or comment, “Working one day a week must be nice!” So I had to go away, or hide inside my house, if I wanted to stop.

Second, Sabbath is resting. Being playful and non-productive. Letting God handle the universe while we play or pray or nap or walk. Sabbath means having faith that God is big enough to handle the world while we stop for a day or an hour.

For all our talk of faith, a fair number of us live our lives as if everything is up to us. Sometimes, even in the church as a pastor, I find myself looking at what we need to do and forgetting the role God might play in all of this.

I remember reading a sports story in *The South Bend Tribune* about a young basketball player at Cassopolis High School. Cassopolis was playing Berrien Springs in a homecoming game, but young Justin Jackson -a 5’10” player averaging seven rebounds a game- wasn’t playing that Friday night.

The reason he was “out” was his faith: Justin is a 7th Day Adventist. From sundown Friday to sundown on Saturday, the sports writer AlLesar reminded the reader, it’s time “for family interaction and worship. No school functions. No athletic events.”

Justin was quoted saying this: “Basketball is super important to me, but nothing is more important than my religion. In basketball, one injury and you’re gone. God, religion, faith - they’ll always be there.”

Stopping.

Time is a great gift, isn’t it?

I know we are told that the best way to express our love for someone is with a box of (now highly priced) chocolates. I know we are told the best way to express our love for someone is a card or a diamond necklace or a dozen red roses. Those are nice. But, I think, the best gift we can give someone is time and -this is key- attention. I see people eating dinner with someone they clearly love, but they are looking at their telephone. They are there but not present. They think they are giving someone the gift of time but they aren’t. I remember, in Bloomington, watching a young couple out with their five year old daughter, and the daughter kept looking to each parent but the adults were buried in their phones. I wanted to walk over to them and say, “Put the phones down because you are missing the moment. And in another five minutes she will be nineteen years old and gone.”

The gift of time...and attention.

Third, Sabbath is delighting in life’s blessings. Little ones and big ones. I like getting up early, walking outside to get the paper, looking up and noticing the stars. It is always a sweet moment for me. I like the feel of clean sheets on the bed. When I

was water skiing I loved the feeling of leaning as far out as I could, holding onto the rope with just one hand, and then letting go. Slowing to a stop on the surface of the lake and settling down into the water. I liked noticing the fragrance of the shrubs along the sidewalk on 4th Street. We go to the beach and I really stop, letting the music of the water speak. I love swimming out into the lake, and the sensation of diving beneath the surface. I like lingering with a book or a poem or holding my wife's hand, and feeling the wonder of it. Sabbath is delighting in life's blessings.

Fourth, Sabbath is focusing on God. Letting God's presence and goodness and truth and love soak into us. You know how, if you stay in a swimming pool or the ocean long enough, the tips of your fingers begin to shrivel up? Sabbath is about hanging out with God so long that it changes you...the way the water makes the skin on your fingers shrivel up a little. Sabbath is focusing on God.

I find it helpful to use some devotional resources. For example, I have been blessed this year to read *The One Year Bible*, which uses *The Living Bible*. That is a translation I have never really used much, and the daily readings often have a surprise or two for me. Each day includes a reading from the Hebrew Testament, the Christian Testament, a Psalm and Proverb. I also use the *Disciplines*, which The Upper Room puts out. It includes a reading, a thought, and a prayer. I find the poems of Mary Oliver helpful, as well as *A Guide to Prayers for Ministers and Other Servants*. When my prayers are weak, and I am distracted, these guides help focus me.

I also find music helpful as a way of connecting with God. Everything from the anthems of John Rutter to Handel to Willie Nelson's latest CD to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* to Nat King Cole's version of Hoagy Carmichael's classic "*Stardust*." Aren't those marvelous lyrics?

And, there are places that help us connect with God. The beach. The high desert of southeastern Oregon. I stop to visit the chapel at Anicla Domini in Donaldson every chance I get because that place is holy to me, and helps quiet me down...and open me up to God.

My hope is that our worship experiences help you. I would be heartbroken if I knew you came here on Sunday mornings, and only got religion. I want more for you. God wants more for you.

Sabbath isn't just a day for dozing off in front of the tv, but it is a time to focus on God and that core relationship of our lives.

When my granddaughter, Ella, was little she made it very clear early on that when I came to her house I was to hang out with her. One of the things I really liked to do was read newspapers. So I would show up at Ella's house in Columbus, sit down on the couch in their living room, and open up a newspaper or two.

I just loved reading that paper! Ella would climb up on the couch with me, we would talk a little, and I would go back to my paper. And -suddenly- the two hands of that two year old would smack the paper out of my hands. Crumple it up before I could even move. Then, she would look at me with a triumphant smile. I think she was smacking the paper out of my hand as her way of saying, "You are here to spend time with me!" Sabbath is focusing on God.

We stop to get in touch with the rhythms of God one day a week, and then every other day of the week we are commanded to finding stopping moments. Soul breathing

moments. When we pray or focus on a verse of scripture or open our eyes to what is around us...what is happening inside us.

I'm not so good at stopping. Even though I had a bad habit of neglecting the commandment to keep the Sabbath, the large church I was serving was humming along. Growing. Thriving. Doing all kinds of good stuff. But my soul was in need of care...power...healing.

I zipped across the country to a national gathering of pastors.

Before the conference they had some pre-conference courses you could take. I signed up for a one-day spiritual retreat. Hundreds of us gathered in a ballroom and just stopped. We were quiet. We didn't hear speakers. We didn't hear presentations on emergent worship or theology or how to use social media for ministry. Someone read a few scripture verses and then there was silence...long stretches of silence.

I remember leaning back against a folding wall. Beginning to pray. And falling asleep.

I woke up and looked around to see if anyone had noticed me falling asleep. I was surrounded by prayer warriors, I was sure, who would never quite understand how a pastor could so easily sleep when he was given the opportunity to pray.

I realized how tired I was.

Then, the late Mike Yaconelli -who had put together the conference- said something I'll never forget. "It's okay to stop for the next four days," he said. "Or you can attend every workshop. Or you can go to the beach. Or, if you are here with your spouse, you can go back to your hotel and spend the next four days there together. You have my permission to stop. To not do a thing these next four days. You can go off and read or sleep or walk or journal or join us for worship or find a good place to eat. Do whatever you need to do. But I want you to know it is okay to stop."

He was giving me permission to stop. Stop leading. Stop problem-solving. Stop producing. Just stop. Hang out with God.

I sat there in a corner of that ballroom crying: it felt so good to stop.

We are people who do. But are we so in love with God, do we trust God enough, to stop? Because stopping is key to pick up the rhythms of God that make life beautiful and good.

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word "beautiful."

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