

Sabbatical

Exodus 20:8-11

June 9, 2024

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

I'm so glad to be home. I walked in the door on Monday evening after a month away and hugged my kids. I missed the sound and smell and feel of them.

On Tuesday, I came back to work. And **I was happy about it.** Some pastors go on sabbatical, and they realize **“I need to be somewhere else.”** And people asked me, “14 years at one church? that’s a long time; is it time to move on?” So I asked myself that. And the answer is, “no.” I feel like ours is still a generative relationship. I enjoy my work here at NDPC. I hope that you continue to feel that I am **helping you grow in faith** and that **the church is moving on a good path toward the future.** I don’t want to get stale. If you think this isn’t working, you need to speak up. Comfort can be bad for a church.

Because I know many of you are curious about my time away, I want to time this morning sharing a bit about my sabbatical experience. Three spiritual truths that God showed me during these two months.

1. Walking is an underrated spiritual practice.
2. The Church is dying. And this is good.
3. Sabbath changes the world.

First, on walking. **I walked a lot over the last month.** The first two weeks of May, I spent in Stonehaven, Scotland, where former NDPC intern Sarah Smith is the pastor. I walked all over Stonehaven; in the beautiful Dunnotar Woods just outside her door. Out to the castle ruins on the coast. All along both beautiful rivers that flow through Stonehaven to the sea. I walked on **golf courses.** I played on the 2nd oldest golfing links in the world. On a course where they don’t own lawn mowers—the sheep mow the grass. I walked on **the ancient pilgrim way through St. Andrews** to the cathedral where St. Andrew’s jawbone used to be (before the reformers burned it down). I walked **a seven-mile pilgrimage across Iona** to the beach where, in 562ce, St. Columba landed on a boat from Ireland. Beth and I walked **the length of the West Highland Way**, a trail that runs from just north of Glasgow to the town of Fort William. 97 miles in 7 days.

I walked a lot. I grew to be a huge fan of the spirituality of walking. First of all, I feel great. I feel healthy and strong. But the benefits of walking are deeper than just vital signs. **As I**

walked, I felt like I could locate myself as a human being in the world. My senses of perception grew. You see the sky, the movement of the clouds, the arching of the trees. The shape of the leaves. The darting of the birds. The infinite colors. You hear bird calls, and wind, and water cascading over rocks. You feel wind on your cheek, sweat on your neck; strength in your back, hips, and legs. You feel the ground itself--pushing up, meeting the heels and balls of your feet. Your sense of proprioception--your own body's ability to stay balanced--builds as you walk.

As you walk, your body locates itself in the world. We become “placed” humans. **This idea-of knowing your placed-ness in God’s creation--is essential to our spirituality.** This is what Jennifer Ayres has been talking about with her teaching about “inhabitance.” It’s a deeply ecological idea. There’s something about the world that our economic and political systems has created that doesn’t want us to pay attention to place. We move around all the time. We travel by car or plane. We bury rivers underground. We vilify other creatures. When you walk, you re-familiarize yourself in the created world. It’s hard to get too big about yourself when you walk. You feel your smallness all the time-- your limits. **But as you walk, the overwhelming truth is that you belong.**

So get out and walk. Anyone who wants to take a walk with me, I will gladly say “yes.” Start a walking group with other church folks. We can make our own pilgrimage trails around this fair city--there is plenty that is holy all around us. Walking alone is prayer. Walking together is worship.

The Church is dying. And this is good. One reason I went to Scotland is that I wanted to peer into our future. Scotland, like most of Europe, is farther along in the process of secularization. The church in Scotland is shrinking fast. And in a way, it is depressing. I went to church services all over the country and there are 30 or 50 people in these massive, cavernous, gorgeous buildings; or the buildings are theaters or condos. The same thing does seem to be happening here in the State; we should expect many more churches around us to shrink and close in the next 20 years.

The quickest response, for those of us who love the church is to panic or to put our head in the ground and say, “it’ll never happen to our church.” But it IS happening. And it may happen even here. But don’t be afraid. So much of the energy and anxiety about the shrinking church in Scotland is about maintaining the buildings. The church is NOT a building. Closing huge church buildings isn’t a bad thing. Here’s one thing we miss about these big, beautiful old buildings--they are often the product of empire that Jesus came to overthrow. It’s obvious in Scotland--the money to build these grand churches came from Scotland’s role in the British empire, which was built on the transatlantic slave trade. Not all Scots Presbyterians were slavers--but they were participating in an economic system that flourished because human beings were being bought and sold all the way through the 1800s. When do you think all these churches in Scotland were built? They’re visual symbols of a Constantinian Christianity. William Yoo at Columbia Seminary has made a

strong case that the Presbyterian Church in the United States also owes its entire existence to slavery.

What I felt so deeply in Scotland was that the sooner we get to the place where we can't afford the building, the sooner we can let go of the idea that the church is a building. The church is the Beloved Community giving themselves in service out of love for the world. The premise of the incarnation of God as Jesus is that God inhabits human flesh. After Pentecost, God's body is our Spirit-inhabited body. The true cathedral of God, is human beings sharing our gifts for the common good. We are so lucky to have this funky mid-century modern building. We'll keep it as long as it serves our purpose--living as the Body of Christ.

Sabbath changes the world. What does that mean? I've always believed in the wisdom of Sabbath. Of rest-taking. But what was shocking to me, was to see that while I have cognitively assented to wisdom of rest, what I have actually internalized is that idle time is time wasted. What I really believed is that doing nothing eroded my sense of worth.

The first month of sabbatical, I decompressed. Pastors don't have the most stressful job in the world, but we do hold onto things... your struggles, but also the wellbeing of the institution. I spent the first month letting go of the compulsion to be responsible. I also spent time with the people I love; time was mostly unencumbered by obligation. Guess what? I felt myself more present, less anxious.

In the second month, I spent lots of time alone. For the first time in a long time, I could hear myself think... which was scary, but good. But in this alone time, I found myself much more able to drop down into my inner life. I wrote--and walked. Over time, I came "home to myself." I recovered a rhythm of life that nourished me. There's something about the world we have created, in which we are alienated from ourselves and one another. We are driven by compulsions. By rhythms of life that aren't ours--and may not even be human. Sabbath is the solution. It's required for every one of us. Sabbath is not "doing nothing." It's a way of releasing us from our compulsions. We can be more present to the people you love and to ourselves. Sabbath is a form of justice. It is a kind of resistance movement against the powers and principalities that de-humanize us for the sake of profit.

Take your sabbath. Fight for it--for yourself and others.

I was glad to go away. And I'm glad to be home. I really feel like I'm beginning my service here again. I hope you will reach out to me--for a walk, for a cup of coffee, for conversation. Thank you all for the gift of a sabbatical.