

SLD08.23.09 21st Ordinary My first sermon after my sabbatical

**Emory Presbyterian Church
Ephesians 6:10-20
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“A Bouquet of Blessings”

This is my first sermon after my three-month sabbatical and I have so much to say, so much I want to share with you about what I learned, what I’m still learning, what I hope yet to learn, about me, about you, about God.

But look at all the ‘I’s’ in that statement! It feels a little weird to preach an “all about me” sermon. I mean, it’s okay to throw in an example now and again from my life, a story from my spotty past, a brief learning from Christopher (as long as he’s not here). But a whole sermon about “What I Did Over the Summer?”

Well, indulge me just this once, okay? Because maybe what happened for me during this sabbatical isn’t just all about me. Maybe it has something to say to you, too, about your *own* struggles to be human, to be faithful, to live a balanced life. Authentic struggle often has a kind of universal ring, don’t you find?

Maybe there’s even something in the story of my sabbatical that applies to this community, to this church, to the historic tensions over the years between you you’re your pastors. It’s possible. Doesn’t any leader’s journey take on a certain poignant relevance to her constituency?

I’m just saying...the stuff I’m about to tell you, maybe it’s not just “all about me.”

On the other hand, most of it is.

Most of what I want to talk about is what I chose to do during my sabbatical, what I learned, and what it meant to me. And how I hope to proceed.

It's a little hard to know where to begin because whereas my sabbatical ran from mid-May to mid-August, the seed of it was planted way back in September of '08 when I heard about a generous grant to support mid-career pastors take what they called a "Sabbath Sabbatical."

Sounds sort of redundant, doesn't it? A Sabbath Sabbatical? But it's a very intentional choice of words.

Turns out leaders in industry, academics and the church take sabbaticals for lots of reasons – to explore a new topic, to write a book, to expand their horizons, to take care of an ill parent or child. A "Sabbath" Sabbatical isn't about all that. In fact, it isn't about "doing," at all. I'd say it's about "being" but it's really more about NOT doing and seeing what's left. If anything.

I mean, if you're a single mom and solo pastor running a church, a renovation and a household and you stop doing all those things, who are you then?

If you're the exhausted, angry, perimenopausal single mom of a confusing and often contemptuous male teenager; the introverted, mid-career solo pastor of a sometimes contentious church in transition; and the manager of the most complex and expensive investment you've ever tackled in all your middle-aged life, and you withdraw from all of that for an extended period of time, well, what's left? If anything.

This is what a "Sabbath Sabbatical" is meant to discover.

I applied for the grant. Put myself, the Session, the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery, and you all through all kinds of last minute gyrations in order to make the deadline.

I didn't get it.

At first I was devastated, and confused because I knew, in the marrow of my bones, that I was meant to do this thing. In fact, I knew that I couldn't continue in parish ministry if I *didn't do* this thing. So I couldn't figure out why God hadn't opened the way.

Then it hit me. My sanity, my clarity, my relationship with myself, my God and the church of my heart could hardly be solely dependent upon the generosity of the Louisville Institute. If a Sabbath Sabbatical was what God ordained for me, by God, there was no way I *wasn't* doing it, if I had to pay for the substitute preacher myself!

Which I almost did. But last minute, the Synod (remember the Synod?) came through with a last minute grant of \$3000 which, combined with the \$600 left in my Continuing Education account, was just enough to pay Kim for the summer.

Okay, so I didn't have enough to go to Turkey and sit at the feet of Rumi in Konya. Most of what I wanted to do wasn't about money, anyway; it was about time. Time to think. Time not to think. Time to settle back in my house. Time to catch up with all the changes of the last decade: my divorce, 9/11, my parents' deaths, serving 6 different churches, love gained and lost both professionally and personally, my sisters' illnesses, my changing son, my changing body. You know. Life.

Well, my soul hadn't caught up with my life, and I needed it to. Only I didn't know how. I didn't know what needed changing, healing, transforming, never mind how to go about it. I'd forgotten how to rest, how to relax, how to let go of control, even for a minute. I was all tied up in a knot and I didn't know how to untangle.

In fact, honestly? I had no idea how to proceed.

I made a list.

So much to do! Boxes to unpack, pictures to hang, photos to organize, wicker to paint, stuff to pitch, two years of garden-neglect to clear. And, oh yeah: rest, heal, pray, discern. Come on, Jill, time's a-wasting! Get on with it! And speak up, God, will you? I can't hear you!

Took me two weeks to calm down.

I resented those weeks. Very inefficient. The privilege of a sabbatical was not lost on me; I fully intended to maximize the use of my time. Two full weeks just to unclench my teeth and drop my shoulders?! What a waste!

Fortunately, I'd scheduled the second week down at the Pastoral Institute down in Columbus, Ga. Didn't exactly know what to expect but I'd heard they were good with pastors in crisis. Of course, I wasn't in crisis, but I thought they might have some word of wisdom for me.

So here's how it went: I took all kinds of psychological and professional inventories before I went and again once I was down there. For a full week, I saw two therapists every day, except for the days I saw three. They kept giving me pages of written materials to read. I read them. Otherwise I ate, slept, prayed and walked, up and down, up and down, up and down, the Riverwalk of the Chattahoochee, all alone.

You see, that many experienced, wise, faithful, sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle truth-tellers in one week, it's a little like boot camp. They make you sweat, they make you cry, they make you mad, and they make you wish you hadn't come. But, whatever your pain, whatever your weakness, whatever crazy ways you try to protect yourself, whatever nutty things you do to get through the day, well, by the end of that week, they make you know yourself better.

I'll spare you the details but suffice it to say, it was intense.

I was glad I had the remainder of the sabbatical to chew on what I learned and try to integrate it. In fact, I'm glad I have the rest of my life to chew on what I learned in Columbus, and try and integrate it.

You know, John Calvin said, "it doesn't matter whether you start with a search for the knowledge of God or for the knowledge of self. The two are so intertwined one with the other that is impossible always to know which leads and which follows. A search for either will drive one to the other."

I know that doesn't sound like Calvin, but he did say it. And my week at the Pastoral Institute made me believe it. It was no honeymoon, but I tell you, God and I did get to know each other better that week. And I walked, I *limped*, away with some serious suggestions for saner living for which no one was responsible but myself.

And it wasn't just holy stuff they prescribed, either. It was stuff like "eat right." "Get enough sleep." "Exercise." "Respect your low tolerance for alcohol."

Kind of silly to go clear to Columbus just to hear that, huh? But I heard it differently, somehow. Maybe because the other thing that happened during that week in Columbus was that Jesus called on me.

Took me by surprise, I can tell you, because I'm more a God and Holy Spirit kind of gal, you know? But Jesus showed up one day and there he was, and I was shy at first but he wasn't, and we started to become friends.

Okay, that's all I can say about that because when people start getting "me and Jesus pious" on me I tend to shut down. Even if *I'm* the one doing it.

Okay, so, the following week I spent puttering at home.

Then, thanks to the generosity of a parishioner of a former church I served, I spent a week at the beach. Jekyll Island. No kids, no parents, no church, no neighbors, no sisters, nobody to take care of.

At first I hardly knew what to do with myself, but I got the idea eventually. Twice a day, when the tides allowed it, I went swimming. I rode bikes. I read. I sat on the beach and stared. I worked on a project for what I call my “bordello bathroom.” I took walks. I rested. And Jesus took a break, which was not a bad thing because, like any new friend, he’s a little high maintenance. Instead, the Holy Spirit who kicked in and soothed and comforted me and helped me rest from all that tough stuff from the Pastoral Institute.

Then I went home and spent a week clearing things out of my attic and off my porch and driveway for a mongo yard sale. Very Freudian, getting rid of all that stuff, clearing out, clearing the way, opening the way, letting go, letting go, letting go.

The yard sale done, I headed for a week at my retreat center, Green Bough House of Prayer. I’ve been going there for years; in fact, I’m an Associate of that community, meaning that I’ve taken a vow to live to the best of my ability by their rule of life.

Only the thing is, when I’ve gone to Green Bough for the last three years, I’ve also worked on a sermon, or planned worship, or prepared for Session, or caught up on expense receipts. This time I went for one purpose and one purpose only – a week-long, directed, spiritual retreat. Which means I spent the whole week by myself in silence except when I met with my long-time spiritual director, Fay Key. Fay and I would talk, or, mostly I would talk and she would listen, and then she’d sort of

“prescribe” some scripture for me, like medicine to break up congestion, or reduce fever, or lessen the pain. And I would sit and walk and eat and nap with that scripture all day long – reading it, praying it, writing about it, listening to it - until then the next day when I went back for more.

And it was God who spoke to me during that time, kindly but firmly, telling me ways I had grown up, and ways I hadn't yet.

A couple more weeks home, then, of puttering, organizing, settling, and thinking, then it was time to get ready to go to Israel.

Now I wasn't sure I wanted to go to Israel. For one thing, this personal examination thing can flat wear a body out. What's more, I'd already been to Israel back in '92 and I just wasn't sure I had the wherewithal to fool with international travel. Anyway, if I were going to go anywhere, I wanted it to be Turkey, remember?

But, then again, I'm a part of this very blessed group of small church pastors called the Macedonia Ministry that's sponsored by the Cousins Foundation and mentored by Tom Tewell, whom many of you have met by now. And here Tom had gone to a lot of trouble to persuade the Cousins Foundation to send our whole group on this pilgrimage to Israel at no cost to us. And he promised us there'd be plenty of time for worship and rest and renewal, so I thought...okay...what the heck.

Well, was I ever surprised. Not only did the company turn out to be fun and tolerant and dear (which you can't always count on with a gaggle of clergy – we tend to take ourselves very seriously.) But what do you know but that not only was the crew pretty fun, the whole Holy Triune showed up besides! I'm talking guest appearances all along the way by Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit, but especially Jesus, which, I'm telling

you, you also can't count on the highly commercialized, over-produced, and not infrequently hokey "holy sites" of the Holy Land.

Secretly, one of my goals for going was to get to know Jesus better over there, in context, you know? And what do you know but that I did. Seriously. In the places we went, especially in the Galilee, and in the deep-hearted piety of my companions on the trip, and, somehow, in a way I can't really explain, in my own deep and honest seeking. Somehow, in my own deep yearning to see and know and trust Jesus, I discovered I already was beginning to see, and know, and trust him.

Which is all I want to say for now for reasons formerly stated. But I'll talk more about our pilgrimage a couple weeks from now during a Wednesday night program.

Okay, so, I came home from Israel, took about a week to get my body clock straight, built my chicken coop, and came on back to work.

So, am I a changed woman? And for the better? Well, I couldn't swear to it. And anyway, only time will tell. But here are some of the lessons on which I hope to keep focused the eyes of my heart:

1. Let it go.
2. Let it go.
3. Hold things loosely.
4. Sabbath is an act of obedience.
5. Trust God.
6. Hope in God.
7. Let it go.

So far as I can tell, this list pretty much comprises *my* whole armor of God, the means for me to remain strong in the Lord and stand up to the wiles of the devil. So far as I can tell, the best way for me to stand firm in the strength of God's power is to take care of myself, hold things loosely, and trust God. 'Cause like Paul said, our struggles are not against enemies of flesh and blood but against cosmic powers and spiritual forces, inside and out, that stand between us and our belovedness of God.

I'm tired of feeling anxious and weary and of pushing myself beyond what I can do and be with integrity and excitement and anticipation and competence and love. So I'm going to try to go at things differently. I'm a little nervous about such a public declaration – I mean, what if I can't? But this sabbatical has given me hope, and intention, and a whole tool bag of advice and resources. Plus, I know Jesus will help.

So that's my story. So far. As to what comes next, well, my story will be my story, and your story will be your story. And *our* story, well, that might be fun to figure out together.

To the glory of God. Amen.