

## **Of Rest and Sabbaticals**

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The story is told of two woodcutters who were given a full day's job chopping. One of them chopped all day, not stopping for a moment's rest. After his eight hours of non-stop chopping, he had a large pile of logs.

The other chopper worked for fifteen minutes, then took a ten-minute break. He worked calmly and steadily, but worked less actual time than his co-worker. At the end of the day, the one who had taken periodic breaks had a much larger pile than the one that did not.

The man who worked non-stop was amazed and asked his co-worker, "How can this be possible?" He replied, "It's simple...when I stopped to rest, I also sharpened my axe!"

The periods of rest in life, the time-outs and the times off, are valuable times. They help recreate energy for living and renew enthusiasm. When we rest, we "sharpen our axes" for the work we are called to do – and end up accomplishing much more.

How do you feel about your own need to rest? In our fast-paced culture that rewards constant activity and disdains "down time" as being unproductive, it's not easy to feel good about taking time off. And yet, the principle of resting is deeply imbedded in every part of creation.

One of most astounding verses in all of scripture is this: "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and rested...So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." (Genesis 2:2-3) Far from the popular image of God as being always busy – always "on the job" – the Biblical account of creation reminds us that even God needs to rest! In nature, everything rests: every plant, animal, species and element have periods of rest. The only species that seems to want to defy the principle of resting is...well, us.

I'm concerned that many of our congregations do not "rest from their labors" as often as they should. Having an active calendar is a measure of vitality, but constant activity can actually destroy creativity and contribute to congregational "burn out". There is no time for the parish to rest, relax, regroup, reevaluate, dream and plan. On parish visitations, I always ask vestries and advisory boards to name their joys and laments. There are always several joys to share, but the one lament I hear the most is this: "there are too few people doing too many tasks." However, unless the parish takes occasional "sabbaticals" – intentional periods of sabbath rest – how will it ever know if its level of activity is appropriate for its size?

And, of course, I am concerned for many of our clergy. I insist in all our letters of agreements between new clergy and their congregations that periods of rest and prayer are built in to the priest's daily, weekly, monthly and annual lives. There is an enormous emotional, spiritual and physical toll that the ministry places on those whose jobs are to be constantly available to people, problems, crises and activities – both in times of celebration and of sorrow. Our clergy do not punch a clock to indicate when work begins and ends, and there are real "pulls" for us to overwork and

neglect our need for self-care. The temptation is to attempt to do what God could not do: create without resting.

That is why the Church encourages its parish priests and bishops to schedule and plan for a two or three month sabbatical after every five to seven years of active full-time ministry. This is as much for the parish and diocese's benefit as it is for the priest or bishop. No one is served well whose spiritual leader is burned out, tensed up and depleted. The springs of vitality and creativity need to flow out from the leader to the ones with whom he or she serves, and sabbaticals are a blessed and powerful way for clergy to recharge their batteries.

As many of you know, I will be on sabbatical January-March 2016. This is a wonderful gift that the diocese is providing me after serving as diocesan bishop since June 2008. During this period Sonya and I will go hiking – which we love to do! – and I will spend some time for extended prayer and meditation in a few monasteries, as well as make some trips that I've longed to do but didn't have the time. I have a stack of books I plan on reading, and I may get in a couple of rounds of golf somewhere. But most of all, I will not be working as I have for the last seven years. I am very pleased to have Bishop Chilton Knudsen on board to provide episcopal leadership while I am away.

I consider it a privilege and honor to serve and be served by the Diocese of Maryland, and it gives me great joy to be your bishop. I am grateful for and excited about my sabbatical, and I look forward to seeing you again in April!

Blessings and peace,

+Eugene