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David W. Wray

WRAYD@ACU.EDU

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Sacred Rhythms: Harmonizing Work and Prayer

David W. Wray

Every generation seeks to balance the polarities of work with times of Sabbath. Sacred rhythms that harmonize work and prayer seem just out of reach for many of us. Abraham Heschel, noted twentieth-century rabbi, theologian and Jewish philosopher, affirms we must understand that the world has already been created and survives without our help. “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world; on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.”¹

In our frenetic culture we long for peace and quiet while frequently lacking the energy, time and discipline to engage in spiritual practices of Sabbath. Ruth Haley Barton, director of the Chicago-based Transforming Center and author of several books on the inner life, formulates that life in the twenty-first century is habitually experienced as “overly and dangerously tired.”² Haley, a former ministerial staff member at a large urban congregation herself, believes that this level of fatigue builds up over months and years through work, family life, ministry and daily activities. While we experience the symptoms of chronic weariness, we seldom examine the source of our exhaustion and often overlook the prescription found in scripture. The scriptural remedy is to dedicate time for participating in the joys of Sabbath worship, respite from work, and enjoying the delight found in relationships and faith communities.

Henri J. Nouwen, Catholic priest and prolific author, asserts that solitude and silence, foundational in Sabbath, are often elusive in our busy culture. In his book *The Way of the Heart*, Nouwen observes that we have appointments to keep, meetings to attend, people to see and countless messages to answer. Our noisy milieu dominates every waking hour and contributes to the conviction that if we stay consumed we are fully alive and of great importance. However, when we engage in the Sabbath disciplines of solitude, silence and prayer, we are brought face-to-face with our mortality and our relations with the Holy Great One. Nouwen reminds us, “Solitude is the place of purification and transformation, the place of the great struggle and the great encounter.”³

Before exploring how we can embody sacred rhythms in our twenty-first-century culture, let’s remember the dichotomy between active living and contemplation has challenged humankind throughout the centuries. An early example of this separation is the fourth-century Desert Fathers and Mothers who escaped the chaos of urban living by relocating in the Egyptian wilderness. Over time these ascetics sought community and formed monasteries across northern Africa and Europe. An ordered life was essential in monastic communities, and it was not long before numerous rules and administrative policies were written and distributed providing stability for monastic communities that educated, delivered health care and afforded shops for commerce. In the sixth century, Gregory, a product of asceticism and monasticism, emerges as an effective Roman administrator: he

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 13.

2. Three of Ruth Haley Barton’s books—*Invitation to Solitude and Silence* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2004), *Sacred Rhythms* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), and *Strengthen the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008)—endorse leaders claiming times of Sabbath in their busy lives.

3. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballentine, 1981), 18.

not only set forth policies and procedures for spiritual communities, but also was an exemplar known for integrating the active life and meditative life.

Pope Gregory I (540–604) or, as he was later designated, Gregory the Great was concerned with spirituality and congregational order when he wrote to sixth-century clergy in *The Pastoral Care* or, as some translate it, *The Pastoral Rule*. Gregory, no doubt, developed his standards for spiritual leaders by building on the foundational works of Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian and Benedict of Nursia.⁴ These patristic Church Fathers loved God and passionately desired to recruit and mentor clergy under their supervision. The challenge, however, for popes and bishops was securing clergy who practiced sacred rhythms of work and prayer. That was not always an easy task because many spiritual masters of that era chose the desert over the city parishes in their quest to draw near to God.

A significant motivation for early monastic dwellers was the Roman Emperor Constantine's fourth-century conversion to Christianity. As religious tolerance spread and Christianity became recognized as the state religion, thousands of men and women moved to the desert seeking solitude, silence and prayer. Scholars believe they fled, at least in part, because of an aspiration to create distance from the power and influence surrounding Christendom. By the late fourth and early fifth centuries many of these ascetics formed monastic communities yearning to revive the purity of the ancient Church. Prayer, obedience, spiritual discernment and humility were touchstones for these contemplatives.

Another consequence of Constantine's conversion, and his 313 AD Edict of Milan that legalized Christian worship, was the establishment of pastors in urban congregations who were non-ascetics. These men received ecclesiastical authority through ordination, not because they had been piously formed by desert spirituality. Their pastoral ministry was dominated by sacramental, doctrinal and administrative responsibilities. Soon after Constantine made Christianity the state religion these pastors were esteemed for disseminating the faith to large and diverse audiences. In addition to preaching and teaching, much of their time was devoted to fundraising, property management and administration. Time for prayer and meditation were often neglected in busy pastoral days.

Church historians note that popes and bishops of this era struggled over standards for congregational leadership. Benedict wrote his *Rule of Saint Benedict (Regula Benedicti)* for monastic communities and Gregory focused his *Regula* on urban parishes. The battle between *exteriority*, service in the parish, and *interiority*, the way of the heart, dominated much of their writing and subsequent strategies for the recruitment of clergy.

The ascetics and monastic community pointed to Elijah and John the Baptist as exemplars. They circulated the sayings of the fourth-century Desert *Ammas* (Mothers) and *Abbas* (Fathers), which provided instruction to a multitude of audiences. A holy and devout life was the basis for the spiritual authority of ascetics, not ordination. Monastics were practical with spiritual disciplines being fundamental. Creating space for God and intimately knowing God was superior to pastoral obligations.

However, urban communities of faith witnessed a great influx of converts during the fourth century demanding an articulate, well-trained clergy. These clergymen often cited the Apostle Paul as their biblical example of one who suffered with his church community for their salvation and principled living. Like Paul, priests were expected to exegete doctrinal truths of Scripture and hold up biblical principles as the cornerstone of their pastoral ministry to the new Christians in their congregations. These clergymen were convinced that preaching and teaching would promote an orthodox understanding of Scripture and shape Christian behavior. For the most part, they were convinced that it was first crucial to instruct people about Christ and then encourage Christians to incorporate Christological teachings into one's way of life.

Not surprisingly, during the fourth and later centuries, most popes and bishops bemoaned the dearth of qualified preachers who valued a life of the mind, clergymen possessing an understanding of scripture while at the same time practicing the ideals of asceticism. It seemed that spiritual leaders either made the journey to the monastery or to the parish, but few could integrate sacred rhythms of pastoring and praying. One of the

4. George E. Demacopoulos's dissertation at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is published as the book *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). This study of five major patristic theologians provides insights into the growth of the ascetic movement, the growth of ecclesiastical offices and the expected standards for leadership in both contexts.

highest compliments said about Pope Gregory the Great, the first pope to come from a monastic background, was that on the outside he was “all pope,” and on the inside, he was “all monk.”

For Gregory and other early theologians, spiritual leaders were those who had contemplated the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and who possessed knowledge and experience of faith on which to reflect. Augustine believed that God is not primarily known by analysis, but by “knowing” and loving Him with one’s total being. Patristic theologians, at their best, desired to blur the lines of demarcation between reflecting about God and being an obedient servant of God.

Before Gregory, before the church fathers, Jesus demonstrated quintessential sacred rhythms for disciples living down through the centuries. He was consumed with people and conflict, and yet he modeled holy rhythms of deep compassionate ministry integrated with times alone with his father God. Mark 1.29 describes Jesus arriving at Simon Peter’s house only to discover that Peter’s mother-in-law is ill. After Jesus heals her, word quickly spreads and hundreds from Capernaum gather at Simon Peter’s house. Scripture is not explicit about how long Jesus heals and ministers, but it is safe to assume that it was through the night, probably into the early morning hours. With only a few hours of sleep from his late night, Mark 1.35 says, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” Because this was no doubt Jesus’ custom, when the disciples awakened they began searching for him. Finding him in solitude and prayer they informed him, “Everyone is searching for you” (Mark 1.37).

Have you noticed this phrase continues to ring true today? Everyone is searching for you! They are searching for you on e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, cell phones and other social media. We are busy people with many demands and opportunities. Service, ministry, labor and family life require much of our energy and stamina, but in the midst of life, Jesus calls us to regularly unplug from technology, clear our calendar, claim Sabbath and personify sacred rhythms. When the disciples found Jesus in the deserted place one would think his instructions would be to slow down and join him in the quiet place, but Jesus, embodying sacred rhythms, says, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do” (Mark 1.38).

Fast-forward two thousand years. Today the active life and the reflective life remain polarities to be managed. Unfortunately, work and prayer may become an endless tug-of-war, rather than polarities held in healthy tension. One scholar, Nobel-Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr, claims that “[t]he opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”⁵ This paradox is exemplified in work and prayer. Work and prayer, two profound truths, when united, produce beneficial and lifelong habits of the hearts. Our task is to assimilate both work and prayer into the beautiful music of sacred rhythms.

Life in a postmodern world with ubiquitous change requires that we combine the ascetic life and the active life. Living out our Christian vocation in the marketplace, in families, and leisure activities demand the best of us intellectually, physically, spiritually and emotionally. We must enthusiastically embrace God’s call and the opportunities of work, ministry and compassionate living. At the same time, we should create space for God. It is essential that we avoid losing communion and connectedness *with* God in our busy life living *for* God. We must intentionally avoid becoming so busy serving God that we lose our relationship with God. Deliberately creating Sabbath time for worship, rest and delight produces mature disciples of Jesus who daily harmonize the stunning, beautiful music of sacred rhythms.

DAVID W. WRAY RETIRED FROM ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY AFTER MORE THAN FORTY YEARS OF CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY, TEACHING, AND ADMINISTERING IN HIGHER EDUCATION. FOR TWENTY YEARS HE TAUGHT GRADUATE COURSES IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION. DAVID AND HIS WIFE LIVE IN ABILENE, TEXAS, WHERE HE SERVES AS ONE OF THE SHEPHERDS FOR THE HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST (WRAYD@ACU.EDU).



5. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 62.