

“Sabbath in Spiritual Disciplines”
Romans 12:1-13
July 29, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

It seems like the ultimate paradox. All summer we've been leaning into Sabbath rest – times of wholeness, of being fully ourselves, of relaxing into the everlasting arms of God. Now, just when it's safe to let go of the pressures to perform, unfinished to-do lists, the endless tending to loved ones and work and the mountains of stuff we own ... just when it seems safe simply to *stop* ... I come at you today with another set of “shoulds” and “oughts.” This sermon is about spiritual disciplines ... and anything with the word “discipline” in it can't be good news. It sounds more like diet, or exercise ... or boot camp.

Nevertheless, I want you to give me a chance today. Give me a chance to think with you about spiritual disciplines as a means to an end, a very happy end at that. Give me a chance to explore with you how the spiritual disciplines, paradoxically, can help us find more freedom, more joy, more delight in life. Then, when I'm done, you can take them or leave them. And I promise, I won't be grading your efforts.

Let me start, though, by talking about something else altogether: not spiritual disciplines, but physical disciplines ... disciplines like music, or art, or, let's say, sports. Now, I'm no athlete, but I know this much: excellence doesn't happen overnight. It starts with some natural ability, sure, but improvement takes commitment. It takes concentration. It takes coaching. It often takes pain, and failure, and worst of all, boredom. But if you want the pay-off, you have to put in the time. There's no other way to get there. That's true for golf, it's true for running, it's true for baseball, it's true for ballet, it's true for the martial arts. It's true of all of the arts, for that matter: musicians, painters, writers all describe the same painful process of perfecting their craft.

Why do we put ourselves through all this, when instant gratification is so easy to be had? Why do we endure the rigor, when leisurely pleasures are right at our fingertips? Because, of course, it's worth it. In fact, it's so exquisitely worth it, that once you've experienced it, you can't *not* strive harder all the more.

Maybe you remember the name that University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (**chick-sent'-me-high**) used for this phenomenon of what's technically called “optimal experience.” He called it “flow”: those times

when we have felt in such mastery of the moment, we are exhilarated by it. It is, he says,

“what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind ships through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt – sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor’s veins. It is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new *thing*, a living form, takes shape in front of the astonished creator” (*Flow* (NY: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 2-3).

Csikszentmihalyi is quick to acknowledge that we do at times experience sublime joy for no apparent reason:

“a bar of haunting music may trigger it, or a wonderful view, or even less – just a spontaneous sense of well-being. But by far the overwhelming proportion of optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules – activities that require the investment of psychic energy, and that could not be done without the appropriate skills” (49).

In fact, “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in [an] effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile ... for a swimmer, it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage” (pp. 2-3). When this happens, he tells us, when our attention is utterly absorbed in the challenge, when our focus is completely caught up in the activity at hand, something extraordinary happens: “[we] become so involved in what [we] are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; [we] stop being aware of [ourselves] as separate from the actions [we] are performing”(p. 53). We get lost in the moment. We experience “flow.”

It seems obvious to say this, but if it’s true for physical and artistic disciplines, it’s just as true for the spiritual disciplines too. The art of prayer is much more satisfying when it’s done with consistency and intention and focus. The insights of Bible study are much more profound when they’re sought with devotion over the long-haul. The disciplines of hospitality or generosity or compassion are all the more gratifying when we practice them deliberately ... when we press ourselves to greater measure.

I'll be honest. I didn't discover this for myself until I was ten years into ministry. In college, as a Religious Studies major, and under the tutelage of professors at Yale Divinity School, I had learned to love the Bible. On my internship, and as an associate pastor at Fourth Church, I sat at the feet of great Biblical preachers. Early in ministry, I was privileged to join the Moveable Feast, a group of 20 pastors who rigorously press themselves to do biblical studies and sermon preparation for each other, as they strive to perfect their craft. For years I would get weak in the knees when it was my turn to present my papers to them. Then one year, something extraordinary happened. It was New Year's Eve. While my husband and sister-in-law were watching some absurdly stupid movie – they always strive for the most inane, like “Brain Donors,” for example – I was desperately trying to work on my papers for the Moveable Feast, which was coming up in less than a week. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting at my sister-in-law's kitchen table, my Greek New Testament open to Galatians 2, an English translation nearby, with three Bible commentaries and Luther's treatise on Galatians covering the surface. The hours wore on. The rest of the family went to bed; I stayed up studying and writing. Then suddenly, around 2 a.m., the light bulb went on in my head. An insight about Paul's relationship to Peter, and the immense struggle for direction in the early church, and the implications for our own divisions ... all of this surged in my mind, as if it were an explosion. I couldn't write fast enough. I was completely lost in the moment. I had experienced the spiritual equivalent of “flow.”

I share this story with you with some trepidation. The last thing I want you to go away thinking is, “Great. It takes her two decades and ten years of ministry to experience spiritual flow; why should I even bother?” My point is completely opposite. It's that *spiritual* flow is exactly like any other exercise. Mastery doesn't happen overnight. We can't expect instant rewards from our prayer life, or our Bible study, or our work of hospitality or mission or compassion. It takes time. It takes effort. It takes commitment. But it is worth it. And it is available to every one of us here.

Let me get back to a sports analogy. Very, very few people will ever make the master's circuit in golf, or play for professional teams in baseball. Very, very few people will make it as professional artists or musicians or actors. But many people, a huge number of people, will find immense satisfaction in pursuing these sports and arts. But amateurs have the same experience of flow as the pros do. It's not the perfection that creates the joy. It's the willingness to throw yourself into it,

headlong, until you lose yourself in it. Jesus said it this way: those who lose themselves will find themselves; “give and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

And St. Paul put it like this: “present yourselves as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). Give yourself completely to the spiritual discipline you choose. Go with your natural gifts, he instructs us: just like an athlete or an artist, you should play to your strength. If you are a generous person, practice generosity. If you’re a leader, become a better leader. If you’re a compassionate, work at becoming more effective in your compassion. Whatever your natural gift is, *work at it*. Not just for the sake of those who benefit from your gifts, but *for your own sake*. So that you can experience spiritual flow.

How do you know what your gift is? There are boat-loads of resources to find out. In my printed sermon and on the website, I will list some articles, books, and websites you can explore your spiritual gifts ... and I’ll give you a number of places to find out more about *perfecting* the discipline you are drawn to. Books like *Practicing Our Faith*, which explores all kinds of spiritual practices – things like hospitality ... keeping Sabbath ... discernment ... forgiveness and more.

How does one learn a practice? Let’s go back to sports for a moment. Craig Dykstra uses the analogy of baseball in his book *Growing in the Life of Faith*:

“One learns baseball by playing baseball. You have to get in on particular games when they are being played. You also have to practice over and over again the particular skills and moves involved in doing it well. And besides that, you need to watch baseball being played. You have to watch attentively – and analytically – as the play of the game takes place. (If you ever doubt the analytical capacity of some ten-year-olds, just engage a young fan in a discussion about a particularly exciting game.) Learning baseball can be greatly aided by good coaching, by apprenticeship to those who have achieved some degree of excellence in the practice, and by reading, conversation, and argumentation about the practice of baseball in all its parts, complexity, and coherence. ...

“Learning baseball requires playing the game, making the moves, developing the skills, thinking it through, and practicing over and over again in order to

do it well. Dance is similar. So is surgery. We have a lot to learn from all this for the purposes of [growth] in faith. ... As with every other practice, learning the practice of the life of Christian faith involves practice, repeated participation in the ... actions that make up those practices” (Louisville: Geneva, 1999, p. 71).

And I want to say it involves learning from each other. One of the things we’ve learned from twelve step groups is the art of coaching by peers -- those who have been down the road, who know what the practice looks like, who will never have perfected it but who keep practicing, pressing themselves over and over and over and over again – they are our best teachers. That’s one of the reasons we are emphasizing small groups this fall. We believe that it’s in small groups like that where peer coaching can take place. We learn how to practice our faith together -- through each other -- not just by trial and error but by encouraging each other ... by watching those who have done it well ... by figuring out new ways to “play” the wonderful game of growing in faith ... by rejoicing with each other when that moment of flow happens. It’s not always easy, the spiritual disciplines, no more than any other practice is. It *is* easier when we do it together. And it’s easier when we decide we’re going to do it well.

Let me close with a different metaphor: jazz. Jazz seems effortless. The improvisation, the shifting rhythms, the movement back and forth between band members – it looks and sounds so playful. But the simplicity is deceptive. Only great musicians can do jazz really well, especially improvisational jazz, because it requires you to know the music inside and out, to master your instrument, to play off each other, to be able to riff. But, oh, the pay-off! This is what the spiritual disciplines can do as well. The more we practice, the better we become. But more than a sense of achievement, the reward it this: flow. Spiritual flow. Spiritual freedom, right into the bliss of the very presence of God.

So I invite you: lose yourself in the spirit. But get there, my friends, by practice. Amen.

Resources for discovering your spiritual gifts ... and for exploring your spiritual practices:

Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). A collection exploring 12 different spiritual practices to strengthen faith.

Out of this book many additional resources have been developed:

www.practicingourfaith.org is a wonderful website that introduces Christian practices for adults, Christian practices for adolescents, , links to other sites, and offers additional resources.

Additional books in *The Practices of Faith Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass) include:

Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian, by Thomas G. Long

Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time by Dorothy C. Bass

Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice by Stephanie Paulsell

A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice by Don and Emily Saliers

For another introduction to spiritual disciplines, look into our denomination's Office of Spiritual Formation: www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm. It provides helpful definitions and examples, as well as links to other resources of interest. Among other resources, it points you to Richard Foster's many books on the life of prayer.

To choose which spiritual practice to explore further, it can be helpful to "play to your strengths," just as an athlete or artist might.

To discern your personal spiritual strengths, turn to a spiritual gifts inventory. One helpful tool is found on the website of our sister denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America: www.elca.org/evangelism/print/spiritgifts.html.

Another outstanding inventory has been developed by psychologist Martin Seligman, a leader in the Positive Psychology movement and author of *Authentic Happiness* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002). His website, www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/, includes an outstanding "signature strengths" inventory.