

## ***Reflections On Being Away:***

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***Introduction:***

I have very few insights from this summer. But the few I have, they've become important to me. I keep, oh, playing with them, reflecting on them. They buzz around in my head. I'll talk about these this morning.

Let me say, though: I'll be talking about myself more than usual today. I hope that's alright; it's probably appropriate given the circumstances. You know, generally, I like to just hang out in scripture, talk about what we see and why it matters. But today, more than any sermon I've given in the past few months :) I hope that I simply be a mirror for us, one in which we see ourselves, our habits, and the ways God carries us in the midst of them.

#### ***Thank You:***

And thank you for the summer. Thank you for it! What a gift. Let's get coffee, let's go to lunch, I'll fill you in, you can let me know how your's has been, it'll be great.

The time was full; by the end of it I had no idea how I fit work in, you know? The past week reminded me. But the summer was sweet and special in all sorts of ways.

***Restless & Discontent:***

I had hoped that something about this summer would change me. That somehow a chunk of time free from the responsibilities that come from the role I have as pastor--guiding, caring, leading, sustaining, organizing--that by not having these responsibilities for awhile, I'd end up different, a little, than who I was. Does this make sense? To step back from the habits and demands of years, ones that had soaked me so thoroughly, I'd discover, as I dried out, something about myself that was neat and new. More importantly, I'd discover, magically really--this is magical thinking--that those things about myself I don't like very much would go away when the responsibilities do.

And there are things about myself that I don't like very much. I'm not talking about sinful traits here, although I could name some: acting impatiently, cutting people with my words, presenting myself only ever in the best light. Sin is sin, you know? We work against it, discover why we are unlike Christ in the ways we are unlike Christ, and seek to find healing and change our pattern of living.

What I hoped was to discover was if some of those more persistent things about myself--aspects of my personality, traits--would somehow, in the face of rest, themselves dissolve away. And there were two things about me in particular that I found myself coming back

to again and again and again this summer. Not just coming back to, but circumstance and events drawing me to think about. Most of us know them, I think, even if we'd name them differently than I do or Carolyn would.

I'm restless and I'm discontent. I am so restless, and I am hardly ever satisfied with life as it is.

Very honestly, I entered my sabbatical aware of these things, and spent my sabbatical becoming more aware of them, and now that it's over, they are just as much a part of me as they've ever been. And the difficult truth is that they've always been a part of me.

I've never been still; I remember an awkward and embarrassing moment as a kid when my grandma tried to check me for worms, which, in my rural Southern Illinois upbringing, was the cause of not staying put when you're told. Like my father and my grandfather before me, to sit still in a chair at home is to pop up again after a few minutes and go tinker with something, clean something, break something so you can fix it later. I can't settle down. I collect a hundred things, have taken up a thousand hobbies for a day or two. I am all in, totally committed, just give me a moment, because I just discovered this really interesting thing...

And this is true all through me; my mind doesn't stop

daydreaming up some new thing, and my emotions never land for any great length of time anywhere. And guess what? Three months free of those responsibilities the pastorate brings didn't do a single little thing to end this; all it did was to shine a light on how deeply unable I am to rest my body or my mind or my heart.

And this has driven me, you know? All the Christian books I read are mystics, contemplatives, people defined, mostly, by their stillness and their meditation on this or that for some long time. The verses I've memorized are those that point toward how life with God is a calming one, a quiet one.

I read Psalm 23 and think of being led by "still waters;" I pray, more hopeful than truthful, Psalm 131, "But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content." I tell myself, over and over, as if Jesus is saying it, "27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." I hear Paul say "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands," and I think "Okay!" I love these things, these models and ideas of stillness the same way I love Carolyn, because of their otherness, how they are so unlike me, and so captivating for it.

But I did not discover, this summer, some great reservoir of stillness in my soul. I discovered only the ability to say, frankly, honestly, I cannot chill out. I am a restless person.

And tightly related to this is that I am simply discontent much of the time. I don't have time for contentment, you see. In order to be contented, you've got to stop and take a breath for a second, live awhile in your context so you can be grateful for it. I know the truth that we have all heard, that "godliness with contentment is great gain," and know that Paul can say "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

And I can respond, lamely, I simply haven't learned this, I guess. Because I'm almost never satisfied with the work of my hands, with where my time goes, with what I'm doing and not doing, with what I have or don't have. I'm almost never satisfied with my life. I vividly remember being 11, and telling my mom "I just don't feel fulfilled." And she laughed, telling me I was too young to feel fulfilled; but I didn't feel too young.

Sabbatical didn't solve my discontent. It didn't magically make me feel fulfilled and satisfied with the life I live. It did, however, provide an opportunity for me to reframe it with gratitude. I see my present

situation as a gift, even though this doesn't stop me thinking about what else I could be doing with my life, my day, my minute. And there is something in gratitude that makes every other thing bearable.

### ***Bearable:***

And I choose the word bearable purposefully. Because I think what I have come to own over the summer in a way that I never have before is that to be me is to be restless and discontent, unsatisfied and unable to calm my mind, body, or heart for any great length of time. And I could be wrong, but I don't think that these things are things I'll grow out of, or overcome, or be able to stuff and hide. This is something I will bear, carry maybe always, the same way Paul carried his same zealously before and after his conversion, just directed in different ways.

### ***Integration:***

Rather than denying these things about myself, or seeking to disable them, I think what the summer has taught me is that I need to receive them, welcome them as parts of myself that I have ignored, belittled, rejected.

This means, in practice, I have to be honest about these things, and honest about the way they influence my decisions, my preferences, and my interactions with people. There's a sort of "waking up" quality to this, an owning up to how I really live, and how the

way I live affects the judgments I make about other people, about their personhood, about especially the demands I place on Carolyn and Bo and those closest to me.

And honestly, no effort to “overcome” these things has ever worked anyway; all I’ve done is made costly errors, hurt people and myself by not seeing and owning my restlessness and discontentment. The sin in this hasn’t come because I’m who I am, but because of the way I have pretended not be who I am, acted foolishly and shortsightedly because of it, and excused bad behavior and irresponsibility.

I also don’t want to spin my restlessness and discontentedness into something positive. I could, right; it’s self-deception’s first trick to make something even slightly threatening to our egos out to be a great, good thing. I reject that.

### ***On Being Me:***

Does this make sense? These are my reflections on being away. On being me, while I’ve been away from you all.

I don’t know what, if anything, each of us might own about how we operate in the world if some great pile of responsibilities or distractions were removed from our lives. But my guess, which isn’t that wild, is that we all know, just as I knew going into June, that there

are parts of who we are, aspects of our personalities that deeply, and sometimes negatively, affect our lives and others' lives. And we haven't really owned up to these things yet.

What I'm talking about this morning is learning not to judge myself the way I have sought, with great effort, to not judge others. To say, with Paul, " I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself." I'm talking about learning to accept myself and my weirdness, welcome it, the way I have accepted and welcomed others'. We are so often good at loving our neighbors, but weak in loving ourselves; if what we're called to is loving our neighbors as ourselves, there's a tension in this.

### ***Two Things:***

I lived with two really, really important ideas this summer that helped me think about embracing who I am, owning how I live, and seeking to minimize the damages that can come of it. Neither of these things will be new to most of us.

The first is simply a focus on the present; the second, a focus on the presence of God.

### ***So - The Present:***

There is no future faithfulness. There is no future unfaithfulness. There's only this moment, the choices immediately set before us, and the chance to choose

for God instead of for Evil. There are no ends that we can accurately predict when it comes to our lives--accidents and terrors and death can come at any moment--and so the means by which we live must be faithful. Faithfulness right now, wherever right now happens to be. The New Testament speaks to our need to live in the present. We remember James saying to those who boast of their big plans "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." We've heard Jesus' tell those who dwell too much on the future and their potential needs, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." We know we're meant to "Be dressed ready for service" and to "keep [our] lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet...."

Our movies, and our books, and the stories we tell each other are stories of people living their lives and finding themselves in circumstances that demand great heroics. But part of the reason we make and read and watch these stories is simply because our own lives, by and large, aren't filled with heroics. They are basic and straightforward. This isn't to say that we don't have our own sorrows, our own demands, that some act of faithfulness--rejecting pornography, drawing close to our kids, saying no to upward mobility, or just cleaning house--might not, for us,

demand some enormous act of will. But it is to say that we train for the acts of enormous will by choosing, in this present moment, for God. The worst thing in the world is loving someone who is absent; absent from their lives generally, but with us and still at work, with us and still grieving the past, with us and not with us at the same time.

It takes great work, great courage to live in the present moment, instead of the future or the past. We are all more than our past regrets and less than our future achievements. But it is easier to connect with a version of ourselves that isn't real, isn't here, than it is to actually deal with how we live now. If we do that, though, we aren't living our own lives. Not really.

This summer I spent time with myself. Does this make sense? I wasn't simply by myself for a lot of the time; I was with myself. I was able to work on a self-awareness that even carried into the times I was with others, and choose, now and then, more than I have before, to be faithful in that moment, which was the only moment given to me.

I was with myself. Sometimes I liked me and sometimes I didn't; but that was irrelevant.

### ***Two Things: The Presence of God***

It was irrelevant because this summer I really did experience the truth we all know, which is that God is

with us, with us in these ordinary, present moments.

God is with us in the ordinariness of life, the regular. If we can't find God with us in the ordinariness of life, we'll never find God with us in life's extremity. This doesn't mean that we won't experience some great rush of God: in great sadness, great fear, great joy, great hope we'll always experience more of God, because our capacity to experience anything is extended in those moments; we feel life more deeply. But it's a hard life that's lived terror to terror, or joy to joy, or joy to terror to grief to whatever. A person can't live that way for long, I don't think, and come back to themselves, easily. There's trauma in that.

We know that God is with us. Our lives and agendas have been reordered by Jesus, called by angels, Emmanuel, "God with us." Jesus as a person makes the point. We know that Jesus didn't leave us orphaned and alone, that the Spirit is with us to guide and counsel and inspire with power. Jesus walked around and taught from what he saw around him. He looked at the lilies and saw the provision of God. He created a radical culture around the idea that people can eat together. He invited people to see God in their regular lives, in work, play, and rest. We've heard Jesus say "Look, I'm with you always, even until the end of the Age." We've read and heard Ps. 139 this morning.

“You have searched me, Lord,  
and you know me.  
2 You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
3 You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.  
4 Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely.  
5 You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.  
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.  
7 Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
10 even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

This summer, without the scaffolding of Sunday, the structure of regularly seeing you all that I hang my faith on, I had to rediscover God in the middle of the day, God in the afternoon, at breakfast, at bedtime. God in the present moment. If I wanted to live for God while I was away from you, I had to live with my eyes open, because when I'm with you--with others--it is easy to live with my eyes closed, and simply lean on the faithfulness of whoever is around me.

Most importantly during the summer, with myself, I saw that God was present with me in my restlessness. God was present with me in my discontent. God hadn't avoided those things about me the way I had. God hadn't sort of acknowledged them and then shifted to focus on how great I am in other areas. In the same way that God is present in our great hurts and wants to give healing, in our great sins and wants to give grace, God is present in the embarrassing truths about ourselves that we try to avoid. And not in judgment, or disgust, or exasperation, but in love and affection.

God, who is love, loves us. And God loves us right now, in this present moment. And God loves us right in the middle of our restlessness and discontentedness--or whatever is true of you that isn't true of me.

And I think it was only living in light of the attentive presence of God that I could handle reviewing how often, over the course of my life, my restlessness and discontent have led me instead of the Spirit of God. And it's only orienting myself to the affection of God that I could open myself to God's presence in my restlessness, in my discontent, in those things about me that I regretted.

***Conclusion:***

Only the presence of our loving God can keep us from judging ourselves, keep us from avoiding seeing ourselves as we truly are, and at the same time, free

us to say with Paul, unafraid, “ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”

I don't have any “reflections on being away.” I have “reflections on being away with God.” And whether we are absent or present from anyone else, we have to be present with God and with ourselves.

I believe, more deeply than ever, that what we need most is to be present with ourselves and with God, wherever we find ourselves. We need to receive and welcome ourselves as we are, with all our weirdness, our tics, our personality stuff that we try to ignore or excuse or justify, and we have to welcome ourselves as we are because God does. The Spirit is with us. The Son is interceding with us. God is upholding us.

My sabbatical was a gift, and I'm grateful for it. It was an opportunity to remember and live with the most basic truths: that God loves me right now. Not in some far off future, not when I am at my best and least like me, but now. And right now is the only chance I have to respond to the love of God in kind. Right now, with ourselves, in the presence of God, is the only chance any of us ever have of being faithful.

This is my report!