

Rick Snyder

The Grace that Brings Us Rest

2 Timothy 4:6-8; Heb. 4:14-16; 12:1-2

Well, are we getting more sleep now that the Olympics are over? They certainly were magnificent. The opening ceremonies were dazzling, and showed what \$300,000,000 and seven years of planning can do. The drama of Michael Phelps reaching for the wall in the 100 meter butterfly, winning by a hundredth of a second, kept us on the edge of our seats. And I, of course, loved watching the men's marathon, where the runners battled not only each other, but high humidity and 85 degree temperatures. One of the runners lamented after his two plus hour ordeal, "The pace was relentless; there wasn't any time to slow down."

That comment – "The pace was relentless; there wasn't any time to slow down" sounds like a description of life. Life is hectic, filled with details, deadlines, and responsibilities. As young parents, we juggle marriage, parenting, careers, and then chicken pox. Those of us in the sandwich generation care for aging parents, while helping our children navigate the critical decisions of early adulthood. In retirement, we deal with inevitable health concerns and perhaps lament, "Does anyone remember who I really was?" Life often seems like a headlong dash.

Scripture compares life to running a race. As his earthly life draws to a close, the Apostle Paul declares, "I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith." He tells the Corinthians, "In a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run so you receive the prize, not merely a crown of laurel, but the crown that will last forever."

The author of Hebrews tells new Christians, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses – so many examples of saints who have run the race of life well – throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

In the midst of this race of life, God commands us to take a Sabbath, to take one day a week to rest, to get off the treadmill and simply "be." The Sabbath was first offered to ancient Israel, to slaves ground down by Pharaoh's relentless demands for productivity. When Israel complained, Pharaoh told the taskmasters, "These slaves are lazy, LAZY! Make them collect their own straw. Work them harder. Beat them, if necessary."

But God gives Israel the Sabbath to say, "You are not your work. You are not valued simply when you produce. I want to give you life, real life. So balance work and rest. Take time to recreate, to re-create, allowing me to fill your heart once again with love and hope and wonder. For if you don't rest, you'll lose joy and hope, love and laughter, perspective and clarity. If you don't rest, your priorities will become skewed.

Once a high-powered businessman went on safari, but he started two days after others in his group. So he drove his porters relentlessly – prodding and pushing and badgering them for three days. The fourth day the porters refused to move. Instead they said, "We need to take a day to have our spirits catch up with our bodies." Without Sabbath, without times of rest and stillness, we can leave our spirits behind. And remember in Hebrew our "spirit" means our life and breath. Without Sabbath, we can lose what makes life worth living.

In the race of life, we need rest. But we also need a deeper kind of rest – a peace of mind, a sense of purpose, a sense that all is right with the world. We can be busy, but energized; challenged, but hopeful; stretched, but renewed.

There's a wonderful scene in the movie *Hoosiers* where Gene Hackman plays a high school coach in basketball crazy Indiana – and this is the pre-Kelvin Samson era – leading little Hickory High School towards the state title. Hickory plays game after game in noisy, cracker-box gyms, with hometown referees, against daunting odds. Hackman feels the weight of the town's expectations and the weight of his own past. He had once coached a national championship Division II college team, but was dismissed after he slugged one of his players.

One Sunday afternoon he walks through the woods with a fellow teacher. She brings up the incident. Hackman remembers, "He was the best kid I ever coached. It all happened in a flash." He slowly unburdens his soul, and begins to come to terms with that dark chapter of his life. The two share. Then Hackman leans forward and kisses her, commenting, "It's been a long time." She nods, "For me, too!" It is a moment so different from the frenzy of the games, and the guilt, confusion, turmoil and uncertainty that has come before. For a moment, there is peace and resolution.

Sabbath creates the space for this to happen. What do we really want in life? Don't we want unhurried connection with God and each other? The Sabbath commandment is about relationship. It is the fourth commandment, the linchpin between the first three commandments which deal with our relationship with God, and the last six commandments which deal with our relationships with one another. We stop; we rest; we commune so that our relationship with God and our relationships with one another will be strong.

What happens when we don't take times of Sabbath? What do we lose? We lose creativity; we lose energy; we lose wonder; we lose potential. Many species of plants need a period of dormancy in winter for them to bear fruit in the spring. Without Sabbath, we don't have deep thought, new insights, and fresh perspectives. Without Sabbath, our relationships grow stale and superficial.

But our text is speaking of an even-deeper kind of rest, the rest given as a gracious gift by God Himself. It is the rest of intimacy with God, of being right with Him, knowing that if He is for us, who can be against us. Who is Jesus? Our author describes Him as "the great high priest who has gone into heaven." A priest's role is intercession, to bring together what is separate. Christ links us with God because He is both God and human.

Think of this: Have you ever been betrayed by someone you trusted? By a former spouse, or a business associate, or by someone you thought was your friend? Jesus understands because He too was betrayed.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by temptation, by impulses you could hardly withstand, by feelings that pushed you along a dark and dangerous path? Jesus understands. After Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Luke reports, "The tempter left Him until an opportune time. So we know that Jesus faces temptation, not just this one time, but over and over and over again.

Have you ever felt that you don't get the credit you deserve, that you're the loyal and faithful one, who somehow is denied recognition for the effort you put forth. Jesus understands. He eloquently tells of the eldest brother in the parable of the prodigal

son. The younger son goes off and squanders all he has, wasting his inheritance in a reckless spending spree. Then he limps home, and is greeted by his father who proceeds to throw a great party. No wonder the eldest son is miffed. But his Father reminds him, “Everything I have is yours.”

Or what really frightens you? Is it the fear of growing infirm and becoming a burden on loved ones? Is it the fear of starting at a big university, facing so much that is new, not to mention unknown academic challenges? Is it a fear of commitment? You’ve fallen in love, but your parent’s marriage didn’t work out, so is marriage the right thing? Or perhaps you’re waiting for the results of medical tests? Jesus understands fear. He knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion in such anguish that drops of blood appeared on his forehead. But steeling himself for the task ahead, He prayed, “Yet not my will, but thy will be done.”

I believe that each of us has not only an intellectual theology – those doctrines and convictions that we confess, but also an emotional theology. If we were raised in an atmosphere that was harsh and legalistic, in a church home that was rigid and demanding, our temptation is to view God in these terms – as harsh and demanding. If we were raised in an atmosphere of grace and acceptance, of love and nurture, we are much more likely to view God in those terms. Faith is essentially trust, and trust is developed when we are children, when we learn that adults are trustworthy, consistent, loving and dependable. Parents help prepare the soil for faith by modeling the kind of God we profess.

So our author reminds us, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who was in every way tempted as we are, yet did not sin.” Who is God? God is a compassionate God, who does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. God is a merciful God, so unlike the Stoic gods who were seen to be high and lofty, above the struggles of life, or the God of the Pharisees, who demanded exacting obedience to 613 commandments, or the God of the church in Garrison Kieler’s Lake Wobegon, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.

Christ, being fully human, understands our struggles, weaknesses and fears. And being God, He bears our sins in His own body on the cross. He is the mediator, the path to God, the One who connects us with our Heavenly Father.

There is a legend that when George Washington was President, he was out horseback riding with friends. They came to a river, and met a man waiting to ford the river. The man looked expectantly at the riders hoping that one of them would offer a ride. Finally he asked Washington, and Washington told him to climb on to his horse. After they had crossed, someone asked, “Why did you ask the President?” The man replied, “I didn’t know he was the President. All I knew is that the rest of you had faces that said, “No.” He had a face that said, “Yes.” . . . In Jesus Christ, we see a face that says, “Yes.”

We’ve been preaching a series of sermons on “grace,” on God’s free, unmerited love. I love the way Frederick Beuchner describes “grace,”

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

An eccentricity of the Christian faith is that we are saved by grace. There's nothing **you** have to do. There's nothing you **have** to do. There's nothing you have to **do**.

The grace of God means something like this. Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party isn't complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you that I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

And it is in receiving God's grace that we find the deepest rest of all. Jesus put it this way, "Come unto me all you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Amid all the frenzy, stress, and perplexities of life, know on the deepest level that you are loved and accepted. So be at rest!