

*ALL WORK AND NO PLAY*

Matthew 11:28-29

September 4, 2016 (Labor Day Weekend)

Patrick Green & Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

*from Parker Palmer's "Let Your Life Speak"*  
*Frederick Buechner defines vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."*

*from Handel's Messiah*

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

*(Matthew 11: 28-29)*

Patrick's message

Tim asked me to talk about my answer to the question "what did you do this summer?"

First, spoiler alert, it did not start as we had planned.

**Roller coaster** of the horrific diagnosis and all the worry and stress that goes with waiting, then the surgery, but thanks to all of you, **Lee Gresko, Marv Qvamme and Brian Ross**, we did not face that part alone. For a little bit there it looked like the plans for Vashon might not happen at all, but given how well the surgery went, convalescing in the beautiful and healing spot that is Camp Burton turned out to be a good option. I moved our things over and set up house so that when Tim came everything would be set up. He got there the same day that the staff for Camp Goodtimes, the camp for kids, survivors and siblings, effected by cancer.

While Tim rested I played so hard and had a life changing summer.

In the craft cabin while hands are busy hearts are opened and some amazing stuff happens.

At Family camp when we were doing a **craft about prayer** one of the campers wanted to pray for the ability to do real magic, like Harry Potter. So we talked about that... we agreed, in principle that only God can make something out of nothing, and we decided that the real magic in Harry Potter was the ability to choose his friends wisely, and to choose to do the right thing, even when it was difficult. After that we made 13 wands, two sorcerer's stones, two flying broomsticks, a basilisk tooth necklace and 1 invisibility cloak. (Did you know you can see through a mylar emergency blanket if you hold it real close?)

Camp Goodtimes is a no cost camp for kids ages 7 to 17 affected by cancer, it is unique because it is for survivors as well as siblings. The whole thing is a **vacation from Cancer**, taking meds, getting injections or IV's is just something that happens, like swimming, archery, whipped cream fights and rides in a golf cart that looks like a firetruck. But one evening the camp splits into two groups, the **survivors and the siblings**, and then again by age group. I was asked to facilitate the youngest survivors. We read a story about Henry the hedgehog, he's sick and the medicine makes his fur and quills fall out. The kids identified. One said that when she lost her hair she made a list of all the reasons it was good not to have hair, faster shower, no brushing and when you throw up nobody has to hold your hair back...

Their **matter-of-fact way** of talking about things that they should never know about was amazing. They asked what kind of cancer I had, I tried to redirect because I didn't think it should be about me but they asked again. I said that I had the kind of cancer that is very scary and made my parents worry, I had the kind where the doctors gave me medicine that made me feel worse before I got better and that made my hair fall out. They all said "that's the kind I had!"

Rachel Platten's fight song, and Frozen's let it go will never be the same for me.

But the camps that really put my life on notice were our New Horizons Camp and its sister Camp Park View, both camps for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. While I had done crafts for the younger campers of New Horizons this was my first time working with the older campers. I loved working with these amazing men and women. Most of them live in group homes, some outlived their families some were abandoned by family and a few are being cared for by siblings. For many reasons, camp is a really special time for them and I really enjoyed any opportunity to make it more special. Whatever gifts I have working with kids seems to be transferable skills to work with this population and I'm hooked. Something about their honesty and caring is infectious and they are so giving. I had to up my game in the crafts cabin because everybody wants to make gifts for their family, friends and caregivers.

But in the end, it's all about camp being an exceptional place for them. One of the campers told me that he loves camp because people "out there" can be mean and sometimes make fun of him. I assured him it was because they just didn't know him the way we did and that's a shame because everybody should know someone as awesome as he is. I asked him why he thought camp was different, he said it's because mean people don't go to camp.

It's not like I'm looking back at the summer realizing I had an amazing time, I was aware of it every day, I knew while it was happening. It felt like being the best me I could be. It felt like playing, but real work got done by and for people that really needed it. I got to spend a summer in that place where my deep gladness met the world's deep need. But I wasn't alone.

Almost every group at camp has a staff debrief afterward, Camp Goodtimes, Camp Park View, New Horizons all have a sharing circle.

And they talk and cry and share about how this session of camp changed them. I got to see them all and witness what an amazing place Camp Burton is. It is ours, created by our Baptist predecessors as a place for God to do special things. It is owned by the Washington Baptist Convention, and that means us. I hope you get to see it for yourselves, it is a beautiful place and God is still doing very special things there.

### Tim's message

I want to thank all of you – and, in particular, Ned, Patricia, David, Darren, Judie and the Personnel Commission – for making this promise in Matthew 11 a reality for me. As of August 23<sup>rd</sup> this year, I have been ordained for 35 years and you gave me the first opportunity in all those years for a sustained time of rest. “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest.” And so you did. I am profoundly grateful for all of you and for this gift.

Now I do feel a little pressure this morning.

While I was on sabbatical I was re-reading the biography of the Rev. Dr. Paul Nagano, one of our great American Baptist pastor-teacher-theologians. He says he left for his sabbatical a conservative, exclusive, absolutist and returned home a liberal, inclusive, process theologian.

Our own Rod Romney says he left for his sabbatical a worn-out social activist and returned home a mystic.

The rumors about one of my rather odd theology professors in graduate school was that he left one year for his sabbatical a button-downed, strait-laced academician and returned a hippie with flowing hair and baggy pants and earrings.

All these folks that I respect and admire seem to have gone off on their sabbatical and returned transformed.

Somehow I don't think leaving for sabbatical with two kidneys and coming home with one is the dramatic transformation any of us had in mind.

So I have spent some time trying to figure out what my transformation might be. And what I have come to is something more like a realization.

I know how to work. In fact, it became clear to me on this sabbatical that there is a very tight congruence between what I do as a pastor and who I am. Ministry is for me, as Buechner says, a "vocation" which means that it is the place where "my deep gladness" – my deep joy – meets some of the world's deep need.

So I know something about work. And I know something about rest – except I discovered that if rest means not doing what I do, I am not sure who I am. Maybe the fit is a little too tight. When Patrick would ask how I was doing, I kept saying that I felt lost. Who was I if I wasn't doing this thing I was called to do?

And then it hit me. I know about work. And I know something about rest. What I don't know very much about is play.

I have been haunted by that old proverb: "All work and no play makes Jack – or Jill – a dull boy or girl."

Apparently that proverb has been around in some published form since 1659. That's a lot of time to be making its rounds in our human consciousness.

Do you think it's true? Do you think that all work and no play will make us dull?

So here is the realization I have to report from my sabbatical. The opposite of work is not rest. Rest is important. Rest is necessary. But

the opposite of work is not rest. It is play. And I have a lot to learn about play.

It is reported that there was a computer virus in the late 1980s that was called the “Sunday” virus. All of a sudden, a message would appear on your computer screen that read: “Today is Sunday! Why do you work so hard? All work and no play make you a dull! Come on! Let’s go out and have some fun!” And then the virus would methodically delete all the files that were currently running on your computer.

I need that virus. I know about work. And I know something about rest. But I still have a lot to learn about play.

Now I know that, as adults, we have been taught to be suspicious of play. Bad things can happen when we get “played” by someone. None of us probably want to find ourselves in a situation where we “play” the fool. Someone who is intentionally messing with you might excuse that behavior by saying: “Chill out; I’m just playing with you.”

One of my great joys is to watch other people “play” sports and to make those incredible “plays” that demonstrate the amazing capacity of the human body. But I realize that the sport I am watching isn’t just a game. It’s a business that has lives and those human bodies in its hands.

Play does have a dark side. I know that life is not a game and people are not toys.

In fact, in the 1820s an Irish novelist expanded this old proverb to say:  
*All work and not play makes Jack a dull boy,  
All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.*

That’s true. But even this correction maintains that the consequence of all work and no play can be that one becomes dull.

And I don't think it's just about dull as in boring – although sometimes I think my somewhat stunted ability to play or to be playful can make my work much less interesting.

I think it's more than that. All work and no play can dull us. Like a tool that gets used too much and becomes dark and less sharp and less useful.

What I realized in this great gift of sabbatical was that I know work. And I know something about rest. But I still have a lot to learn about play.

Fortunately, this summer I was in the right place. I was in the company of Patrick and I was surrounded by children and young people of all kinds at Camp Burton all of whom knew something about play.

I experienced most of it at a distance but I can tell you that there were silly songs and crazy games. There was a giant tire swing and games of chase and carnivals with a giant foam pool and whipped cream fights. There were jokes and laughter and the sounds of pure joy all around me.

It might have been overwhelming from time to time but I can assure you that it was never dull.

It occurred to me, after the fog of surgery wore off, that play is about experiencing the sheer joy of being alive. It's being lost in the wonder of the world around us. I started noticing how the light *played* on the leaves of the trees and on the waves of the water and I realized that we aren't alone in play. The world is playing all around us. Marilyn Gustin says “we can revel in God in the midst of our play.”

The light dancing on the leaves or the water is a reminder that God can be found in the middle of our own playfulness – in the joy of just being alive celebrating the great gifts of the world around us. Life isn't just about what we can accomplish – or think we *should* accomplish.

It's also about play. It's about being immersed in the joy of celebrating the gifts all around us.

Now in the middle of all this play, I was supposed to be working on my doctoral project. And I was trying to be very serious about it all. My theological work was not some kind of "child's play." It was to be deep and profound and thought-provoking.

But what is "child's play" if it's not learning how to navigate the world through play? Along the way I realized that the most enjoyable part of writing was what I was learning by "playing with ideas." In fact, one of the postmodern philosophers I was reading surprised me by saying exactly that - it is this kind of imaginative play that offers up new ways of understanding ourselves and the world.

Modernity got stuck in the work of *thinking* about everything. Postmodernity *plays* with things not because it takes the world less seriously but because it recognizes that the greatest human developments have happened when people are free to imagine and to play with ideas together.

Play is allowing ourselves to believe that the world is not dependent on our thinking and our productivity alone. It trusts that great wisdom can emerge out of our deepest joy.

There is a picture this week that really is worth a thousand words about play. Maybe you saw it. It appeared in the Seattle Times on Monday accompanying an article announcing the death, and telling some of the story, of Charles Z. Smith. The picture is perfect. Here is this great man – this Washington State Supreme Court Justice and one-time president of our denomination, a local and national leader -- someone who made a huge impact on the world in the cause of justice and peace and here he is *playing* the piano. I didn't even know that Judge Smith knew how to play the piano but I do know there is playing the piano for a performance and there is *playing* the piano for the sheer joy of it.

So there is Charles, at the keyboard, looking over his shoulder with a smile on his face, and behind him is his granddaughter, Lani, smiling, mouth wide open and I just have to imagine that she is singing at the top of her lungs. It's a beautiful picture and an inspiring one.

Justice Smith did a lot of work. And given all the things he accomplished I'm not sure how much time he had for rest. But that picture tells me that he also knew how to play.

I know that we have serious work to do in our lives and in our life together this year. We know something about that work. I trust we will give each other the gift of rest along the way. But most of all, I hope we make the time to play – to play with ideas, to enjoy the world around us, and to just get lost in the gift of one another.

I don't have a very dramatic story to tell about my sabbatical. I did not leave a conservative and come home a liberal. I did not leave as a social activist and come home a mystic. I did not leave a button-downed teacher and come home a hippie. I came home with a simple realization that all work and no play can dull the beauty and the brilliance of the world and of our lives. And if there is some transformation yet to come, it may well come through some moment when I have abandoned myself in play.

So this week, this year, if you hear that voice – or if a message pops up on your computer screen that says "It's Sunday. Why are you working so hard? All work and no play can make you dull!" well, today, it's Sunday and if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts. Come out and play.

#### NOTES

Paul Nagano, *Transformed by Love* (Council for Pacific Asian Theology, 2009), pp.55-57. Rod Romney, *Wilderness Spirituality* (Element Books, 1999), pp. 198-199. Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), p.16. See the article about Charles Z. Smith in the *Seattle Times* August 29, 2016.