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“Sabbath as Resistance to Multi-Tasking”

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Amos 8:4-8

Have you ever seen a young person studying, or an adult doing work, with papers strewn all about, while watching TV, listening to music, and checking their phone? Have you ever found yourself at your computer, with your email open, some social media account, taking calls on your landline, while answering messages on your cell, and perhaps doing a little online-shopping in the background? Have you ever seen a couple out on a date, dressed up, and in a beautiful restaurant, sitting at a corner table - and they are both staring at their smartphones? It's a phenomenon, so common, its got it's own name - phubbing. It's a combination of the words - “phone + snubbing = phubbing.” And it's a problem!

While we might bemoan the way youth culture and technology have changed our old ways of doing things... this is nothing new - this “doing more than one thing at the same time.” It's called multitasking. The word “multitasking” came on the scene in 1965, in reference to using a single computer to simultaneously carry out two or more jobs. As computers became more ubiquitous, the idea of multitasking drifted into the realm of human affairs: we answer emails during meetings, we scan Twitter while streaming a movie, we play video games while we are chatting with friends. Being a multitasker is a point of pride for many, implying mental agility and exemplary productivity.

The problem is that multitasking, at least for humans, doesn't work. “We know from the psychology literature that multitasking is bad for you,” says Gal Zauberman, a professor of marketing at Yale School of Management. Research shows that we can't really do two things at once. We're actually switching our attention back and forth between the two tasks—and we perform worse at both.¹

Our brains, as amazing and complex as they are, don't have enough RAM to do more than one thing at once - if they require higher processing. Yes, our brains and bodies do more than one thing at once all the time. Our brain stem controls our breathing, circulation, digestion.... *Some of us can even walk and chew gum at the same time!* But we're not well-designed for complex multi-tasking. Does that stop us? *Not at all!*

¹Gal Zauberman, accessed 4/5/2019

<https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/the-illusion-of-multitasking-improves-performance-on-simple-tasks>

In a different study, a different group of researchers at Stanford, “compared groups of people based on their tendency to multitask and their belief that it helps their performance. They found that heavy multitaskers—those who multitask a lot and feel that it boosts their performance—were actually *worse* at multitasking than those who like to do a single thing at a time. The frequent multitaskers performed worse because they had more trouble organizing their thoughts and filtering out irrelevant information, and they were *slower* at switching from one task to another.”²

Of course, the ancients didn’t have the challenges of living such a technology saturated world. They didn’t have the temptations of uninterrupted and endless streams of content. And yet, the prophet Amos, found they had a similar temptation towards multi-tasking.

From our text from Amos, we read that while the people of Israel were keeping the outward form of Sabbath, and technically observing Sabbath “rest” every seventh day, and during special festivals... instead of keeping the sabbath with their whole hearts - they spent that time - multitasking - anxiously waiting for the return to commerce, and, in fact, scheming of ways to acquire a little bit more. They spent their sabbath days thinking of how they might cut corners, gain every advantage, and, even cheat their neighbors. They kept the letter of the law, yet ignored the spirit of the law.

For this, the prophet has harsh words - saying that YHWH sees - and condemns that behavior. The form of God’s lament is that of a divorce proceeding, of an aggrieved spouse, saying, “I will never forget any of their deeds.” For, you see, it’s not just the distraction - it’s the total disregard for the covenant relationship - which so angered God. And it is not just anger, but hurt that is being expressed. The first commandment was a call to exclusivity - to God being their singular allegiance - and instead their attention is elsewhere on the Sabbath - they had their minds on profit.

In Brueggemann’s book, “*Sabbath as Resistance*” - he opens and closes this chapter with a story about “Mr. G and his family.” They ran a local grocery store. And every Sunday, he and his family attended Brueggemann’s father’s church - an

²Travis Bradberry, accessed 4/5/2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2014/10/08/multitasking-damages-your-brain-and-career-new-studies-suggest/#770bbfd456ee>

Evangelical and Reformed church. And every Sunday - the family sat in their pew, and watched the clock, and the last five minutes of the sermon - preached by Walter's father - the family got up - and walked ceremoniously down the long center aisle to the back of the church. Why? Because the other church in town - the Missouri Synod Lutheran church, ended a half-hour earlier, and he wanted to open up the grocery store in time to receive the "Lutheran trade" and "Lutheran money." Brueggemann notes - he was worshipping, even as he kept an eye on the clock for the sake of trade and profit.³

There is one caveat - in today's culture, there are individuals who don't have the privilege of not-working on Sundays. There are people whose employment requires them to work while others of us can afford to keep Sabbath. This is not at all intended as a criticism of them. If anything, it's an appeal that they deserve Sabbath rest, too, and we as the Church should think of ways to provide worship opportunities on days and at times when they can participate. I understand those who have to leave early or arrive late from jobs on Sunday. The shift-workers, and service employees, doctors and nurses, who don't get a consistent weekend. They have my prayers, support and understanding. But I'll tell you what I still don't understand...

There were some members of a previous congregation who I remember getting up and leaving the worship early (never during the sermon) because they had season tickets for the Cleveland Browns, who, until recently - couldn't win a game to save their lives. *I never understood that!* For many of us, the temptation to sabbath-short-cutting is not so profit focused, as it is on our own desire for distraction, entertainment, and consumption.

It makes me think of the times when I've been home, and I begin checking my phone, checking the news, or social media, or messages or email from work, and how, one day, my oldest son has said, "*Dad, I think you've had enough screen time for today!*" Ouch! That one stings. Every time.

In contrast to the culture of multi-tasking, Sabbath is an invitation to practice simplicity - to cultivate the ability to give our singular focus to one thing, or one person. When it is not done in a draconian way, this practice, this invitation to simplicity, is a great gift. One of the things I love about Camp Adams - our UCC camp - is that when you arrive at camp, the counselors collect students' phones -

³ P. 59, Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No in the Culture of Now*.

and give them back at certain times, but it's so far away from civilization, that most phones don't get great reception anyway. You can call in and out on the landline, if you need, but cell phones are almost useless - except as a distraction from the natural beauty and time with friends. Today, I hear more and more of people taking a "technology fast," and those of means sometimes going on extended retreats and vacations, going "off the grid," to get a physical and digital "detox." We need this Sabbath rest for our spirits, too. It's good to unplug sometimes.

I believe God has given us Sabbath to remind us we don't have to do it all. Indeed, we can't do it all. And, no one asks us to do it all. It would be unhealthy if we did. Sabbath reminds us to say, "ENOUGH!" I am enough! I have enough! *God is enough!*

In the coming week, my challenge to all of us is to notice when we find ourselves tempted towards multi-tasking. Notice what is going on in the world around inside us. What is motivating us to multi-task - Is it restlessness, boredom, anxiety, a need to fill some void... Just observe what's going on inside your head and heart in that moment. Then notice what is going on *around you* when you might be multi-tasking - what are you missing out on - in real life? Our loved ones, our neighbor... the Holy?

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters." He was speaking about God and money, yet it's true in many other ways. We simply can't serve two masters - for diverted attention is diminished attention. And God wants all of us - as a lover wants all of us. Our minds, our hearts, our lives, just as we crave the full and undivided attention of each other. God has given us a way to make space for each... if we will only receive it, and keep the Sabbath wholly.

May Spirit grant us grace, and help us to offer our best to one another, and in worship to the Living God.