

So, in case anyone was wondering, that isn't a typo in the sermon title. We didn't accidentally switch the sermon out for a 4th graders first assignment of the school year, although I did choose it because school is starting back for most of our kids in just a few days. (Sorry for the reminder, kids, but it's true.) This time of year is one of big transitions and adjustments, especially if you or someone in your house is heading back to school.

And even though no one in my house is going back to school, my ministry follows the school year for the most part, so it's a time of adjustment for me as well. I'm gearing up for our Youth Group kick-off in 2 weeks, planning Sunday School lessons, and preparing to jump back into the consistency of routine that the school year provides.

When I started to make that switch in my mind, I found myself reflecting back on the events of the summer. Even though things seem quieter around the church and the weekly routine doesn't exist in the same way for a lot of our ministry staff, there was a lot that happened in just 10 short weeks. And I know that you as people in our community and congregation didn't see me around as much as I am during the school year. I've been gone for 4 of the last 8 Sundays, which I know makes some people nervous.

Our congregation is in a time of transition, and we have been for well over a year now. And I know that you look to the ministry staff and the pastors for a sense of stability. And so when one of your pastors is gone for almost half the summer, it can feel unnerving. So in an effort to be more transparent, and to invite you to share in the amazing things that I was lucky enough to do this summer, I want to tell you about what I've been up to.

The first week that I was gone was for our High school mission trip to Reach in Greenville, SC. Because of the length of the drive, we had to leave before church even started on June 24th in order to make it down in time to register and get settled. Randy Master and I took 7 amazing youth on this trip, 4 of whom had never been to Reach before.

The work that we were all able to do together and on our separate worksites was truly a blessing, not only to the neighbors whose homes we worked on, but for those of us who were doing the work. The dedication and commitment that our youth and the others that were there showed was impressive and encouraging.

With the schedules of teenagers these days, it's hard to find a day where you can choose what to do, let alone a whole week. They work so hard during the school year and have so many pressures put on them, and then you add construction projects in 90+ degree heat and sleeping on an air mattress for 7 days and it's astonishing to think why any of them come in the first place.

But if you ask anyone, youth or adult, who has attended a Reach Mission Trip before, they can tell you that it is an experience unlike any other. Yes it's hard and tiring and you never thought you could sweat that much in your life, but what we do on those trips is crucial.

The scripture passage from Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time a time to break down and a time to build up. During that week, we helped others build up when they couldn't do it themselves, and we were built up, too, through the love and kindness of strangers who, by the end of the week, were dear friends.

One week after I got back from Reach, I took a week of Con Ed time, or Continuing Education. All of the pastors and program staff at our church have time off apart from vacation written into our contracts so that we can attend conferences, go on trips, or explore different areas of interest that help us continually grow in our ministries.

In the past, I have gone to the Annual Conference of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators, the Program Connection and Annual conferences of the Presbyterian Church Camp and Conference Association, Youth Ministry Forums at Princeton Seminary, and a week of intensive sermon and lesson planning with other pastors.

What I used my Con Ed time for this year was to attend the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina. As many of you may know, I love art, painting, crocheting, cross-stitch and many other forms of crafts and artistic expression. I believe that there is a very strong connection between the creativity that God has put in each one of us and our spirituality. Finding and exploring creative outlets is a way that I express myself, but also that brings excitement, joy, and calm to my life. And going to the Folk School for a week was a way to do that intensively.

I was able to attend for free as a part of a Lilly Grant that my friend, Rev. Beth Garrod-Logsdon, received for her sabbatical from Wilmore Presbyterian Church. She used her sabbatical time to find different ways to reignite her creative spirit which also helped her ministry and calling to be reignited. It is crucial for pastors to find ways to learn, expand, and develop our sense of call and ministry focus over the years so that we don't become stagnant in what we do.

The class that Beth and I took was on the art of Marquetry, or painting with wood. The only experience that I had in woodworking prior to that week was carving up a downed tree with a chainsaw, so what we were learning was slightly more delicate and precise.

You begin with a design or picture and then pick out different types of wood veneers for different parts of the picture. Then you go through a painstaking process of cutting out each shape in the picture and gluing it into the background wood. It was very challenging, but as the week went on, I became more and more confident with the work that I was doing, and I was able to concentrate more on the artistic expression that was taking place than on the measurements and precise cuts.

So why was this something that I used Con Ed time for? Because of the different things that it awoke within me, passions that I often let slip away and replace with stressing over a perfectly written sermon or a youth event that goes off without a hitch. I am a creative person because I was made in the image of a Creative God, and I need to make sure that I don't lose sight of that when I throw myself into the incredible ministries that I have been called to be a part of here at Second Pres.

A large part of understanding our passage from Ecclesiastes is to recognize that there are times in life where things are going to happen that are difficult and trying, and there are times where things are going to be joyous and full of celebration.

There are going to be times of renewal and times where we have to prune away things that are no longer helpful. We have been given the incredible gift of life by God, the Creator of the Universe, and we need to learn how to embrace and appreciate all the different aspects of that life.

God's gift to us in living is that there is the possibility of joy and human happiness. There are possibilities everywhere, all we have to do is engage with them. There are opportunities for activity, action, reflection, and enrichment all around us. Not everything is available to everyone, but there is no reason that anyone should ever utter the words "I'm bored" or "There isn't anything that makes me happy".

I admit I have said both of these things on more than one occasion, but I have come to realize that even if I'm feeling down or depressed, or if it seems that my life is boring on occasion, there are actions I can take to change that situation.

Now, I would never go so far as to say that depression is something that can just be fixed instantly with a "can do" attitude, but I have found that something as simple as talking to another person about what I'm facing helps me start down the path to feeling better, even if that path is long and winding.

Which brings me to my actual time of vacation this summer. I hadn't taken any vacation time this year until the end of July, and I decided to take a full two weeks off. I have never taken 2 straight weeks of vacation in my life, and it was incredible!

Around day 9 I had the thought of "This is awesome! I get to sleep in every day if I want, read books and watch movies, work on my cross-stitch and play board games in the evenings. What would happen if I just didn't go back to work?" Now, obviously, I did come back, but I was ready to come back because of a shift that happened during the second week of my trip.

The first week I spent with my mom in Spokane Washington, and we did some really cool things together like going to a painting class and taking an afternoon cruise on Lake Coeur D'Alene in Idaho. And when I was there was when I was thinking, "Wouldn't this be cool if I could just live like this every day?"

But during my second week I went to Philadelphia and Princeton to visit two of my best friends, Sam and Len, and their husbands, both of whom are named Andrew and both of whom are in the final stages of their PhD programs at Penn and Princeton Seminary.

I went to seminary with all four of them, and over the course of the week, I was able to engage in conversations about faith, theology, the church, and ministry in ways that I almost never get to do anymore. And I believe that I was able to do that so well because I was already relaxed from my first week of vacation. It took me almost 9 days to truly get to a point where I wasn't always thinking about ministry stuff or what needed to be planned or what emails I hadn't yet returned.

And until they happened, I didn't even realize how much I missed having those conversations with my friends and fellow pastors. Tom and David and I have those conversations, and I also have them with other pastoral colleagues in the area, but it's always as part of a meeting or a planning session or as a way to figure out the best program for a need at church.

The conversations I was able to have during my last week of vacation came purely from a place of inquiry and fascination, discussing theology and the church because it is a great passion we share, not in order to figure out the best format for a Bible Study.

I have come to realize that those conversations are crucial, not only for my own personal well-being, but for my ministry and the work I do here. I have to make sure that I am taking care of my own personal needs so that I can be the best pastor and teacher and preacher that I can be.

We each have to find that balance in our own lives, to figure out the times to tear rather than to sew, to laugh rather than weep, to speak out rather than keep silent.

I have times where I need to balance my church credit card statement and make sure that I have all the forms for youth going on a trip. There are times where I need to make sure I put out sign-ups for a 20's and 30's event so that we can have enough food. There are times where I have to tidy up the mess that seems to appear overnight in the youth room.

And there are times where those things have to be set aside and priority has to be given to the discussion with the kid who is being left out and teased at school, or to sit with the family in the hospital waiting for someone to come out of surgery, or to celebrate with a couple who just got engaged, or even to sit down and relax and read a favorite book.

So what is it that I did on my summer vacation? I learned the art of balance, of working hard and sweating all day when necessary, of letting go of stress and learning a new hobby and art form, of engaging with friends and family to discuss what we are passionate about and what we find interesting.

There is a time and a season for everything, we just have to allow ourselves to seek out and find that balance in the life that God has given to each of us. That is when we can find true contentment and peace.