

Lessons from Sabbatical

I am back from two months of time off in sabbatical. What does one even do with two months of time like that? One grows their hair out is what one does. Seriously though, Megan and I have been getting questions about what we did so it's great to be able to talk about that a little bit. Naturally, travel was part of our time. We visited Megan's family early on, especially because her brother is heading to Germany for two years so it was good to see him. We spent a little under a week on the Washington coast which was surprisingly delightful, given the weather. The highlight of our travels had to be Disneyland though. Yes, we saved up our Alaska points and got the Costco Disney package, and our 4-year-old son Reed got his first exposure to Disney. It was a whirlwind, and definitely a lot of fun despite the torrential rains. I walked 18 miles in two days. Reed hugged Donald Duck. And Mickey. And Goofy. We found out that he loves roller coasters. It was a lot of fun.

But most of our time off these last two months have been spent at home. We nested and we rested. We did a little bit of work around the home, for sure. The most significant project we took on around our home was to create a series of pathways in the property behind our home. Our home sits above a ravine, and our property actually goes down into the ravine in the woods. When we first bought the house we were told there was a creek down there, but we hadn't seen it yet. And we really wanted to! So we made it our goal to blaze a trail down to the creek during our sabbatical. And it was this particular project that I think defined our sabbatical.

By the way, I feel like I need to talk about what a sabbatical is and where it comes from. The concept is rooted in the commands of the Old Testament, particularly the Sabbath. You may be aware that God commanded the people of Israel to rest on the seventh day; it's in the 10 Commandments actually! But taking a break every seven days wasn't the extent of God's Sabbath decrees, he also commanded the Israelites to let their land lie fallow every seven years. There's really a lot to unpack about Sabbath, really too much right now. Themes of building trust and faith, of God's provision, grace, freedom from slavery. So much. But in particular, I want to point out that when God commanded the Israelites to let their fields just sit for a whole year, every seven years, he was concerned with fruitfulness. We know that if you just farm and farm and farm on one piece of land eventually all of the nutrients will get sucked out of the ground. It needs a break, or the land will no longer be fruitful. Well, human beings are no different, hence the concept of a sabbatical; a chance to let our mental and emotional "fields" so to speak, lie fallow, so that we can be fruitful.

And this is why this project to blaze trails on our property really defined our sabbatical because it illustrated for us so powerfully how God was working in our lives, and how he works in all our lives actually. We learned this about God: God is the Master Gardener. That's not a way we use to

describe God very often, there are other metaphors we use more frequently, like shepherd, or rock. But the Bible also describes God as a gardener as well.

Turn with me to John 15, we'll use this passage to illustrate this aspect of God's character. (vs.1-4

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

In this part of the Gospel of John Jesus is giving his final instructions to the disciples. And he is using this metaphor of the vine and the branches that is borrowed from the Old Testament. There are a number of passages, particularly in Isaiah, where God describes Jerusalem as a vineyard and himself as the vineyard tender. There, the point is that Israel was producing wild grapes, and the metaphor illustrated God's judgement. Jesus borrows from that Old Testament context to create new meaning and significance. Jesus is the vine now, not Israel. What he is telling his disciples is that Jesus is creating a new community of people that are centered around himself. If he is the vine, then they are the branches, plugged into him and his life. And they are to be fruitful branches. What is the fruit he intends? Well elsewhere in Scripture Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Let me stop for a moment. Aren't those things you desire? To love and be loved. To have real joy. Peace, gentleness, instead of turmoil and business. The fruit of God's presence are actually the things our souls long for the most. We yearn for these things. And Jesus tells us that he intends to make a community of people who live with and in him, and because of that they bear his fruit, they look and act like him. Loving, joyful, peaceful, and so on.

But here's what's surprising about this. Read vs. 2 again. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Did you see that? God is a gardener. Not only does he throw away the dead branches, but when he wants more fruit he prunes. What? Now, if you're not a gardener that may seem counter-intuitive. To get more, you take away?

But it's absolutely true. We had an apple tree at our former home, and the first time we saw the tree bear fruit it made these itty bitty tart green apples, tons of them. And we thought that was the kind of apples it made. Then we pruned it. We absolutely murdered it. But that next fall, it made beautiful, full, delicious, red apples. To be fruitful, it needed a pruning. We could have watered it forever, we could have put fertilizer all around that tree, but it would never have produced more and better fruit until we cut a ton of branches off of it.

Now this is the surprising thing we learn about God. As I mentioned, we actually yearn for more fruit. We yearn for love, for joy, for peace. But the way we get those things is not by more Disneyland, it's not more water, more fertilizer, it's the hard work of pruning. God is the Master Gardener of our souls.

As I mentioned, we knew we had this creek below our home. We wanted to find it, because what if it was pretty? What if this could be a place to find peace, to rest and enjoy creation? So you can see why this project was so illustrative of what God was doing, beginning with this realization: winter is the best time to prune. We simply could not have begun to have blazed a trail in the summer. Too much undergrowth, too much to hack away, we couldn't have even seen where we needed to go. Winter stripped everything away, so that we could begin the work of pruning back to move forward.

Going into sabbatical was surprisingly like a winter for Megan and I. I remember the first day of sabbatical, when I shut down my email. When I hit the button to turn it all off there was a twinge in my gut. Here I was, about to leave a significant part of my life for two months, something that gives me meaning and purpose. Would I be missed? Would my co-workers realize that I wasn't needed? All of a sudden I had a realization, what occupied my life, what kept me busy, what told me I was important in some way, was being set aside. And for Megan and I both, there was a real sense of retreat in that, a holy loneliness. It was a kind of winter of the soul.

You don't need a sabbatical to experience this kind of winter. We all go through seasons of life where things are stripped away and we are left bare. Leaves of significance, comfort, busyness, distraction, whatever it may be. Winter is when you discover your spouse is addicted to pornography. Winter is when you get passed over for that promotion. Winter is when your spouse passes away. These are the kinds of things in life that leave us feeling in a place of darkness, of loneliness, of isolation. And that exactly the time when God is at work in us the most. Because when we are in those seasons of life, there is no pretense. No distraction. Your soul is laid bare with whatever pain and ugliness comes to the fore. The Master Gardener can begin to be at work in you.

When we made it down to the bottom of the ravine we could hear the creek, and we could see it, but we couldn't quite get to it because of massive amounts of stinging nettles. This is what stinging nettles look like in the summer, but in case you've never encountered them, they are covered in the most pernicious of thorns. And there were groves of these things all around the creek. They would have been impossible to get to in the summer, but we could begin cutting away at them now.

Megan and I knew going into sabbatical that there were stinging nettles in our souls, things that we really wanted to work through while we had the space and time. We are about to plant a church, and we know that is intense, life-consuming work, so before then we thought it would be wise to speak with counselors to speak into our marriage. We found a couple who specifically work with church planters, so we began to meet with them almost weekly over video conference.

If you know me well, you know that one of my positive attributes is that I'm a steady person. It's how I function in my role at Chapel Hill, moderating meetings, providing bridges between people, making peace. Where Pastor Mark and Pastor Megan are fire, I am water. But there's a dark side to my placid

exterior, that was especially coming to bear in my relationship with Megan. We've gone through some tough things together, especially this year, and when Megan is in pain she doesn't need me to be steady necessarily, she needs me access my empathy. But instead, I've felt numb. There's a part of my soul that has been walled off from feeling.

And as we met with our counselors we began to explore some of the stories of my childhood and I realized that some of the things I had kind of shrugged off could contribute to this numbness. I recalled how I would be the last kid to be picked up from school, sometimes waiting an hour for my mom to come, sitting on the sidewalk curb. I recalled how I would see my parents screaming at each other and I would scream at them to stop, but they never acknowledged me in the moment, or even after, and my screams didn't seem to matter. I remember as a teenager, once again waiting for my mom to pick me up, sitting as still as I could to practice not feeling or thinking. And all of that, and much more, has contributed to a way of dealing with life by shutting myself down. I can't hurt if I don't feel, right?

These are the stinging nettles of my soul. Life experiences, beliefs, that had accumulated. I didn't want to touch these things because it would hurt if I did. But if I want to be more fruitful, if I want more love, more joy, more peace, God the Master Gardener would need to do some pruning.

What are the stinging nettles of your soul? What are the accumulated experiences that have taught you lies about yourself and about God? Are you someone who believes that you are only matter if you succeed, if you're keeping busy at life, making deals, moving forward, getting recognition for your hard work? Or maybe you've come to believe that you are loved if you're attractive enough, or funny enough, or helpful enough. You see, most of the time these kinds of things drive us and actually make us very functional. We become successful! We are attractive! We are funny! We are helpful! But then winter comes, the leaves are stripped away, and we're not as helpful, not as attractive, not as successful, and we realize that we are also not as loved, not as joyful, not as at peace, not truly fruitful, because there are stinging nettles choking our souls.

Gardening is actually a pretty violent thing, did you know that? Any time you look at a beautiful, fruitful garden, you have to realize that to get that required a lot of cutting, tearing, ripping, and digging. Megan loves to garden, so for Christmas I bought this for her. It's called a Hori Hori knife, a lot of gardeners use it, and it makes her look like Rambo.

This is the surprising work of God, that in order to truly gain what our souls long for, we must allow God to do a painful work in us. We have to let him in to the parts of our souls we are scared to death to touch, so he can cut, and dig, and rip away what needs pruning.

What it boiled down to for me was unbelief. It all came to a head for me when I was recounting to my counselor an encounter I had with someone where I was aware after the fact of how I had avoided asking someone a question about their life because I knew it would mean I would have to be emotionally available to them. I said to him, "I did this, and afterward I thought, 'How completely ridiculous!' There's no reason why I couldn't have asked this simple question." And he said to me, "Be aware of the voice of condemnation. Your Father God doesn't say to you, 'You're

ridiculous.' He says, 'You are loved.'" That struck me. After I finished my video call with him, I sat to journal some reflections. And I realized as I thought about it that I indeed believed that God's voice was a voice of contempt. I was prompted to pray, but to pray a prayer of confession. I knew what I needed to say was this, "Father, I am sorry I believed you had contempt for me." But I couldn't say it. Instead, I began to weep. And weep. And weep. The weeping turned into wailing. For minutes. I wept and wailed. It hurt, like some kind of emotional spiritual boil that needed lancing. The lie that God saw me with contempt was so deep, so wounding, I couldn't even speak.

Finally, I choked the words out, "Father, I am sorry I believed you had contempt for me." But that wasn't it. Now I knew I needed to say, "Father thank you for loving me." I wept some more before I could say that too.

There's a passage in Hebrews 12 that I always thought was harsh, but now I understand. It describes God the Father as someone who disciplines. (vs. 5-6, 11)

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

In the moment it is painful... but later it yields fruit. There are parts of our lives, parts of our souls, that are so shameful, so frightening to us, that to go there feels like death. And in a way, it is. But before there can be resurrection, there must be death.

As we got closer to the stream, there was about 20-30 feet of stinging nettles blocking our way. But we hacked, and chopped, and pruned it all back, until we found a beautiful stream. Time will tell what fruit our sabbatical will bear, but I can already tell you that in my soul I feel a gentleness. I feel more peace. I feel more kindness toward others.

You don't need two months to explore any of this yourselves. Let me give some short, specific encouragements to you that allow you to have your own sabbath. First of all, Stop and Listen. I mean that literally. Take an hour or 30 minutes on a Saturday and just sit and be quiet. That may be hard. It may even be frightening. But especially in our day and age, when we are so busy, what time do you give to pay attention to your soul? Especially if you are in a winter. Pay attention to what you yearn for. Pay attention to what hurts. Write it down if you have to. But please, Stop & Listen.

I'd also encourage you to Bare Your Soul. I would not have been able to allow God to do his work of pruning in me unless I had bared my soul with a trusted counselor. God gives us his body, the Church, so that we would have that kind of thing. Maybe that's a lay counselor, maybe it's someone in

your LifeGroup, maybe it's giving CR a try on Wednesday nights, but please, please, invite someone you can trust in.

Finally, Be Hungry. I would not have gone down this path if I weren't hungry for more. More of God, more of the fruit he bears in my life. The reality is, what our souls long for, yearn for, is found in God. Do you feel that? Or are you distracted? What if there is more to life? What if there is more fruit to be born? Be brave. Be hungry.