Reflections on a Broken Sabbatical

by

Rev. Walter Hermanns
Pastor, Holy Communion Lutheran Church, Racine, Wisconsin

If life is a banquet, then a sabbatical is a cool drink of water between the courses. It cleanses the palette. It refreshes and sustains. It prepares us for the next course. My Dad taught me this years ago at the dinner table. Anxious to return to my kickball game, I would gulp down my water before swallowing my food. "Don't wash your food down", I can still hear him say. I had literally bitten off more than I could chew because I was rushing. For my Dad, this was a "manners concern"; his admonition, however, stayed in my mind and became a "sabbatical concern" for me.

My initial thoughts were to fill my sabbatical time as I had once filled my hungry, hurried mouth. My time would be different, certainly. But it would be full, definitely. After all, that is how I had approached my sabbatical seven years before. During that time I had completed an intensive unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. Six days each week were filled with chaplaincy visits, didactic sessions, and verbatim presentations. While those three months were educational, they were definitely not filled with Sabbath rest!

With similar misplaced enthusiasm, I began to prepare for this sabbatical. I ordered the perfect books to read: a wonderful blend of fiction, spiritual growth, theology, and autobiography. I discussed my plans with the parish I serve: I led the congregation in a reflection on the meaning of Sabbath, and even planned a reentry strategy for when I returned. I purchased a beautiful blank journal to capture my deep thoughts as they swam by: as I changed my daily agenda, I looked forward to creating a restful, peaceful space in my life. But then, exactly one week before I was to begin my season of renewal, my plans literally broke apart. I fell hard in the bathroom and broke my femur, that large bone connecting knee to hip. As I lay with my face planted against the bathroom tile, my prayers were not peaceful prayers; my thoughts were not restful thoughts. Only as I left
the hospital for home two weeks later did I realize that the time carefully set aside for my sabbatical had begun. At first I was tempted to delay my time away. With an injury this severe, I would have had to take a medical leave of absence anyway. But then I realized that just maybe God would help me use this healing time as the rest and reflection I truly needed. Perhaps I needed to heal more than a broken bone....

I suppose that if someone had to begin a sabbatical in a wheelchair with a broken leg, it might as well be me. I don't say this out of false humility. It's simply that I was already in a wheelchair. In 1994 I learned that the weakness and fatigue I was experiencing came from multiple sclerosis. As my disease progressed, I had made numerous adjustments. First I used a cane, then crutches, followed by a scooter and now a wheelchair. Multiple sclerosis affects more than one person, however. I am married, with two children. I had been a pastor since 1987, serving Holy Communion Lutheran Church in Racine, Wisconsin. My family and church had also made one adjustment after another. We had installed a ramp and widened doorways so I could get into our house. The congregation modified my office to be "wheelchair friendly" and purchased a portable ramp to make the chancel accessible. Beyond the physical adjustments, we all had to face the emotional challenges that came as a result of my disease. Individually and collectively we grieved our losses. I grudgingly realized that it would be impossible to continue full-time parish ministry for much longer. It was in this context that I felt the need to step away, to reevaluate, to grieve, to take that "cool drink of water" called a sabbatical. "Moving into a New Now" was the theme of my sabbatical proposal that was approved by the Louisville Institute. My stated objective was "to explore the best way to use my gifts for parish ministry within the physical limitations caused by chronic illness". A sabbatical would give me a chance to reflect on the changes that had occurred in my life. I also hoped to plan for the future not with a sense of despair or surrender, but rather with a sense of trust in a loving God who promised never to abandon me. What would the shape of my ministry be in the years to come?

I suppose my sabbatical might have been entitled "What Now, God?" In the end, a broken leg changed my sabbatical plans, but it didn't prevent me from experiencing the Sabbath I so sorely needed. God used this time to invite me into a place of deep reflection; a place where I might not have gone otherwise. My understanding of the potential fields for ministry expanded greatly. Just as my broken leg reshaped but did not prevent my sabbatical, could my physical disability transform my ministry rather than impede or even prevent it?

My plan for this Sabbath time was to prepare for this New Now through listening, learning, and reflecting. I would listen to other clergy with physical disabilities. I would learn about self-care for people with MS. I would learn about the congregational dynamics that would be present during my transition. I would prayerfully reflect on these changes, spending time in private retreat and writing an online journal.
While it is tempting to give you a "travelogue" account of my sabbatical, instead I am going to describe several "sabbatical incidents", with a reflection on how they have influenced my personal ministry. For me, God is most profoundly revealed in the little things. It is in the unexpected graces of each day that God also shines forth. My sabbatical gave me an opportunity to "clean my eyeglasses" and see more clearly the light that is always there. Following this, I shall offer suggestions for how these insights call for a much-needed correction for ministry in the contemporary Christian community.

**Traveling Bus 86**

Because of my injury, I couldn't drive my van for several months. Often I would take city bus 86, which passes near our house. The route takes a huge circle north past the hospital, downtown, south to neighborhoods and shopping centers, and finally back home. During my trips I often talked with my fellow passengers. Although I didn't tell them I was a pastor (after all - I was on sabbatical, wasn't I?), we often ended up having "pastoral conversations." A young woman's boyfriend had just left her. A man was getting the runaround from the city health department. A newcomer to town was having a difficult time making friends. In effect, I had become the "pastor of bus 86"! This experience set me free to be open to new possibilities for using my gifts. Although my objective had been to "explore the best way to use my gifts for parish ministry", I learned that ministry can happen whenever the Spirit is present. Suddenly the future was wide open with possibilities.

**Making Friends with My Body**

I had purchased several books on theology for my sabbatical. As I entered this time, those books suddenly seemed too much like "work". I found myself gravitating toward fiction and autobiography for my reading. Almost every book had a special paragraph or insight which moved something deep within me. One such passage was in the powerful and humorous memoir *Moving Violations* by John Hockenberry. The author is a journalist who like me, uses a wheelchair to get around. In the midst of his adventures, he took a moment to reflect on his body, especially his legs. He described how he looked at them with compassion, casualties of his spinal cord injury. In and of themselves, there was nothing wrong with them. They were there, just waiting for the signal from the nervous system — a signal that would never come. Hockenberry’s words challenged me to reflect on my own body image. I had begun to treat my body as an enemy, a friend that had betrayed me. Could there be a way to make peace with my body, even my legs which just seemed to get in the way? I cried the next Sunday morning when I heard Jesus' words in a new way: "this is my body, given for you".

**Do You Swim?**

My wife and I attended a weeklong program run by the Jimmy Heuga Institute. Designed specifically for persons with MS and their caregivers, the program
guided participants as they developed plans for healthier, balanced lifestyles. Included in this week were seminars, personal physical evaluations, and mutual support. While we received many insights on living well with MS, one passing comment made by an aquatic therapist had an immediate and long-term impact on my life. I had stopped by the pool in the afternoon to thank her for the session she had led that morning. When I described to her my regimen of exercises and stretches in our local pool, she asked me "do you swim?" I told her that since I couldn't kick my legs, I hadn't even tried. "You don't need to be able to kick in order to swim," she added. "As long as you can move your arms, and have some control of your torso, you can swim."

When I returned home I gave it a try. Swimming is now an incredible, liberating experience for me! Gliding through the water, I feel like I am flying. I am fascinated at how the rippling water makes auras of light dance on the pool's floor as I swim by. Sometimes I am so mesmerized by their beauty I almost forget to come up for air! I now swim four laps as part of my regular workout.

More important than the exercise was the lesson I learned that day. When I'm faced with a task that no longer seems possible, I try to think creatively about new ways to accomplish old tasks. Sometimes this involves adaptive equipment, and other times it involves enlisting the help of a friend. Last summer I remembered her simple question when I was asked "Do you want to go camping?" With the little inventiveness and a lot of help, I traveled to northern Wisconsin for a three-day kayaking/camping adventure. It was an unforgettable trip, filled with the challenges and rewards of living outdoors.

From Web Log to Dialogue
As I gave myself time to reflect on my identity as a religious leader with a disability, I wrote a series of essays and posted them on the Internet. Using names from a registry of religious leaders with physical disabilities kept by the National Organization on Disability, I invited others to respond. I was amazed to learn that there were others like me, working in local parishes or struggling with their local judicatories for a chance to do so. A number of us have continued this online conversation. Our discussions range from personal life stories and their challenges to theological understandings of disability. We have recently formed an Internet discussion group that we will use to broaden our membership. We hope someday to secure funding for a national gathering of religious leaders with disabilities, to further the dialogue with Church at large.

The insights I gained during my sabbatical have been invaluable to me both personally and professionally. I believe they also point to issues which need to be addressed within the contemporary Christian community. Three of these issues are described below.
**Creative Thinking about Contextual Ministry**

As I learned when I became the "pastor of bus 86", the opportunities for ministry are limited only by our imaginations. So many congregations have become slaves to their own buildings. While our sanctuaries often provide us with comfort and inspiration, they can also be barriers to sharing the Good News. What would it look like if parish pastors were challenged to spend at least one day a month in a unique ministry setting such as a city bus? What if the insights they gained were used to challenge members of their congregations to do so as well?

**Finding Our Voice**

While many denominations have policies and publications designed to promote accessibility to physically disabled persons, very little attention has been given to religious leaders with physical disabilities. For some, our very presence is a threat to their understanding of faith and healing. Others place us on high pedestals, citing our courage and inspiration. For the most part, we have been disconnected from one another as well. The emerging Internet community that formed as a result of my sabbatical reveals a need for connection and a desire for theological discussion. I also see a hunger to engage the larger church community in this discussion. In what ways do we offer a unique perspective on the tasks of ministry? I believe that our viewpoint will both challenge and enliven the contemporary Christian community as we continue to find our voice.

**The Spirituality of Disability**

The number of persons living with some type of disability will be increasing dramatically in the next several years. Two reasons for this are our aging general population, and the number of veterans returning from Iraq with disabling injuries. All spirituality is contextual and relational. As I began to understand during my sabbatical, new questions as well as new insights arise when someone lives with a disability. How can the church community accompany the spiritual journeys of persons with physical disabilities? This is more than an issue of accessible buildings. As one of my email friends explained, “what good is it if a church puts in a wheelchair ramp if there’s no place for us [in the church community] once we’re inside?”

If my sabbatical began in a curious manner, it also ended in a surprising fashion as well. Actually, I don't think my sabbatical has ended yet. The skills that I’ve developed and the resources I discovered still continue to serve me well. If there was one piece of advice I would give to a colleague about to begin a sabbatical, it would be "don't come back." At least don't come back expecting to be the same person you were when you left. More specifically, don't come back without a strategy to nourish the seeds God has planted in your sabbatical soil.

My sabbatical was one of making plans and then seeing them broken. Time has revealed that the breaking was also a breaking open: an uncovering of what truly needed rest and healing. The breaking open reveals the questions usually buried
beneath the busyness of day-to-day life. What do I truly desire? What is our place in the world? Where is God leading me and the people I serve? Recently I preached a sermon at the congregation of a friend who would be returning from sabbatical the very next week. She had spent three months traveling around the Eastern United States in a big pink RV. In my sermon, I tried to remind them of the holy and unique nature of Sabbath. Many of them had read her regular reflections that she had posted on a web log. Like me, they had noticed a shift in her words during the previous two weeks. There had been a turning in her soul just as there had been a turning of the pink RV. "In the end," I reflected, "she has discovered that the traveling she needed to do was really on the inside. But most of us have to leave and come back in order to understand this."

If life is a river, then a sabbatical is a trip to the river's source. When we have found that source, we can rediscover that the water which springs forth from the ground to nourish us in the beginning is the very same Holy Water which swirls around us in the day-to-day currents of life.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

From Little Gidding,
by T.S. Eliot