“Sacred Idleness”
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When someone asks, “How are you doing,” how do you respond? I'm one of those people who usually just says “Fine, thanks” and moves along in the conversation. However, I've noticed that when I ask people that question, especially at work, what I usually hear is “I'm busy,” or some variation such as “I'm swamped” or “I'm stressed.” Sometimes this is said enthusiastically—someone is deep into a project they're excited about—but usually it has an air of exhaustion and anxiety to it. Often I think I pick up an unstated subtext along the lines of “I'm doing my part” or “I'm earning my keep,” as well.

Of course, hard work is usually a good thing. Most of the people I work with are smart and accomplished teachers, writers, and researchers who aspire to make the world better place. I'm proud to call them my colleagues. But I've also begun to feel that there's a certain emptiness to that response—"I'm busy, I'm swamped, I'm stressed.” I’ve begun to wonder if we're missing out on some important aspects of life that cannot be captured by busyness, ones that dissolve in the face of excessive stress and anxiety.

When trying to imagine what an antidote to this might be, I arrive at *idleness*. I like the word *idleness* because there's something a little scandalous about it, something in it that gently thumbs its nose at our culture of busyness. It also pokes gently at our Christian tradition, with its notion of idle hands as the devil's workshop, a phrase that appears in Proverbs and is echoed in Ecclesiastes, Paul’s letters, and other places.

But if we can set aside the idea that idleness is not inherently a bad thing, perhaps we might even embrace the possibility that there can something sacred about idleness. When we talk about the parts of our lives that feel sacred, most of us probably think of the active, impactful roles we play, especially roles where we are caring or teaching or advocating for others. I think this is true especially at a church such as Edgewood, where many of our members see a direct line between their faith lives and the work they do for justice and peace.

But what if our spiritual development might also require more idleness? Perhaps we need to begin by rehabilitating that word, *idleness*, by placing it among more respectable company, words such as *rest, repose, meditation*, and *play*. In the Christian tradition we also have Sabbath, the day of the week we are meant to put down our laborers and rest. I think it's safe to say that for most of us, this is an especially difficult spiritual practice to keep. If we do manage to find a few hours on Sunday to put aside our labors, there's a sense that it's not so much resting as recharging, catching our breath so that we can hurl ourselves back into the work week. In this way, Sabbath becomes just one more thing in service to work, to productivity, to busyness. Even our vacation becomes a sort of secularized Sabbath in which we save up all our need for rest and release and cram it into two weeks in August.

In contrast, idleness seems more indulgent, less purposeful. Idleness is a willingness to put down our laborers and do something relaxing even if it's not Sunday, not the scheduled Sabbath, even if there are other pressing things to do.

So, beyond merely relaxing, what might make our idle time feel “sacred.” I don’t think sacred idleness has to involve an explicitly religious or spiritual activity, though of course it might. In terms of language, I think of sacred idleness not as a noun or a verb, but as an adverb, that is, not a particular activity, but the manner in which we do *any* activity or non-activity. Particular adverbs that come to mind here are *purposelessly, slowly, lovingly, lazily, quietly, calmly*. Sacred idleness certainly could mean walking in the woods or praying, but it could also mean binge watching the new season of *Stranger Things*, or cooking a slow meal, or reading a beach novel until you drift off into a nap.

So how might we see these activities—including ones that are not inherently religious—as sacred, as touchstones for our spiritual growth. Let me suggest a few ways.

First, if work has become the default setting for many of us, if busyness has come to feel like the most “real” or meaningful part of our lives, then cultivating idleness offers an opportunity to snap ourselves out of this trance and see the world with fresh eyes. We might question to what extent we have conformed our lives not to our faith and other deeper values but merely to the status quo of our

culture. At the very least, we might ask ourselves, Is this really the life I want to live, that I am meant to live?

Another way in which idleness might be sacred is that idleness is close kin to humility. In idleness we're not doing the world's work or forwarding our career or impressing anyone. We're not being purposeful, we're probably not contributing much to the economy (or to our carbon footprint). Performing for the outer world can bring great, meaningful accomplishment, but it can also mean losing sight of who we really are. In our idleness, offstage and relieved of our duty to perform, we can look deeper into our own hearts, and be honest about our fears and sorrows and our brightest hopes.

And, finally, it may be that in these unguarded moments we are most able to open ourselves up to God. Psychiatrist Gerald May called this "willingness" – a sacred vulnerability and openness to the presence of the divine in our life. May contrasted this with will*ful*ness, which reflects our usual attempts to guarantee a desired outcome through our own efforts. In the religious realm, this might mean attempting to reach God through ritual, or study, or our own willed attempts at belief. I don't think there's anything wrong with those approaches, though May suggested that for many of us, the way of willingness is a more fruitful path to God. This tradition reflects the mystical belief that God is always with us, closer than our own breath, our own thoughts. It is not soaring worship, or penetrating study, or devout belief—in short, not our own efforts—that most easily brings us to God, but our openness, our vulnerability, our suppleness of mind. Our willingness.

I'd like to close by telling a story of my own experience. Perhaps this will remind you of your own. My place of sacred idleness is the Platte River Campground at Sleeping Bear Dunes. I try to go there at least once a year for 3 or 4 days. I go alone, with a tent, backpack, food, and a few camping supplies. When I arrive at the campground, I try to find an isolated corner and set up my little camp. I spend the days hiking and swimming and evenings cooking and staring into a campfire. I also spend some time reading and writing, especially in the mornings. My favorite part comes on the last evening of the trip—after I've had a few days of idleness to waken me out of my routine life. On the last night I stay up until midnight, then I put on my headlamp, grab a flashlight, and walk down to

Lake Michigan, a ten minute hike through the woods down to the beach. At this time of night the campground is silent, and in all my walks I have never encountered another person.

I come out of the woods, through the scrub pines and dunes, and make it out to the wide beach. To be alone on the shoreline at this time of night is an immersion in darkness and solitude. To be honest, it's a little frightening. There are no lights despite visibility for dozens of miles in every direction, including over the dark expanse of Lake Michigan. The rise and fall of the waves is an eternal sound. On a clear night looking up into the stars, I say a prayer but then let go of words, and try to give myself over to God. I long for a moment of spiritual transcendence, the kind of life-changing event where one feels infused with connection to the divine, something I've read about in the testimonies of saints and mystics and ordinary people. I long for this, but it hasn't happened for me, not yet, and that's okay. I know these moments are a divine gift, and cannot be summoned or cultivated or earned.

I may not feel something that dramatic sitting alone on the Lake Michigan shoreline, but I do come to feel like I know what theologian Paul Tillich meant when he called God "the ground of being." In these moments, God becomes pure immensity and otherness, the very premise of everything within the universe and beyond it. Losing myself in the night, in the timeless, primordial sound of the waves, I can feel in some dim way God's eternal nature, which always was and always will be, and I also feel how I partake of this nature, and thereby some part of me is eternal as well. I try to give into this feeling completely, though it is both comforting and frightening.

Slowly, as I sit there, something else begins to happen. I get lonely. I start to feel a little forlorn, missing my wife and kids, my friends, my church, my neighbors. I feel the depth of my love and my great need for all these people. I feel pulled back to my campsite, where the next day I'll wake up and then return to my life, to my obligations, to my joys and sorrows and achievements and failures, to my noble intentions and petty resentments. And God is also in this feeling, not as immensity and eternity, but as love and longing. God is the vastness of the starry sky, yes, but also the closeness of how it will feel to go home the next day and walk into my house and hug my wife and son and

daughter, how they we will say they missed me even though I was only gone a few days. And I will realize that my ability to feel this will be nothing I earned or arranged or willed, but only through my willingness to give myself over for a few days to quiet, and solitude, and sacred idleness.

Amen.