

# The St. John's Pulpit

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## **TO BE A SPIRITUALLY RENEWING CHURCH**

(Sermon 2 of 6 Lenten Series: Following Jesus in Spiritual Practices)

Scripture: Gospel of Matthew 12:1-14

Second Sunday during Lent, March 1, 2015 Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Amidst the hillsides and farms of southern Indiana, sits St. Meinrad Archabbey. Dr. Bill Leonard guided my second visit to St. Meinrad, in 1982. My first journey to St. Meinrad was seven years earlier, as a university student majoring in religion. Our professor took us there for a three-day spiritual retreat with Benedictine monks. I remember one monk saying, “*Life is noisy and crowded. If you are going to follow Jesus, you must nurture a listening heart.*” As a nineteen year old Baptist boy, I remember thinking, “what does a monk living in this quiet, secluded place know about noise or crowds?” As it turns out, he knew a great deal.

Please hear my affirmations of you. Your desire to have a relationship with God that enriches your living and the living of others is obvious. Your aspiration to serve the purposes of God is clear. Your pursuit of living in such a way that God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven is unmistakably evident. You invest your individual energies and our life together, as a community of faith, in ways that contribute substantive influence in the world. You are committed to God, through Jesus as Lord of your faith, so that the life of God’s Holy Spirit at work in you and in us offers spiritual vitality throughout metro Charlotte and beyond.

Yet, while each of these affirmations is completely true, it is also verifiable that life, like a moth on a garment, eats away at these desires, aspirations, pursuits, investments and commitments. “*Life is noisy and crowded. If you are going to follow Jesus, you must nurture a listening heart.*”

Therefore, just as we must give attention to our most significant human relationships, we must also care for our relationship with God. We must care for and nurture our listening hearts. We call this spiritual renewal and it is both personal/individual and communal/congregational. The spiritual life of St. John’s is determined by how we care for our individual spiritual lives.

How are you tending to the spiritual core of your life? How are we caring for the spiritual core of our congregational life? What are we doing to assure that we are a spiritually renewing church? How are we nurturing a listening heart?

Last Sunday, I reminded you that Jesus went into the wilderness to be alone with God because he wanted to be spiritually literate. Jesus knew spiritual literacy is about more than reading or reciting scripture passages. Spiritual literacy is incarnating servant faith rather than selfishness; living with a singleness of heart rather than duplicity; and relating through humility rather than arrogance. Today, there are many voices suggesting they speak for God while fleshing out selfishness, duplicity and arrogance. Last Sunday, I called you renew yourselves to God through spiritual literacy, by following Jesus in servant faith, singleness of heart and humility.

Today, I ask you to follow Jesus in caring for your spiritual renewal? And, I ask you to renew your commitment to be a spiritually renewing church. Consider the ancient idea of Sabbath; a spiritual practice observed by Jews, Muslims and Christians. For Jesus, Sabbath was a practice for spiritual renewal.

**First, Jesus Used Sabbath As a Gift From God.** Imagine that UPS has delivered to you a special gift from God. You would protect that gift above all others. Sabbath is God's gift to you. In our faith tradition, Sabbath is not an option; Sabbath is a commandment: '*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.*' This means, '*You need to create time and space in your life to focus on God and you need to protect this time and space as God's gift to you.*'

Every parent has said to a child, "You need a nap." Even adults can need a nap. And, friends, when your spirit becomes tired, unfocused, lacking energy, frazzled, fatigued, fragmented and frustrated, you need some Sabbath time; you need to stop and focus on God. Sabbath is God saying, 'you need a nap.' The practice of Sabbath is sacred, not because God's ego needs you to stop and pay attention to God. The Sabbath is holy – set apart – sacred – because you need to stop and focus on God. If you do not build into the structures and schedules of your life this practice of Sabbath, your life will become increasingly fragmented, frazzled, fatigued and frustrated.

*The practice of Sabbath is God's gift to you so you can nurture a listening heart.* Friends, your desires, aspirations, pursuits, investments and commitments are spiritually renewed as you treat Sabbath as God's gift rather than as an interruption in your noisy and crowded lives.

**Second, Jesus Used Sabbath as an Opportunity to Be with God's People.** It was Jesus' habit to gather with the people of God on the Sabbath day (Luke 4:16). In today's scripture story, Jesus is with his disciples. He knew the importance of participating in a community of faith and gathering to worship God with others.

The charter members of St. John's wrote into our church covenant – "*We will be faithful to the public worship of God, gathering with the family of the Church to celebrate God's glory and remember God's grace.*" I think they were purposeful in naming this covenant statement first. We gather on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath, because Jesus' disciples discovered his tomb empty on a Sunday morning. This day is a gift of God. This day calls us to celebrate God's glory and remember God's grace as we celebrate the life we share through the risen Christ. *Friends, you nurture a listening heart for God and your desires, aspirations, pursuits, investments and commitments are spiritually renewed as you invest time with God's people.*

**Third, Jesus used Sabbath for Service.** Matthew tells of a Sabbath day when Jesus and his disciples were hungry. As they walked, they plucked grain and ate. The legalists were lurking, as they always are, waiting to catch someone violating their understanding of God's will. The legalists pointed out the discretions of Jesus' followers and Jesus put them in their place. He brought to the memory of the legalists a story from 1 Samuel 21. David and his hungry men, while hiding from King Saul, ate the holy bread representing the Presence of God. Jesus knew the legalists interpreted David to be doing the will of God on that day. So, Jesus pointed out to the legalists that just as David was not wrong, so these disciples of Jesus are not wrong.

These legalists, being true to form, pushed the envelope. A man with a withered hand was in their midst. They asked Jesus if it was lawful to do the work of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus pronounced that people with needs are more important than a sheep in a ditch. Jesus healed the man with a withered hand. *Friends, as you observe Sabbath, your heart is freed from slavery to the cynicism and legalism of this world. When you practice Sabbath, your priorities and your visions become realigned with the priorities and visions of God.*

May we be a spiritually renewing church! May we be followers of the Jesus path by nurturing listening hearts in a noisy and crowded world! Amen and AMEN!