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Exploring the Ecological Hermeneutic of Purple as Sabbath

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Abstract

In the busyness of what has been described as a “grind culture” where there is an expectation to be constantly busy, little appreciation is given to the gift of rest. In fact, the church promotes and pushes a lifestyle of ministry that tends to overproduce, overperform and it often leaves ministry leaders feeling overwhelmed. If left unchecked, this pattern can be damaging to the well-being of ministry members and the life of the church. The persistent goal to *be busy* is to abandon the blueprint of rest that God created. By examining rest through an ecological hermeneutic, we will discover that not only is rest necessary for the flourishing of human life, but it is also necessary for the well-being of nature and land.

This paper will seek to explore the color purple as an invitation to experience Sabbath rest. I will posit that within the web of life, rest is a necessary mandate that we are called to experience. By using the words of womanist writer, Alice Walker, from her acclaimed literary work *The Color Purple* as a premise to undergird this paper, I will offer ecological perspectives from selected readings and from the presentation of MarthaLyle Ford from the cohort residency. I will suggest that the color of purple and its connection to the Greek word, *oikonomos*, is an invitation to reclaim the rest, rhythm and relationship of Sabbath that is part of our web of life.

Key Words: ecological, hermeneutic, womanist, purple, oikonomos, menuha

Within the web of life, partnership and participation with creation means giving attention to the things that God created. Engaged in a state of perpetual busyness robs humanity of its responsibility to be in tandem – that is – in connection with creation. “*I think it pisses God off when you walk by the color purple in a field and don’t notice it.*”¹ Those words are spoken by the fictional character Shug Avery in the award-winning book and movie, *The Color Purple* penned by Alice Walker. Those stirring words suggest that the beauty of nature can easily be ignored if we are too preoccupied with our own agendas and lack of appreciation for nature, especially the vibrant and liberating color purple, a deep hue that is not harmful or offensive. It is innocuous even when it confronts humanity that is sometimes disengaged, unyielding, with not so much as an unencumbered gaze at the beauty and variations of purple.

In his book, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, Steven Chase says “Nature is Christian practice: she is the teacher and she is material and she is spiritual – the everyday and the sacramental.”² If we ascribe to this premise, then it motivates us to not only pay attention to nature, to the beautiful colors of purple in a field of pansies and lilies, but it also invites us into relationship with nature as part of the ordered life of creation. Chase further asserts that, “The whole universe is God’s tongue speaking, speaking in a language more ancient than Torah, more ancient than the Bhagavad Gita, more ancient than any Testament.”³ This bold claim, when coupled with Shug Avery’s declaration, means that not only does it piss

¹ Alice Walker. *The Color Purple* (Penguin Books, 1982),

² Steven Chase. *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), xi

³ Chase, xii

God off when we ignore the color purple, but in our abandonment of not giving attention to nature, we also do not hear God speaking. We miss the voice of the land calling out to us.

Grind culture, a term that means burnout, imprints an unattainable work practice that is antithetical to rest. In Genesis 2:2, God – the Creator of the Universe – indulges in a complete day of resting after six days of busily creating. “On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work he had done” (CEB). From a pastoral care practice, residency cohort member MarthaLyle Ford offered that, “Sabbath is intended to connect us to creation.”⁴ This means that in many ways our relationship with creation is fractured and there is disconnect because we do not engage in Sabbath. When we trample the land, there is an injustice that happens because the land suffers from our busyness and does not experience the renewal that comes from rest.

Womanist ecological hermeneutics, a theological framework that looks at the experiences of people, land and environment through the lens of the Black woman in a way that liberates the oppressed and the marginalized, recognizes that a lack of rest produces stress. Where there is tension and stress, there is a yearning for Sabbath rest – not just a day off – but a disconnection and withdrawal from work. Valerie Segrest, a First Nations member of the Muckleshoot Tribe in Seattle, said that land is sacred and part of our legacy. She says that land is a teacher and teaches without a spoken word.⁵ This speaks to the tongue of God in creation that, in the grind culture, we are too busy to hear.

⁴ MarthaLyle Ford, July 20, 2020, in an online presentation through the digital platform of Zoom

⁵ Valerie Segrest “*Food Sovereignty*” TEDxTalks. January 22, 2014.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGkWI7c74oo> (accessed July 20, 2020)

Rest is sacred and liberating. The seventh day, designed for rest and practiced by God, is more than our interpretation of Sabbath; this intentional practice of rest is from the Hebrew word, *menuha*, מְנוּחָה, which means a joyous repose or tranquility that comes from *not working*. Ford supports the necessity and mandate for rest that Norman Wirzba explains when he says in his book *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* that “Menuha is not just a day of rest; rather it is the happiness and harmony that comes from things being as they ought to be.”⁶

From a womanist theological perspective, what would it look like if the church adopted a practice of pausing and taking rest that allows for joyous repose and harmony whenever one sees the color purple in a field, park or yard? If understood and introduced as a spiritual discipline, Sabbath rest creates a rhythm of harmony where humanity and creation can flourish, in concord, as they were meant to do. In the *oikonomos*, οἰκονόμος, a Greek word that means “steward or manage the household”⁷ or more aptly, to order the rhythm and life of a people to whom you have been entrusted to shepherd, there is an intentionality given to calling for a time of Sabbath rest. I offer that the church can willingly engage in a time of covenant rest. In many ways, this global pandemic of COVID-19, the deadly coronavirus that necessitated a sheltering-in-place during the spring, fall and winter seasons of 2020 and much of 2021, produced unintended, but needed Sabbath rest. With a reduction in work, school and recreational activities, humanity has been forced to adopt a new rhythm of *un-busyness*. While it is putting a strain on the nation’s economy, I would

⁶ Norman Wirzba. *Living The Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 30

⁷ Strong’s Concordance. “3623 oikonomos.” <https://biblehub.com/greek/3623.htm> (accessed July 29, 2020)

argue that it is helping God's economy to flourish as the land and much of creation is experiencing an unexpected, but much needed rest, from the woes of humanity's grind culture.

As Wirzba points out, menuha "sits as the crowning achievement of God's creative work."⁸ For the busy church who often sees the day of gathering and worshiping as Sabbath, a reimagining of joyous repose is to begin practicing a day where there is no work – no ministry work of choir, no ministry work of being a liturgist, no ministry work of preaching, ushering and teaching. As a form of congregational care, that twice monthly day could be spent connecting with the joys of creation and hearing the tongue of God speak through the purple colors in the field. It then becomes a form of spiritual formation to understand how our life flourishes when we attend to the liturgical sounds of creation in the breeze that blows, in the rustling of leaves and in the flap of birds' wings. Further, it informs and elevates our worship of God as Creator when we are face-to-face with the rest of creation, in a way that promotes and produces harmony and concord.

If we begin to see Sabbath rest as freedom and liberation from activity, as part of the rhythm of creation, and as a more nuanced shepherding and stewarding of God's gift to us, then perhaps it compels humanity toward remembering that the Sabbath day is to be kept holy. As Wirzba states, "Sabbath teaching proclaims rest for the entire household."⁹ Finally, by seeing purple as Sabbath, it becomes a reminder to us to cease from the busyness of an

⁸ Norman Wirzba. *Living The Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 33

⁹ Wirzba. 38

overworked life and to instead engage in and reclaim the rhythm, rest and relationship with creation that happens with intentional rest. That, I submit, would be pleasing to God.