

The DISCIPLINE of
DISCIPLESHIP
LENT SERMON SERIES
✝ MARCH 17
9AM | 11AM
UNPLUGGING

Sunday, March 17, 2024
“*The Discipline of Discipleship*”
UNPLUGGING | Matthew 6:30-34 | Charlie Berthoud

At your next annual physical, along with all the usual questions, what if your doctor asked you:

- How is your screen health?
- Are you making good decisions with your mobile device, your computer, your TV?
- Are you happy with the amount of screentime in your life?

I don’t recall my doctor asking me those questions at my last physical, but I think it would be appropriate if she did at my next one.

The reality that we all know –and often avoid—is that excessive screen use is not good for our sleep, our social skills, our mental health, and our brain function. There are many studies documenting the problems associated with excessive screen use—which you can easily find, ironically, by getting online and searching.

A lot of us are struggling with our screen health. According to a Fortune magazine article (which I found on a screen!), the average American spends over four hours a day on their phone and picks it up 144 times. fortune.com/well/2023/07/19/how-to-cut-back-screen-time/

According to a Nielsen study referenced in our Presbyterian curriculum, in 2018 Americans spent 11 hours a day in front of screens.

As I reflect on that statistic, I can’t believe that there aren’t many people who intentionally plan on spending 8, 10, or 12 hours a day on a screen.

Who wakes up and says, “It’s a brand new day, full of possibilities, and I’m going to use

a few hours binge watching a show I've already seen, use a few more hours scrolling Facebook and Instagram, then take a couple hours doomscrolling, and then unwind by using an hour to watch puppy videos."

For many of us, we just get sucked into it. The lure is strong.

Remember the good old days, when you watched a movie or even a video clip, and when it was over, it was done? Now our streaming services and video providers automatically play another one, to keep us watching.

I've had a smart phone for about eight years now. I don't think I'm any smarter.

It probably has made me more easily distracted, more discontent with life, and possibly more detached from people in my life.

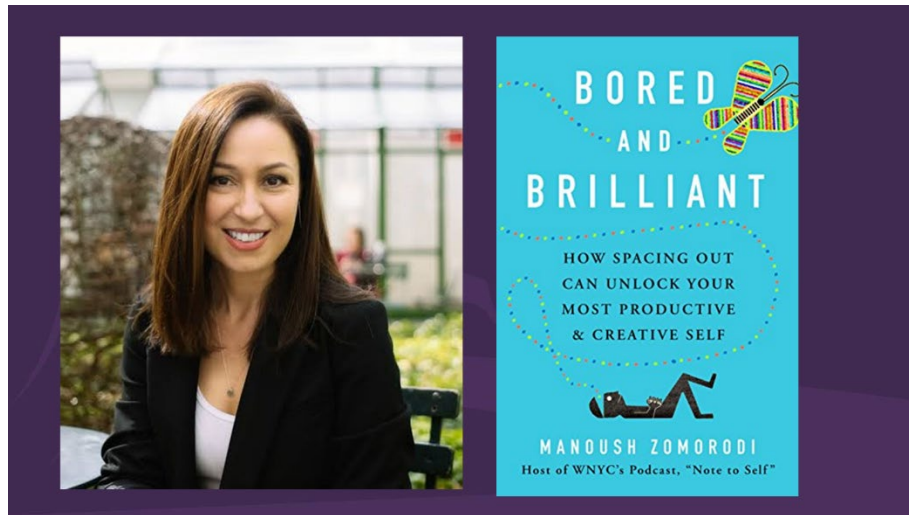
So, I think we have to be smart with our smart phones and about how we use our technology.

I need to be clear that I'm not anti-technology. I use screens for work, for connecting with people. My calendar is online. I read the New York Times, Madison.com and other news online. Facebook and Instagram are sources of connection and enjoyment. I like the challenge of Free Cell on my tablet. And like a lot of other people, I enjoy watching movies and sports and such.

The challenge for me and for a lot of us is turning off the screen at a reasonable time. Sometimes I intend to take a five-minute break for a game of free cell and to check a sports score, and then all of a sudden 20 or 30 minutes are gone.

Technology is good, when used wisely. Sometimes we need to unplug.

In her fantastic book *Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*, Manoush Zomorodi makes a strong case for the value of unplugging and being screen free, to help us be more creative and wiser.



Since reading her book last year, I realize more fully the value of going for a walk with no earbuds, or driving with no radio, of standing in the shower with no noise except the water. I get a sense of peace and clear-headedness during those unplugged times. But she is not anti-tech. Near the end she writes:

[Bored and Brilliant] is about living smarter and better within a digital world. Technology isn't going anywhere, and who would want it to? I love that I have an app on my phone that can tell me the exact subway car I need to be on to get out of the station quickest. What I'm advocating is balancing the way we use technology and making sure, as best we can, that our gadgets align with what we hold dear and true." (p. 181)

We need balance. We need to avoid overuse.

Screens and technology are wonderful blessings, but also hugely problematic when overused.

Think about ice cream. Having a scoop or two is great. Having a gallon or two is not so great.

A recent Pew Research Center Study reflected how teenagers feel without their smart phone, showing their ambiguity. Without their phones, 72% of teens report feeling peaceful and at the same time, 44% report that they feel anxious.

www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/03/11/how-teens-and-parents-approach-screen-time/

So, a sizable number of teens, when they don't have their phones, feel **both peaceful and anxious**.

We are conflicted and confused and struggling with our screens.

Interesting side note: Pew report also noted that 46% of the teens say their parent is at least sometimes distracted by their phone when they're trying to talk to them.

So, we need to be smart, we need to be purposeful about our screen time.

Our gospel today helps us, reminding us of the importance of unplugging, in a non-electronic kind of way.

This reading is one of several biblical accounts of Jesus stepping away to pray. The best-known account is right after his baptism when he spent forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying.

Two weeks ago, our reading was from Mark 1, where Jesus tried to find some quiet time, but as the text says, the disciples hunted him down. Apparently even Jesus had a hard time unplugging and getting away for some peace and quiet.

Mark 1:35-37
In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'

Today, our reading is from Mark 6, a little farther in the gospel, after the disciples have begun learning from Jesus. He decided they **all** needed some time away, some time to unplug from work and stress and to reconnect to God. But in this case, the crowds hunt Jesus and the disciples down.

Listen for God's word:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

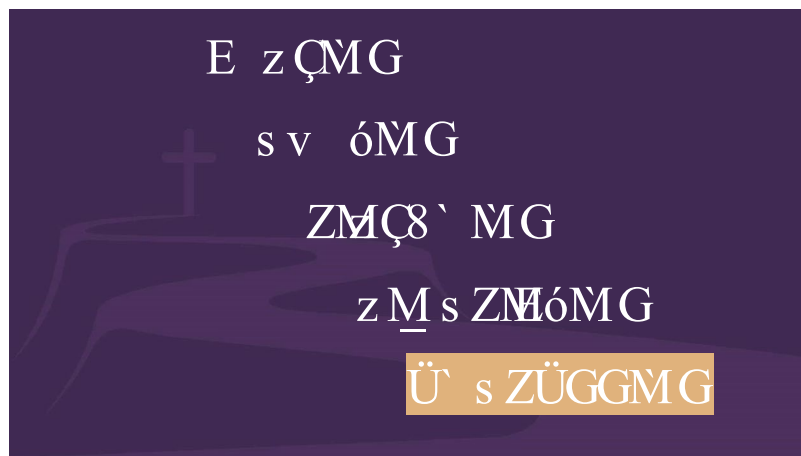
And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

From both of these readings, we see both the importance of and the challenge of unplugging and finding time and space away for rest and renewal.

Over the past four weeks, we focused on FASTING and PRAYING, LISTENING, and SIMPLIFYING. Today, our final week of the series, the focus is on UNPLUGGING.



The series comes from a Presbyterian Church curriculum called “Follow Me” and in the workbook for the series, there is a good understanding of unplugging.

“Unplugging helps us connect with God because we remove what is distracting us such as screens and earphones. Unplugging makes space in our lives for God to transform us because we are more able to pay attention to what’s happening in our lives. We are more able to see where God is leading us through the events and relationships of daily life.”

--From PCUSA “Follow Me” curriculum

The idea of unplugging as a spiritual discipline is rooted in the biblical notion of Sabbath—a foundational principle, found in the second chapter of the Bible. After God finished creating the world, God rested.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. On the

sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 2.1-3)

To help us think about unplugging, I want to share three biblical perspectives on Sabbath.

One reason it is important is because God rested, so we should do. In Exodus 20, the first listing of the Ten Commandments, we see one explanation for Sabbath, the fourth commandment.

So, Sabbath is about **rest**.

In Deuteronomy 5, the second place the 10 Commandments are listed, the reason for Sabbath is very different.

The people had been rescued from slavery and were meant to be free. Even the slaves were given a day of rest.

Sabbath was a celebration of **freedom from slavery**.

A third interesting perspective on Sabbath is that Jesus wasn't rigid about it, recognizing the common sense of saving someone's life was an acceptable violation of the rule against doing any work.

"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.... Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave... or the resident alien in your towns, **so that your male and female slave may rest** as well as you. Remember that **you were a slave** in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

-- Deuteronomy 5:12-15

"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; **you shall not do any work**—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but **rested** the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

-- Exodus 20:8-11

Taken together, these biblical perspectives on Sabbath teach us that:

- Rest is important; we need to unplug

- We are not meant to be slaves—to Pharaoh or to technology
- We need to have flexibility and common sense— to be strategic and smart

Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy Jesus.

-- Mark 3:1-6

Over the five weeks of this series, we have over suggestions on how to implement the five practices. In our weekly CONNECTIONS email, I offered three suggestions:

- Develop a non-screen habit
- Avoid screen time after you wake up or before you go to sleep
- Make a daily commitment to a few minutes of doing nothing

I'd like to add one more today. One more suggestion about unplugging, with the hope of helping us become more faithful disciples.

The practice is this: Do the one thing and be done!

If you pick up your phone because it dinged with a notification, check the text or whatever it was, and put the phone down. If you open your tablet to check email, do that and close the tablet. If you get on your desktop computer to check the weather or read the news, do that, and then turn away. Don't get sucked into more screen stuff, unless you really need or want to.

I've been trying to do this over the past week, and it's really hard. The all-powerful algorithms are strong. But trying to take back control of our minds and lives is important.

Let's say it together: **Do the one thing and be done.**

Remember the point of UNPLUGGING and the other disciplines is NOT to take away all our fun.

The purpose is:

- to clear out the clutter;
- to open our eyes, ears, and hearts;
- to help us reconnect with God and with life

Speaking about his disciples, Jesus said “I came that they might have life in all its fullness.” Sometimes that is translated as Jesus saying “I came that they might have abundant life.”

When we get stuck in our screens, we miss out on abundant life, we miss out on the beauty of each day, we miss out on God.

Thanks be to God who continues to love us, to call us, to give us wisdom and strength to change, and to guide toward abundant and eternal life.