

Sermon for Proper 16cc
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There are things we do in life that are outward physical acts with deeper spiritual significance. Hugs, kisses, handshakes usually are outward signs of something deeper. Visits to the cemetery often help people grieve. Tying a string around your finger or putting a rubber band around your wrist may be a reminder of something that it is important for you to remember. The outward and visible signs of water in Baptism and bread and wine in the Eucharist speak to us of inward and spiritual grace. There are many things we do because they help us focus on something even more important, a deeper, greater reality.

For God's people, that is what Sabbath is all about.

One morning in the first school chapel after summer vacation, our reading from the Hebrew scriptures was the story of creation. I told the students that for me the story of creation has three main points: God created everything out of nothing; God gave us humans the most important role and instructed us to take care of everything and each other; when God was finished, he rested. From the earliest times, people who know this story and call themselves God's people have followed God's example to one degree or another and set aside a time for rest. Traditionally, we call that time *Sabbath*. Sabbath is the Hebrew word for rest. Essentially, Jews think of the seventh day of the week and Christians think of the first day of the week as Sabbath. In agriculture there is a concept of letting the earth rest every seventh year. A year from now I will have completed six years as your rector and will be eligible for a sabbatical before I start another six years. So, whether it is every seventh day or every six years or just some time set aside every day, there is something important about making the concept of Sabbath a part of our lives.

Do you remember when we had blue laws? Blue laws prohibited certain kinds of commercial activity on Sundays. I remember as a youth when the State Legislature was debating doing away with blue laws, I asked my pastor what this was all about. He told me that, in his opinion, blue laws protected people, particularly poor people, from employers who would require them to work all the time. He said, "without a Sabbath, some people will never get any rest." People were not designed to work 24/7. That thought has stayed with me ever since. I never enter a place of business on Sunday without thinking about the people who are working there. I'm still conflicted about it.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why God rested? Do you suppose God was tired? God, who watches over Israel and never sleeps; God the omnipotent; God the Almighty never gets tired. Stop and think about it: if God was tired after creating people, putting up with us must give God chronic fatigue syndrome. No, God didn't rest because God was tired. God rested so God could reflect on everything. God rested so God could survey the entire situation. God rested so God could appreciate and love and behold the cosmos in its splendor and in its intricacy.

Rest is more than refraining from work.

I once knew a psychotherapist who said he could not possibly see more than 20 clients a week. Slacker, I thought. (Do the math: 20 sessions at 50 minutes each amounts to less than 17 hours.) I couldn't resist. I just had to know. So, I said, "what I hear you saying is, you only work 20 hours a week." "No," my psychotherapist friend said, "I limit my time spent working with clients to 20 clients per week. If I spend more time than that with clients, I don't have enough time left over to think about what I'm doing and what is going on in their lives." My friend had something there. In order to be effective in helping people, he needed time to rest and reflect.

People need that kind of thing. People of faith need that kind of thing with the extra added attraction of communion with God, who invites us into his life and lets us look at things, behold things if you will, from God's point of view. And that's what Sabbath is all about.

Pilgrimages are journeys people take for sabbatical purposes. We go to special places, shrines, and holy sites, in order to get a deeper grasp of something divine, something holy, something sacred. I love to make pilgrimages to the Holy Land. One of the things I love best about Israel is how central the Sabbath is to life there. They take it seriously. Even the most reformed Jew is careful about observing the Sabbath in certain ways.

On our last trip, as we were leaving the area of the Western Wall late in the day on Friday, we approached a group of Israeli police who were being harangued by a man. The man was shouting and shaking his fist at them and they were patiently listening to him. Since he was speaking Hebrew I had no idea what he was upset about. Our guide walked over to the man and, in a calm tone of voice, said something in Hebrew to the agitated man. The man immediately stopped carrying on, then turned and walked away. Our guide rejoined us as if nothing had happened. When we got on the bus, I said, "Mishi, what did you say to that man?" Mishi said, "I asked him, 'so, this is how you greet the Sabbath?'" Then I understood in a more profound way why Jews in Israel have a special greeting reserved for the Sabbath: *Shabbat Shalom*. It means, have a peaceful Sabbath. The concept of rest contains within it the concept of peace. Our Sabbath time is not simply about not working, it is about being at peace with others and with ourselves.

Sabbath is also about not creating anything new. That means part of our reflection on things is to be reminded that the world can go on without us.

Our readings for today are a call to keep Sabbath. The prophet Isaiah says that if we will do that, we will remember to stop accusing and blaming one another, stop saying evil things, offer our food to the hungry, give up our silly excuses, and look after the needs of the afflicted, God will do amazing things for us. God will cause light to shine, our needs will be satisfied, we will be made strong, we can rebuild ancient ruins and continue the work begun by the generations before us. But we have to stop trampling on the Sabbath! We have to give it a rest, so we can behold it and reflect on our place in it.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, heals a woman on the Sabbath in a synagogue. The leader of the congregation is outraged. He thinks keeping the Sabbath in a certain way is about keeping the rules. Jesus thinks keeping the Sabbath is about rest, peace, reflection, and liberation. He liberated a woman who had been afflicted with arthritis for 18 long years. Jesus "untied" her from her physical ailment just as the leader of the synagogue might untie his ox or donkey to lead them to water on the Sabbath. Jesus chastised the leader and his ilk for having such a narrow view of the meaning and keeping of Sabbath. Such a view was obviously bondage for them because it limited their compassionate response to another human being in their midst. Jesus saw this as a great hypocrisy.

St. Paul applies the concept of paying attention to God to all of life, not just to sabbatical times. He reminds these Hebrews to whom he is writing of Mt. Sinai, where the law was given by God with great and terrifying numinous earth shaking activity. Then he tells them their new life as Christians is not about that. It is instead about approaching a different mountain, Mt. Zion, the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant grounded in grace, not simply in the law. At Sinai, Moses consecrated the people by sprinkling blood upon them. In the new covenant, the blood of

Jesus speaks a better word, a word of forgiveness rather than a word of vengeance. The kind of shaking that is coming will remove created things – earth, plants, rivers, possessions – leaving only those things that are eternal and we need to cling to those things so we will not be shaken, too. Therefore, says Paul, “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God and acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

And, that gets us back to Sabbath. Take a break. Give it a rest. Settle down. Time out. Count to ten. Stop/Look/Listen. That’s why we are here today and every Sunday. Not simply because it is an obligation for Christians, which it is, even for Episcopalians. Read all about it in the catechism in the back of the prayer book. WHY is it an obligation? It is not simply because we must keep the rules and come to church and receive the Sacrament “week by week.” It is not simply the keeping of the rules that matters. It is WHY we do it. And we do it so we can fulfill our purpose given to us in creation by God the Father, and in our redemption by God the Son, and our sanctification by the Holy Spirit. We need to do this in order to continually be reminded who and whose we are. Without Sabbath, we will be carried away with all our stuff and it will be as if we never existed. With Sabbath, there is a great chance that we will be liberated from our stuff and the creative things we do will have lasting value for those who come after us, as we participate hand in hand with God in the ongoing creative, redemptive, sanctifying process of life.

David Wilcox has a little verse, which in some ways sums up what Sabbath is all about for me:

If I had a spell of magic I would work an enchantment for you;
A rose-colored, heart-shaped medallion with a window that you could look through.
And when all of your mirrors are angry with you and the things that you do,
You could look through that heart-shaped medallion and see you from my point of view.

Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Well, it is wonderful. We have it right here. This is the window of heaven. We keep Sabbath by the physical act of coming here so that we can see ourselves and others and the whole cosmos from God’s point of view! Shabbat Shalom. Amen.