

## ***Sabbath: Now More than Ever***

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 20:8-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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.

Now we continue with the gospel of Luke as we follow the new Narrative Lectionary. Luke 6:1-16 The Message In Charge of the Sabbath

1-2 On a certain Sabbath Jesus was walking through a field of ripe grain. His disciples were pulling off heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands to get rid of the chaff, and eating them. Some Pharisees said, “Why are you doing that, breaking a Sabbath rule?”

3-4 But Jesus stood up for them. “Have you never read what David and those with him did when they were hungry? How he entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat? He also handed it out to his companions.”

5 Then (Jesus) said, “The Son of Man is no slave to the Sabbath; he’s in charge.”

6-8 On another Sabbath (Jesus) went to the meeting place and taught. There was a man there with a crippled right hand. The religion scholars and Pharisees had their eye on Jesus to see if he would heal the man, hoping to catch him in a Sabbath infraction. He knew what they were up

to and spoke to the man with the crippled hand: “Get up and stand here before us.” He did.

9 Then Jesus addressed them, “Let me ask you something: What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?”

10-11 He looked around, looked each one in the eye. He said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” He held it out—it was as good as new! They were beside themselves with anger, and started plotting how they might get even with him.

Sabbath. What a concept.

Geezer alert: when I was a kid, stores were closed on Sundays, even most gas stations were closed! In our family I didn’t have to rake or mow the lawn on Sunday. Of course, the cows had to be milked, but other farm work did not happen on Sunday.

Sabbath. How quaint.

Okay. Let’s start at the beginning. The wonderful artists that composed the book of Genesis tell us, in a beautiful, poetic and metaphorical way, that God created the world in six days and then, on the seventh day...rested.

Even God doesn’t work every day! So the Ten Commandments, which Moses brought down from the mountain, and which we now read in the book of Exodus, say we are to follow God’s example and refrain from work one day a week.

Whereas in Deuteronomy, the other place the Ten Commandments are listed, the reason given behind the Sabbath is that the Israelites themselves had been slaves in Egypt. Don’t become slaves again, says God, by working seven days a week and don’t force your own servants

and animals—horses, oxen, camels—to work seven days a week.

The Sabbath is a good thing. It is a gift. Over the years in biblical times people would try to get around it. So the keepers of the law tried to spell out exactly what was allowed and what wasn't...not to be picky and persnickety and mean because they were control freaks, but to protect people from themselves. For the Sabbath is a good thing. But the Sabbath rules eventually went too far and that issue is what Jesus was addressing in this Luke passage.

First, note that this isn't a Christian vs. Jew thing. Jesus was a Jew. It's not an inter-faith dispute, it's an inner-faith disagreement.

And note that Jesus doesn't say to get rid of the Sabbath. Absolutely not! Rather, he declares that he is in charge of the Sabbath, not the other way around. And the Sabbath is for doing good. In the Mark version of this, Jesus declares "the Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath."

So in this passage which I read this morning Jesus is making some common sense exceptions to the many rules of his day regarding the Sabbath. My first thought on reading this passage several weeks back as I was looking ahead for preaching was, "Wow, our people, myself included, don't need any encouragement to ignore the Sabbath." My second thought on reading this passage a couple weeks later was, "Wow, our people, myself included, don't need any encouragement to ignore the Sabbath." My third thought, "Wow..." you get the picture.

What we need, myself included, is a reminder that "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy..." is, indeed, a Commandment—right there with "Do not kill," "Do not commit adultery," "Do not steal..." I tend to forget that the Sabbath is not just a suggestion, it's a commandment. Anyone else forget that?

Like all the commandments, this one is designed for our own good. The

commandments are not intended to be stultifying restrictions. The Sabbath commandment is not a set-up for a Grand Gotcha. The Sabbath is a gift...and we ignore it at the peril of our health—our physical health, our emotional health and our spiritual health.

For many of us, our lives are out of control. We are swept away in busy-ness. And sadly, it's not just those of us in our working years. But as Gandhi put it, "There is more to life than increasing its speed (Wayne Muller, Sabbath, p. 3)"

"As Brother David Steindl-Rast reminds us, the Chinese pictograph for 'busy' is composed of two characters: heart and killing. (Ibid., p. 17)."

Let's think together for a bit about Sabbath.

Our loving Creator God has woven into the fabric of Creation the idea of Sabbath. Our loving Creator God has woven into our very DNA the idea of Sabbath. As Wayne Muller notes in his wonderful book entitled Sabbath, "If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbath for us (p. 20)"

Another example, which some of you have heard before. The French Revolution involved a number of social engineering experiments. One of them included the ten-day week to improve productivity for the economy; work nine days, instead of six, and then one day off. In very short order they had to give up this experiment. Raise your hand if you remember why. The horses died. You can't plow with a horse nine straight days. The horses died. Horses were not created by God to work nine straight days.

Neither were you.

Years ago I read about a very creative idea, which I then modified a bit. It is a calendar of nine-day weeks, six days of work and three days off. That

seems perfect to me. I always need one more day of work per week... and wouldn't it be great to then have a three-day weekend, instead of one day, after that six-day workweek? And here's the great part for church life and other organizations: weekly meetings would only come every nine days.

Monthly meetings would only come every 36 days. We'd have ten 36-day months and then five bonus days every summer. I think it's brilliant!

When I mentioned it to my mom she said, "If you're thinking up stuff like this it seems to me that you have too much time on your hands already." It's thinking like that which impedes progress. I still think it's brilliant.

Back to Sabbath.

Now, by the time I was 15, in the summertime I worked 60-65 hours a week at my brother's store. Which I loved...because I was paid by the hour. But the store was closed on Sunday. When I was growing up I thought the idea behind observing the Sabbath was a day of rest SO THAT we had the energy to work well the rest of the week. You know, it was all about efficiency. And a recent (2009) article in the Harvard Business Review backs up that efficiency part. The study found that working all the time and being attached to work via texts and emails 24/7 is, in fact, counter-productive. Predictable time off produced more and better results than working 65 hours a week and being on call all the time (Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter).

Again, growing up I was taught that the purpose of the Sabbath was to get good rest so we could work productively the rest of the week. But in recent years I have learned that the biblical idea is just the opposite. We work six days SO THAT on the seventh we can celebrate life.

Work is not what life is all about. The Sabbath is what life is all about: celebration, relationships. Again Wayne Muller: "When we cease our

daily labor, other things—love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing, rest—can be born in the space created by our rest (p. 30).” One thing I am looking forward to in retirement whenever that happens, is to have friends. That’s a confession of sin.

A Catholic priest friend of mine once said to me, “I used to work hard all day long, usually seven days a week, and then at night I would reward myself...by drinking. ‘You worked hard. You earned it.’” In alcohol treatment he learned he wasn’t personally responsible for bringing in the Kingdom of God all by himself.

A Presbyterian pastor friend of mine years ago mentioned to me that in the previous month he had worked every morning, afternoon and evening except one evening...for a month. And the month was August, for heavens’ sake.

Well, he was a highly gifted and successful pastor of a rapidly-growing congregation with a zillion programs and pastoral care needs. What could he do? Two years later he was out of the ministry, not because he had died of exhaustion, but because he had been guilty of sexual misconduct. He broke the commandment about adultery, but I would submit that it was significantly linked to first breaking the commandment about Sabbath. We work too much, the rest of our lives get out of whack as well!

We need balance in our lives to stay healthy in every way.

Now, a caveat: let us recognize that parents with young children don’t get much of a Sabbath. Kids don’t take a day off from diapers and trying to run into the street. I’m well aware of that. It takes creativity to get downtime when you have young kids. Two suggestions. Try to find another family with whom you can trade time off. One day or one afternoon or one evening a week one of you takes all the kids while the parent or parents in the other family get some time off, and then trade. Second suggestion, young parents ASK some of us older folks in the

congregation for help. We are EAGER to do so. I've offered free babysitting to many young families, but no one has taken me up on it so far. Kris and I love little kids. It's a win-win.

Some practical Sabbath suggestions for all of us. Two from our family: First, we try not to shop on Sunday, usually, we're not legalistic about it. A few hundred years ago the largest and grandest building in town was the cathedral. Today's version of the cathedral is the shopping center and Sunday is the biggest shopping day of the week. We try not to shop.

Second. The thing we did when our kids were young was Family Night. Every Sunday night, with few exceptions, was blocked out for Family. We took turns coming up with two or three options and then the family voted on those options. We might have played a game, watched a movie, went on the lake, went out for supper. One of our favorites was watching old home movies together, laughing our heads off.

Some other practical suggestions: take a weekly break from electronics and social media and for a few hours at least, even your cell phone. Teach your kids to do the same. No screens!

A couple suggestions from Wayne Muller, which will seem quaint in the light of Facebook, Facetime, Instagram, Marco Polo and other electronic ways of keeping in touch. But I still think they are lovely...if not holy.

Every Sunday afternoon, a woman named Carolyn sits quietly and writes letters. 'I have friends I don't get to see, and I love writing letters, the physical touch of pen on paper. I get to spend time with people I love as I think about them, about how they are doing, about what I could share that they would like. It is a little old-fashioned, but that is part of why I like it so much. It connects me to an earlier time, when life was slower, and more thoughtful.'

Brenda uses Sabbath afternoons to call friends who live far away. She

sets aside time to make long-distance calls, so that she will stay close to those who are separated by miles and time (Muller, p. 229).

Two more suggestions from Barbara Brown Taylor:

Sit mindfully in God's presence and talk out loud to God.

Share a quiet and simple meal with someone you love, or someone you'd like to get to know better, someone you miss, someone who makes you laugh.

Other suggestions? What are Sabbath traditions of yours that you would recommend?

God commanded us, for our own good, because God loves us, to honor the Sabbath. The Son of Man, Jesus, is lord of the Sabbath. What might our Sabbaths look like under his gentle rule? (Elisabeth Johnson)