

**The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 8, 2010**  
**Exodus 20:8-11 "Sabbath Delight"**  
**The Rev. Michelle Slater**

*Rev. Michelle has returned from maternity leave and leads joint Dunbar Heights and Knox United worship at Knox.*

Well, it's been a long time since I've stood in a pulpit and preached! As most of you know, I've been on leave for the last fourteen months, with a maternity leave followed by a two-month sabbatical.

I had planned on taking a sabbatical last year, but God had other plans and so we joyfully welcomed our long-awaited baby boy Nicholas instead. So all my previously-made sabbatical plans went out the window, as our plans often do when God intervenes. Rather, I have spent the last two months pondering, with God, my ten years in ministry: what I have learned, what habits and practices have fed me and kept me whole and healthy, and what habits have not been helpful or even been an obstacle. And, especially pondering what difference it might make to be a minister who is also, now, a mother.

Part of my sabbatical involved attending a kind of orientation in the United States, at the Louisville Institute in Kentucky. I received a grant from this institution, along with 40 other pastors in Canada and the US, and we all gathered together last February to consider how best to approach and experience our sabbaticals. Not surprisingly, the theme of our gathering was "Sabbath". The first question that was asked of us was to think of a time that we had each experienced "Sabbath."

Some mentioned times of deep rest during long vacations with family. Some talked about times on silent retreat. A few mentioned times spent in nature: hiking, or tending the garden. For my part, I offered, a bit hesitantly, that in some ways, my whole life since Nicholas was born had been a kind of Sabbath time for me.

Of course, it stimulated a lot of conversation about what Sabbath is, and what it means. The word in Hebrew, Shabbat, literally means, "to cease," or "to stop." We are given the commandment to cease, to stop, in the "Ten Commandments", as we heard it in the book of Exodus: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Why? Because in the first creation story, at the very beginning of the book of Genesis, we read that God creates the whole world in six days by speaking it into existence. And the story ends by saying that after God finished making the entire creation in six days, God then rested on the seventh, so we are to do so, too.

But that's not quite what Genesis says. God was, in fact, not quite finished on the sixth day of creation. Near the end of the story, we are told that at the end of the sixth day, "the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." Did you notice? God finished on the sixth day, and then finished *again* on the seventh.

This is the kind of thing that had the rabbinic scholars in some debate. Why would God need to finish creation twice? What would be the significance of God finishing a second time? The medieval rabbi Rashi claimed that God did, in fact, create one more thing on the seventh day: rest. But not just “rest” the way we might use the word. The Hebrew word used, *menuha*, means something more like: tranquility, serenity, the peace of God. “In the biblically informed mind, *menuha* suggests the sort of happiness and harmony that comes from things being as they ought to be...It is this capacity for happiness and delight...which sits as the crowning achievement of God’s creative work.” {Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* }

Hmmm. We have been used to thinking of ourselves as God’s final and best achievement, haven’t we? After all, after God creates each day, God regards what has been made and says, “It is good.” It is only after human beings are created on the sixth day that God proclaims, “It is very good!” Logically, the pattern and the responses suggest that God has saved the best, the most important, for last.

Yet if rabbi Rashi is right, then it is *menuha* – rest, tranquility, and delight – that completes creation, not humanity. So God’s rest, the Sabbath, is not simply a cessation from activity, but rather the lifting up and celebration of every other thing. And this resting in, celebrating, and sharing in God’s delight with the whole of creation is not just an afterthought, but indeed the very goal toward which our whole lives should move.

Perhaps that’s why I think that the last fourteen months have been a Sabbath for me. On the face of it, it’s obvious: it’s because I haven’t been “at work”, or, to be more accurate, at my *paid* work. But that’s not all that made this time, Sabbath-time, for me. I think what made it a time of rest, of joy, of delight and of God’s deep peace, has been the presence of my son, and through him, the presence of God.

Nicholas’ birth has been an invitation into a new way of being, as any new parent will tell you. When you are responsible for a new little human being, you lose the sense of yourself, becoming subsumed into caring for the needs of this new little one. So you become very attentive, very attuned, to this other creature. And soon enough, once you start getting a few more hours sleep in a row, this attention helps you notice not only what is needed, but what is experienced. And while I don’t want to make it sound like having Nicholas has been an experience of pure delight at every moment, merely being in his presence changes the way I am in the world, for the better.

Now, of course, he is turning into a little boy, and finding his own delight in the world around him: the smile of a neighbour in the pew; the feeling of the sand slipping through his fingers; the way the water splashes in the tub as he lies on his back and kicks, eyes closed, grinning madly; the first sweet taste of a strawberry. And somehow, as he encounters each person, creature and thing in his life with exquisite interest and attention, curiosity and delight, I am drawn into that Sabbath experience with him as well.

Well, that’s all well and good for me, isn’t it? Or at least, it was: now it’s “back to reality” as I come back to work. But you’ll notice the commandment in Exodus doesn’t say to have a

nice long Sabbath time, once in a while. It commands us to take this time, every seventh day. Not because everybody needs a regular rest from work, though that is true. Not because everybody needs to spend time regularly with their family, though that is also emphatically true. We are commanded to take this time, to practice Sabbath, because it gives aim and direction to our life. And because life's fullness or happiness cannot be achieved without participating with God in enjoying, savouring, delighting in, all that has been made and all that we have been given.

So Sabbath is not an interlude within life, but rather, the golden thread that weaves our life together, suffusing every moment with the possibility of experiencing God's joy and peace. As the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it,

"All our life should be a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the thought and appreciation of what this day may bring to us should be every present in our minds. For the Sabbath is the counterpoint of living; the melody sustained throughout all agitations and vicissitudes which menace our conscience; our awareness of God's presence in the world." {Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*,}

So keeping Sabbath, practicing Sabbath, is the practice of becoming aware of God's presence in the world.

Certainly, as I return to my ministry with Dunbar Heights United Church after more than a year away, I am certain that I will need to practice keeping Sabbath once a week, although it probably won't be Sundays. But more than that, I am sure that I will need to cultivate the same kind of Sabbath attentiveness that I've directed toward Nicholas – but now toward the rest of my life, as well. For me, practicing Sabbath will not only involve making sure to take one day off from work and chores and errands. It will also mean staying alert to find, to receive, Sabbath moments during the work, during the chores, during the errands.

For surely, God's delight could be found behind every corner, if we only paid attention, couldn't it? God's peace could be claimed at every moment, if we only asked. God's rest could be entered into, at any time, whenever we needed it, if we only quieted ourselves for a moment to receive it. God's presence could be known, in each person and encounter, if we could only get ourselves out of the way. God's *menuha*, God's Sabbath, available for us to experience, in each and every moment, when we can remember to open ourselves to it.

As I head back into the office this week, there are a few reminders I will be putting up on the bulletin board above my desk. One, you can be sure, will say: "Remember the seventh day, and keep it holy." Feel free, if you are in my office and notice I am a bit more harried, hurried, or stressed than usual, to point it out to me with a smile...and I promise to do the same for you.

May it be so. Amen.