

**The 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 15, 2010**  
**Deuteronomy 5:12-15      “Sabbath Challenge”**  
**the Rev. Michelle Slater**

“Observe the Sabbath, and keep it holy.” I’m wondering, did anyone here grow up in a household that “observed” the Sabbath, and kept it “holy”?

***Responses from the congregation***

- *We had a wonderful day: we went to church, we had time with family, we played, we sang hymns, we read the bible.*
- *Our Sunday was different: we went to church in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening, we could not play, we could not sing, we could not work—that part was fine.*
- *We certainly couldn’t play either, especially playing cards!*

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that keeping the Sabbath holy so often, at least in the past in many Christian traditions, meant keeping the Sabbath...well...boring, to say the least. There was a sense that being “holy” meant not doing anything that gave any enjoyment, or at least no enjoyment of anything that was considered to be “worldly”.

Yet that’s pretty far from God’s original intention for the Sabbath, as I shared with you last Sunday. The Hebrew word is *Shabbat* which means, literally, “to cease” or “to stop.” And we are commanded to stop, to cease, every seventh day because God stopped after six days of creation. However, as the early rabbis noted, in the first story of creation in Genesis chapter one, God actually finishes creation twice: once on the sixth day, and then again on the seventh. It was the medieval rabbi Rashi, who suggested that since God finished again on the seventh day, it must have been because God had created rest.

So last week, we considered the Hebrew word that we translate as “rest”: *menuha*, which has a much bigger meaning than simply resting, but includes serenity, tranquility, enjoyment, savouring and delight. And if such rest was the last thing God created, the high point of creation, then perhaps that rest, that tranquility, that delight in all of creation, is indeed the goal of our living, as well as the thread that holds our lives together.

Yet, as wonderful as that sounds, even the Israelites had to be commanded to keep Sabbath, to keep practicing Sabbath, rest, *menuha*. A mere suggestion wasn’t enough: no, it is included as one of the Ten Commandments. And, I’m afraid it is so for us, as well. As wonderful as we know Sabbath time can be, for many of us it seems only a distant, or at least infrequent, dream.

So now I’m wondering...what obstacles do you experience, what blocks you from practicing Sabbath, a weekly day to cease from work, from chores, from errands? One day a week set aside (which is what “holy” really means) for savouring, enjoying, delighting, celebrating?

***Responses***

- *Technology is always available to help us do more work.*
- *Until a few years ago stores and businesses we not open on Sunday. Now, we can do the same things on Sundays as any other day of the week.*
- *Some people even **have** to work on Sundays to keep those stores and businesses open.*

### **NOT ENOUGH TIME**

For so many of us, there is often not enough time. Between earning a living, fulfilling a vocation, nurturing relationships, caring for dependents, getting some exercise, cleaning the house, grocery shopping, church groups and meetings, there often is not enough time for ourselves, and increasingly, for God.

At the same time, we are bombarded by messages that urge us to spend more (and so ultimately, work more), keep our homes cleaner, and continue to improve ourselves as parents, spouses, investors, or athletes. Supposedly to make all this possible, grocery stores stay open seven days a week and long into the evening, and entertainment options are available around the clock.

What are we to do? Well, our culture has some answers. "Quality time with your kids." It doesn't matter how much time you spend with them; just make the minimal time you do spend with them, count. An exercise machine that promises to reduce stress and burn off fat in only 20 minutes, three times a week! "What you need is a good night's sleep, or a vacation," say the advertisers. Yet none of these is good enough, are they? None of these offer us the abundant life we crave.

The gift of Scripture is the reminder that there is enough time. God has enough time in the creation story of Genesis. Perhaps it is not that we don't have enough time, as that we have too much to do.

### **TOO MUCH TO DO**

Why do we have too much to do? Perhaps because of our work. In this economy, we don't want to be the one who takes their full vacation time, or doesn't come in on weekends when needed, or put in overtime. Or maybe, we have a particular skill or expertise that is needed and is in short supply and so we just don't feel we can say no. Or maybe it is because of our other responsibilities. Maybe our life's work now is caring for young children, or elderly parents, or chronically ill dependents, and it feels like there is really no way to take a break without letting people down who depend on us.

And yet...are any of us really that indispensable? If even God can take a break, a rest, a Sabbath, if even God can accept and simply delight in what is, content not to work, to change, to improve, to fix, then surely, we creatures can do the same. Surely it is just the teensiest bit arrogant for us to believe that the world will not keep on turning for one day, without our efforts on its behalf.

And if we really do have too much work to do...then perhaps we are continuing to perpetuate an unjust work environment, one where too many have too much work to do, while others have too little. Which reminds us of the second reason given in Scripture to Sabbath, the

reason we heard this morning. That is, to remember that the people of Israel were once slaves in Egypt. Slaves, of course, can never take a day off; only free people can rest. When we stop work to keep the Sabbath, we are reminded with gratitude that we are free human beings. And we remember that not all God's children are really and truly free, to work at what gives meaning and then to rest.

That's why the commandment to keep Sabbath is not only to rest, but also to allow others to rest as well, including work animals. Keeping Sabbath is not only a call for us, for health and wholeness and abundance, but is also a call to ensure that others have those things as well. It is a call for us to work for justice, for those who have no work, as well as for those whose work is oppressive, who work for long hours for little pay in horrendous working conditions.

### **WORK GIVES US IDENTITY AND WORTH**

Being busy, being needed, is all too often a way for us to feel worthy. Our fingers might itch and we might feel a bit jumpy if we don't have something "productive" to do. Our identities become rooted in what we "do", what we contribute, what we accomplish. Yet our deepest and truest identity is as God's beloved. It lies in who and whose we are, not what we do. Practicing Sabbath reminds us of the reality that ultimately, our worth comes from being created by and loved by God, and spending one day a week living out of that reality.

### **REST OF CULTURE NO LONGER SUPPORTS**

It was easier in another time, when you simply couldn't DO your grocery shopping on Sundays, and there were no sports teams playing on Sunday mornings. When everything was closed because the whole culture observed, at least nominally, the Christian day of rest on Sunday.

Now, of course, that's not true. We can drive to Superstore anytime up until 11 pm. We can go to the gym 24 hours a day (although I can't imagine anything I would not rather do at 3 am than exercise). Our children are involved in all kinds of activities that take place on Sunday mornings, from soccer to birthday parties.

So keeping Sabbath is once again becoming a practice, something that we have to attend to, to make sure it happens. And it is something that, like anything of value, will cost us something. Keeping Sabbath can remind us that we can't actually have and do everything, despite what our culture would have us believe. It can remind us that what we have achieved and acquired and done in the last six days are ENOUGH, and that for every "yes" we say to one thing, means saying "no" to something else, a knowledge that many families with children, especially, seem to be losing.

### **LOSS OF RHYTHM OF CREATION/LIFE**

In biblical times, and even just a few generations ago, people's lives were intimately attuned to the rhythms of creation. Before electricity, you woke when it was light, and slept

when it got dark. The earth had its rhythms of seedtime and harvest, fallow times and times of growth.

Now, of course, we have largely lost that rhythm. We can eat fruits and vegetables that are out of season in our region through global transportation. We can travel to warm places in the winter or even spend whole seasons there as “snowbirds”. We have even lost the sense of life being circadian, or circular, as we move from clocks that have round faces to clocks that are digital. Even the way we use the phrase “24/7” indicates how we’ve blurred both daily and weekly rhythms.

And this loss of the rhythm of time dehumanizes us, and makes us agents of production rather than human creatures part of the rhythm of creation. It also means that we have lost an accurate understanding of the nature of time. For us, time becomes something that we never have enough of, so that we have to rush to fill every moment, to make it worthwhile, productive, successful. But practicing Sabbath relocates us in God’s time, in God’s rhythms, and reminds us that God is ultimately at work in every moment, working mysteriously to bring the kingdom to birth in our midst.

That’s why the Jewish Sabbath begins in the evening, at sundown. So that when Jews awaken in the morning, they know that while they were asleep, God was still at work, turning the earth through the darkness toward the sun. Practicing Sabbath, then, can turn our attention from ourselves, from our work, our accomplishments, and toward God. When we embrace the Sabbath, we learn to watch eagerly for what God is doing rather than obsessing on what **we** are doing, or usually, what **we** have still left undone.

So, rather than being an obligation laid on us with rules and restrictions, the Sabbath is actually a gift, a gift of freedom. Freedom from our own mistaken views of ourselves as indispensable, and as worthy only for what we can produce or achieve. Freedom from the “too muchness” of life and entry into the “enoughness” of it instead. And ultimately, freedom to be, to breathe, to enjoy and to savour, each other, and God, and all God’s gifts. May it be so. Amen.