

KEEPING SABBATH

TEXT: Exodus 20:8-11 and Luke 13:10-17

“Shabbat Shalom”. I greet you this morning with the Hebrew Sabbath greeting. Literally meaning “peaceful Sabbath”, it is a phrase shared in Jewish communities all over the world from Friday morning to sundown on Saturday. If you’re in New York, you’d probably say “Gut Shabbes”, which is really the same thing, but n Yiddish.

In the book of Exodus, we hear God’s commandment to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus shows how the purposes of God can be distorted. Rather than the Sabbath being a day of spiritual and humanitarian reflections of God, it can become a legalistic obstruction to God’s purposes.

Even today, to the Orthodox Jewish community, the strict rules of the Sabbath are strictly adhered to. Most of you know that in one of my former lives I spent several years living in Israel. My work often required that I work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. The shortest distance from my home to work passed through the Orthodox section of Tel Aviv. But I skirted around it because driving my car was prohibited on the Sabbath and it would be stoned by those who felt that I was disobeying God’s mandate to do no work on that day. The stone-throwers did not know, of course, that I was going to work, but just driving my car on that day was seen as prohibited, even as turning on a light switch was considered work.

So, in this week’s gospel, once again the love of Christ runs smack into an impromptu ambush. Jesus is roundly condemned by a Pharisee for curing a woman on the Sabbath. But Jesus doesn’t back down an inch. He stands his ground and argues that love always trumps legal nitpicking. The confrontation is all too familiar. Sometimes the issue has been verbal fencing over the finer points of theology. At other times it has been condemnation of Christ for reaching out to gentiles and sinners. This time the attack goes right to the heart of the new covenant.

What is more important? Unconditional love of God and neighbor, or total conformity to an elaborate canon of rituals, rules and regulations? God's commandment given to Moses stated plainly: *Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy*. The rest of the text goes on to state that God knows that we must toil for our livelihood, but he expects one day of our week to be devoted exclusively to him. The word *Sabbath* literally means to rest, but resting is really not the sole purpose of the day. God's overriding intention is to keep the day holy, not to keep it inactive. The commandment to "rest" is a call to deliberately interrupt our weekly work schedule, to take one day and give it to God. It is not a license to zone-out and ignore the call of either God or neighbor.

So let's be clear about what the commandment does *not* say. It does not say "Go to church all day". It does not say "Pray all day". Here's what it does say: "don't work". Why would not working make the day set apart for God? What is the purpose of not working? It is giving up control and declaring our trust in God. It is declaring our trust that ultimately God provides for all of our needs, just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Give us this day our daily bread". Keeping the Sabbath is a weekly choice to trust God, to lay down our pursuit of success, achievement and wealth, and instead remember that all of our success and achievement is a gift from God.

But how do we keep Sabbath in a society that doesn't? We live in the "None Zone". In the Pacific Northwest, when people are asked about religious belief or church affiliation, the most common answer is "None".

"Have you ever really appreciated how countercultural our worship is in this rushed, acquisitive society?" asks Dorothy Bass, professor and author of *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. In her book she recalls being at a Saturday night dinner with other professors. They all whined about the grading they had to do the next day. Suddenly it struck her that Christians would never tell each other, "I'm planning to commit adultery" or "I think I'll steal something". So why do we feel fine about dismissing our Creator's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy? When you

see yourself as the ultimate master of your time, you measure your worth by what you accomplish. Maybe you know Christians so caught up in doing God's work that they feel guilty for joining God in divine rest. That's why Bass says it's vital to keep Sabbath in community, beginning with gathering for worship.

Think about how the pattern of face-to-face worship identifies you. Listen to scripture with ears for vivid particulars of how God provides for those God created. Hungry sheep, cool water, green pastures. Winter ends, flowers bloom, doves coo, figs ripen. Peter shivers; the rooster crows. Days later Jesus tells him where to catch 153 fish, gives him breakfast and a mission. Bass says that experiencing ourselves as "a Sunday people" helps us remind each other to explore ways to keep the day holy. We may rest from commerce, worry, and work as well as give creation a rest.

I sometimes think we might be better off by taking Sabbath more seriously. We aren't slaves, certainly not in the way that the Israelites were, or some people still are, but plenty of our folks have to work long hours and sometimes more than one job to make ends meet. Just a little over a week ago a representative came to service all of the church's fire extinguishers. He was a young man who had escaped from the cruel regime in Cambodia and is working to make a life for himself and his family in the United States. As he was leaving the church he told me he was heading to his second job, which he needed to cover health insurance for his family. And he worked a third job in order for his family to afford the things they need. There are many of us who have a harder and harder time disconnecting from work – from emails or texts or the endless grind of a 24/7 world that never stops. Life, for people at all levels of the economic ladder, is both hectic and demanding. We all benefit from a proscribed time of rest.

We need to be clear that the commandment to observe the Sabbath does not mean that work is bad. The whole of Scripture affirms that working is part of what we as human beings are made for. God gives us the privilege and dignity of participating in and contributing to God's work rescuing and restoring the whole of creation. But we humans have the tendency to worship ourselves rather than God, and one of the ways we

do that is to think that we provide all that we need for ourselves. Sabbath is a practice designed to help us outgrow that notion. It's why keeping the Sabbath is often referred to as a spiritual discipline.

Lauren Winner, in the introduction to *Mudhouse Sabbath*, writes: "Practicing spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians. Instead, the practice teaches us what it means to live as Christians".

What does your Sabbath look like? I remember as a child going to church with my family, meeting my friends there. Sunday dinner we all sat around the dining room table, talking about events of the past week, and what we anticipated for the next week. Sometimes, in the afternoon or evening, we stood around the piano and sang the old songs that I still love to this day.

What guides the choices of what we do? I hope the things each of us do help us joyfully affirm the goodness and trustworthiness of God rather than things that advance our own success. We have fulfilled God's commandment if our Sabbath reflects God's abundance and generosity, rather than making us feel that time is scarce.

God asks us simply to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy. When the legalists of his time tried to make it cumbersome and difficult, Jesus reminded them, as he reminds us, that the Sabbath is a day to rest in God's love. It is a day to show God's unconditional love to those in need as was the bent-over women whom he healed. It is a day to treasure the life we have been given by God. While the Sabbath is set aside for God, it remains in the context of all the other days. We give the Sabbath day to God and God gives us the grace to take us through the week and all the weeks to come. Forgiven, nourished, strengthened and energized in the love of God and neighbor, we keep the Sabbath holy, rejoicing in the Lord, knowing that when we rest, we will rest in him. Amen.