

The Gift of Sabbath

Labor Day Sunday

Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I'm not going to tell you anything new this morning. I'm not going to tell you anything I haven't told you before. I simply want you to reflect with me and think with me about the importance of receiving and celebrating the gift of Sabbath.

I have to smile when I see that title, "The Gift of Sabbath," because it took me a long time before I thought of the Sabbath in terms of a gift, for I was raised in a home in which the Sabbath was very solemnly and seriously observed. The observance began on Saturday night where my father would peel the potatoes for the Sunday dinner. And then he would go out on the porch and take down a basin, one of those old white porcelain basins with chips all over it, fill it with water and put it on the stove, get it steaming, put his towel in that water, and put it on his face. Six days a week he shaved with an electric razor, but on Saturday night, he really did a job with the safety razor very closely so he wouldn't have to shave on Sunday.

The *Kalamazoo Gazette* came to our door on Sunday morning, but it was put under the couch and never opened. And then it was off to church, and after church there was Sunday School and my mother stayed home to get the dinner ready. Dinner was ready when we came home, we ate the dinner and my father took a very brief nap. It had to be a brief nap because we were off again, off again to pick up my grandparents where I was dropped off while they took the grandparents to the Dutch service in the afternoon. Then back to the grandparents where the clan gathered for coffee and cookies. By 5:00 p.m., with the other grandfather in tow, we went home for a light supper and then off to the evening service. Following the service it was a social gathering with friends for more coffee and cake, and finally home about 10:00 p.m.

That was Sunday - our Sabbath observance, but it was hardly a Sabbath. It tires me even now to think about it. It was one big day.

It was a strict and serious observance. It accomplished the purpose of stamping my existence. Here I am six decades later still observing Sabbath, but in quite a different mode, for that observance of my childhood was marked by legalism.

It is not easy to observe seriously without falling into legalism. This is a problem generally for us as human beings - the things that we structure into our lives, to be able to do them, remembering why we do them and to revel in the joy of doing them and not to get caught up in the obligation to do them in a certain fashion so that there is a kind of legalistic pall over the whole thing.

There certainly is a positive there. We all need structure, predictability, and I don't want to paint my growing up in tones too dark, for there were moments of delight in that; there were family gatherings, there were community gatherings. And, of course, in spite of myself, I must have picked up some stuff in all those church services and Sunday School classes and youth groups. That steady observance, obviously, imprinted my life, so I am still doing it week in and week out.

But, there can be a negative side to it, as well. We all have certain moments we remember in encounters with others, and I remember dealing with a young man, I say young from my perspective, that makes most people on earth young. He came out of my very circle. But, somehow or other, his observance was hard, lacking all grace, and I shall never forget when he looked at me, his eyes moist with deep emotion in his voice, saying, "I most regret I have lost 40 years of Sundays." That's almost five and a half years of one's life, and what he was saying is that it was such an oppressive, almost abusive experience - it carried with it such heavy weight, such baggage that, to this day, he has been unable to come back to worship because of that experience which was so negative in his past.

It is difficult. Do not hear me playing light and fast and loose with this. Observances that are significant and meaningful in our lives must be observed. If we don't have a structure for them, if we are not caught up in a pattern and a routine, chances are that we will be less and less likely to carry out any kind of serious observance. But to mark out a sacred space and sacred time and avoid that heavy legalism is the secret. Because, as a matter of fact, as we look at the Sabbath principle in the scripture it is designed with human beings in mind.

Somehow or other we twist that around as though we do this for God. We don't do this for God. We do this for ourselves. We do this for our sanity. We do this for our humanity. As Jesus said, when he was criticized by the Pharisees, who were giving expression to that negative legalism of which I spoke a moment ago, "The Sabbath is made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath." The translation is, "So the son of man is even lord of the Sabbath." The real translation is, "So humankind is really the lord of the Sabbath." In other words, we are in the place of determining how the Sabbath will be observed. It is our gift. It is given to us.

If we go to the Hebrew scriptures, the Sabbath principle was a revolutionary principle. The observance of one day in seven is a big part of it, because it was that weekly observance, and in the giving of the Ten Commandments we have it attached to the fact that God created the heavens and the earth and then rested and blessed the Sabbath, so that Sabbath is a day which God has blessed and has given to humankind for rest.

The significance of one day in seven can be seen in Leviticus 25 where the Sabbath principle is applied to the agricultural situation in terms of years, and they are to work the land for six years and then let it lie fallow for a year and not work, and not work their slaves and not work their beasts of burden, and take what the land offers, but let it lie fallow. Let the land rest. And then if you continue in Leviticus 25, you will find the year of Jubilee is every fiftieth year, a Sabbath of Sabbath years, seven sevens, and the 50th year, the year of Jubilee in which the trumpet is sounded, the slaves are set free, debts are cancelled, and property, if it has moved from one family to another, goes back to the original family. You try running on the Republican or Democratic ticket with that kind of a policy.

The point of it is obvious. You don't own your land. The land is God's. It was an intentional instrument to short-circuit human greed and acquisitiveness and aggressiveness and competition. It was all set up very carefully. If you get indebted at a certain point in that Jubilee run, it is thus and so. If you get land at one point, it is thus and so. It is all set up so that there was a kind of justice about it. But, the point of it was this: the land belongs to God. If Israel had ever lived by that ideal, there would never have been the development of the gap, an excessive gap between the rich and the poor.

It was a day to be delighted in. It was a revolutionary principle of freedom and liberation. It was a weekly reminder that we didn't create ourselves, that we live by grace. It was a weekly opportunity simply to be and not to do. In the Jewish observance, it was not for corporate worship as in the Christian tradition. When I think back about my own story as I related it a moment ago, that was not a day of rest. I get tired thinking about it. I can't believe that we did that year after year after year. But the day was intended, according to the Exodus passage, for the contemplation of creation, for in six days God created the heaven and the earth and rested and blessed the Sabbath. Or, if you go to Deuteronomy, it was the contemplation of their redemption, their salvation. It was a punctuation in the ongoing tale of their lives in order to short-circuit and cut that drivenness. It was in order to say, "Cease and desist! Stop, already! Would you for a moment simply be! You are a human being, not a human doing."

So, the biblical intention, whether you take the Sabbath principle in the Hebrew scripture, or Jesus' application, which was simply the mantling of that institution with grace, the intention of the Sabbath is human well-being. In the situation where the disciples were hungry on the Lord's Day, they broke the Sabbath. They

broke the ordinary, regular regulation. In the gospel of Thomas, there is an incident recorded where Jesus sees a man picking up sticks on the Sabbath, which is to break the law, to break the Sabbath regulation. Jesus said to him, "If you understand what you are doing, blessed are you. If you do not understand what you are doing, you are cursed." The point is that this is not a matter of the literal dotting of i's and crossing of t's in some slavish manner. The Sabbath principle in a given situation cannot be observed in the same way, perhaps. And if that is true in given circumstances of our human experience, how much more true is it in the culture in which we live. How in the world do you observe the Sabbath in our culture today?

Think of it with children, for example. I remember when I came here 40 years ago that Wednesday nights, in terms of the school system, were sacred and left for the church. Now, Sunday morning isn't even sacred. Sporting events are scheduled now on Sunday mornings. And we went from the Sabbath to Sunday to the weekend. Some time ago in *Time* magazine there was a cover story about the demand on parents to get their kids involved all over the place. The cover said, "Sports-crazed kids - year 'round play, summer clinics, pushy parents. Is this too much of a good thing?" The author said, "So what are parents to do?" This isn't a preacher; this is a journalist observing a cultural situation. What are parents to do? We do what Americans have always done. This is, after all, a country that systematizes. We create seminars on how to make friends, teach classes in grieving, make pet-walking a profession.

In that light, Greg Heintzman's praise of structured play seem almost un-American. Any activity, no matter how innocent or trivial or spontaneous, can become specialized in America. So, if our children are to have sports, we will have leagues and teams and schedules and rulebooks, publish box scores and rankings, hire coaches and refs, buy uniforms and equipment to the limit of our means. We will kiss our weekends goodbye, and maybe more than our weekends. So, what are you going to do? You want your kid to grow up distorted? You want your kid to go through life with no self-esteem, feeling odd and different? Well, as a matter of fact, that is the intention of some religious groups whose very peculiarity is their statement of being different.

I couldn't do that, personally. I didn't do it very well with my own. I could still remember how difficult it was always being different, always being odd person out, and I know the gospel says this whole thing is for us, not against us. But, what do you do? How do you find that golden mean? How do you raise your children so that they have a sense of identity which is other than main street culture? How do you get through to them that there are some other concerns than that with which we are bombarded in our culture?

I mention that as the whole school year starts and all the activities start, and I do it from the luxurious position of a grandparent, because it's out of my hands. All I have to do is sixteen soccer games on weekends, that's all. Watch the grandkids.

That's easy. And we can laugh about it, but I know if you are a parent, I mention this in order that there might be the beginning of a conversation, if it's no more than talking to yourself, in order that you are not simply pressed into a mold, but you live with some intentionality that comes out of your own vision and value.

But, that's one thing. What about the world of technology? Look at all the labor-saving devices that have given us so much more leisure. That's a joke. The labor-saving devices that allow us to work all the time. I sent this very weekend to my associate, Jane Ruiter, a fax which had a letter to be e-mailed to the other side of the country, and I thought to myself, "This is Labor Day weekend. Why am I doing this? One is able to receive e-mails. You know, there are certain number combinations that take hold and signify a whole panorama of things. You say 9-11, immediately we all pick up on it. What else do you always pick up? What do you see everywhere these days? What other number combinations? 24-7, 24-7, 24-7. There is no ceasing. There is no stop. There is no gap. There is no peace. There is no rest.

Susan is working with my son Joseph who has some system going at George Washington Hospital in Washington D.C. where there is a system whereby the doctor can be on the ninth tee and with his little wireless thing check into the computer system of the hospital to get the pulse rate of his patient and prescribe whatever needs to be done and then get on with his golf game. I mean, it's wonderful. You never have to work. You can never simply play.

And, of course, I speak about others. I am fortunate in that my work is my hobby and my hobby is my work, so I never work and I am an exception to all of this, as Nancy will bear with this. I'm talking about a real serious issue. It was the intention, the sense of the Hebrew writer of the Jewish tradition that God would have us have a cathedral in time that there would be those moments in which we could be present to the presence. In these past weeks we have been saying, if the world and nature, if we ourselves are the incarnation of that overflowing font that Mystery that is God, then God is in us and God is in the whole creation, and then it takes a moment to stop and to be aware and to allow that sense of the eternal to bathe our souls and mantle our spirits in order that we might be sane, in order that we might be human.

I come back to these things because I have preached them before and it doesn't make any difference. It just gets worse. We are just being bamboozled. We are bombarded. We are driven to a kind of obsessive compulsive posture in so much of our lives and that is, according to the Hebrew prophet and according to Jesus, not good for us. God will get along just fine. It is our souls that wither. It is our spirits that grow thirsty and hungry, and we can't figure out what in the world is wrong with us.

The gift of Sabbath, finding time, taking time, making time, time to be, time to be in the presence of God, time to be with the family, time to be in community. And this isn't a bad time, this Sunday 10 o'clock hour. Not a bad time for a serious

appointment full of grace in order to keep our lives on track. It's a gift. Don't miss it.