

### “The Gift of Sabbath”

When I was growing up I often heard stories about how my ancestors observed the Sabbath. It involved taking their Saturday night bath and polishing shoes. Sunday morning it was breakfast and then off to Sunday School and church. When church was over the family would return home for Sunday dinner. It was the large meal of the day after which, once the dishes were done, everyone would spend the balance of the day doing nothing. That last part terrified me. I have the image in my head of people sitting on a front porch in rocking chairs and swings whiling away the afternoon. The first part of the day seemed normal, but an afternoon of doing nothing seemed so boring. When I asked “Why” the answer was, “The Lord commanded us to rest on the Sabbath.” I thought resting is one thing - being bored to death is another.

Now I wonder if they did not have it closer to right then I used to think. Is the idea of resting after a week full of work really that weird? I do not mean sitting in front of a television watching sports, going to the movies, or going shopping. I mean real, honest-to-goodness rest. Taking time to be with family, doing a puzzle, reading a book, napping, going for a walk. Anything that is rejuvenating, gives your mind a break from your worries, gives your body some time to release stress,

That is one part of the gift of Sabbath that God gave us in the creation. In the Ten Commandments God prohibits labor on the Sabbath for two reasons. The first reason is that God rested on the seventh day of creation. If God needs rest humans who are made in the image of God need rest also. The second reason given for not working on the Sabbath day is that we are to worship God on the Sabbath. I think we could agree that both are good reasons not to work on the Sabbath. But this Sabbath keeping has gone by the boards in the modern America. Our society is so driven by the desire to make a profit that we cannot think of taking a rest, much less giving others a day of rest. It is always go, go, go and do, do, do. We are working ourselves to death partly for avarice and partly because we don't know what to do with ourselves if we aren't working.

On Thursday I took a midweek Sabbath. I went into DC to an art exhibit at the Phillips Collection. I had not seen an exhibit of the works of Pierre Bonnard in twenty years, and there were only a few days left to see it. Still, it was hard to take the day off. I stopped by the church office on my way to the exhibition just to check in.

A couple of years ago I performed weddings for two couples. In one couple the man was a lawyer. We had to set up our premarital counseling sessions around his grueling schedule. When we met, he usually looked tired. He worked almost every day. Sometimes he worked overnight to conference with clients in other times zones. In the other couple the man was a resident at the Mayo Clinic. We had to arrange our premarital counseling sessions around his periods of working and being on call for days at a time. Is this really necessary or is it a kind of professional hazing? I do not want a sleep-deprived lawyer or doctor advising me on significant legal or health issues.

I find it hard to believe that anyone would argue that this way of living is good. The old adage is “No one on his deathbed ever said he wished he had spent more time at work.” Another adage is “that the cemetery is full of indispensable people.” God's gift of the Sabbath is the commandment to live a life that is more than toil. However, just as there are those who feel driven to work hard all of the time, there are also those

who make a misery out of a gift. The case in point would be the Pharisees whom we met in today's Gospel reading.

The Pharisees take the injunction to observe the Sabbath and make it the end in itself. Instead of understanding that the Sabbath is God's gift of rest, they get hung up on the definition of work. The disciples were meandering through a field, and plucking heads of grain the way you might pluck up a blade of grass to chew on. It bears only the faintest of resemblance to work. The Pharisees are nitpicking because these are Jesus' followers. They are looking for something to call them out on. They are pointing out this minor violation of the Sabbath in order to tell others that Jesus does not follow the rules. "He allows his people to break the laws we have held precious since the time of Moses. You don't want to listen to or follow someone who has such disregard for God's law."

Jesus counters the Pharisees' criticism with what at first seems to be a *non sequitur* about David and his followers eating the Bread of the Presence from the Temple. They ate the sacred bread because he was hungry. The rules about the Bread of the Presence were overridden by his need. Likewise, the rules about the Sabbath are to benefit people not the Sabbath. If the disciples break some stems of grain off as they idly walk by, they are not working they are enjoying the Sabbath. Another way of putting it is if we can forgive David for a greater transgression against religious law, we can certainly forgive the disciples for such a tiny breach.

This passage is followed by another where Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. This time it seems like Jesus is provoking the Pharisees. Here Mark makes it explicit that the Pharisees want to see if he will heal a person on the Sabbath, "so that they might accuse him."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly there is no prohibition from healing someone on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees are itching for a fight. Jesus is angry with them apparently because of the incident about plucking grain on the Sabbath. (Yes, Jesus, who was fully human could get angry). When the man with the withered hand comes forward Jesus asks him to stretch out his hand, and when he does, they see it has been restored. Jesus did not touch him. Jesus did not say a prayer. Jesus did not pronounce him healed. It is almost as if Jesus is saying, "you don't want any work on a Sabbath then look at this." That was enough to send the Pharisees off to plot against Jesus with the Herodians a group nearly as despised as the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to understand the meaning of the Sabbath. It is a time for worship and rest. However, let's not get so hung up on what is work that we fail to get any rest out of it. Perhaps tending the garden or washing the car or cooking is restful and relaxing for you. If so that is your version of plucking grain. Do what brings you peace and rejuvenation. You need it. Also, keeping Sabbath does not mean we should fail to do good on the Sabbath when offered the opportunity.

Keeping Sabbath is to be a joyful experience that gives us happier lives. Lives that are not so full of burdens and work. Whether it is experiencing the world or art or a hobby or helping someone. The Sabbath is a feast day for Christians. Treat it like a feast with a celebration of your one precious life and the lives of those you love. When we do our life will be richer. Our life will be full of joy and gratitude instead of envy and greed. A time that leads to the life that God intends for all of us.