

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
7/23/06
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

Exodus 20:8-11 (NRSV)

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. [9] Six days you shall labor and do all your work. [10] But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. [11] For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Mark 6:30-34 (NRSV)

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. [31] He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. [32] And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. [33] Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. [34] As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

YOU SNOOZE ...

“You snooze. You lose.” That could be the official mantra of the twenty first century where we always seem to be moving at warp speed. One commentator put it this way,

“We're hooked in, signed on, trading, buying, selling, dating, checking e-mail, and answering our cell phones around the clock. Take a nap and somebody just might take over your company, steal your girlfriend, or give your job to somebody else.”

Many in our generation seem to think that vacations are luxuries that we can no longer afford.

SACRED VACATION

But, the Bible has a totally different way of looking at this issue. According to the Bible vacations time are not only important; vacations are sacred.

In our lesson for today the disciples have been busy. Jesus sent them on mission, and they excitedly report to him “all that they had done and taught.”

But, Jesus seems to ignore their report in favor of taking a retreat. Jesus responds to all their excitement about work accomplished by suggesting that they need a vacation. He says to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

VERY BUSY

When Jesus proposed this vacation, they were very busy. The Bible tells us that so many people were coming and going that they didn't even have time to eat. In my opinion if you're too busy to eat, you're too busy.

And apparently the disciples agreed. They set sail for a deserted place where they could be by themselves.

STILL TOO BUSY

But, as it often happens with us, their vacation plans didn't turn out as expected. The needy crowds follow them to their new location, and the disciples were once again forced to go into action.

Later when they once again set sail for the other side of the lake (perhaps in another attempt to get away from the crowd?) the people once again recognize Jesus as soon as he makes landfall.

There seems to be no rest for Jesus and his disciples. Too much ministry can make a person go crazy.

In fact Jesus' own family thought that they should force him to take some time off; they thought that his workaholic schedule that didn't even allow time for food was evidence that he had taken leave of his senses. (Mark 3:21)

The family didn't realize just how special Jesus really was. He was the Messiah, and because of that there was urgency to his mission. His divine mission sometimes precluded even the most basic of personal needs.

THE RETREAT THEME

But, Jesus did understand the need to seek time and space for the sacred even if those attempts were often interrupted by the needs of the crowd. This is a theme that runs throughout the gospel of Mark.

Jesus retreats to a lonely place to pray. He ascends the high mountain with his closest disciples. And even on the night that he is betrayed he retreats to the garden to pray. Jesus knew that all time was sacred, and that it was necessary to set aside time even when the pressure was the greatest to acknowledge that fact.

THE CHIEF END

In our Reformed tradition we have a way of talking about sacred time. We say that the "chief end" of men and women is to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

Do you believe that? Do you believe this is the main point of your life is to glorify God and enjoy him? Is sacred time the most important time in your life?

Sadly most of us cannot truthfully say that this is true. Our main focus in life is not that sweet hour of prayer. That seems like the goal of a bygone era.

We are focused on all the things that we have to do, all the tasks that we have to accomplish. We even have a word for it, multi-tasking.

TOO BUSY TO EAT

As Mark put it in our Scripture for today we are so busy coming and going that we don't even have time to eat. Why do you think that the number one

service industry in our country is fast food? We're too busy coming and going.

At lunch time the drive through lanes are full. It hasn't been that long ago that we didn't even know what a drive through line was and now they are a staple of American life.

One author even suggested that the golden arches of McDonalds are more widely recognized than the Christian cross.

CELL PHONE MANIA

And if you do try to take a little break at a sit down restaurant guess what happens? That's right. Someone next to you gets a call on their cell phone. Do they take the call outside or promise the caller that they will return their call at a more appropriate time?

No. They just talk louder so that their caller and everyone in the restaurant can here what they say!

Try counting the number of people who are talking on their cell phones as they drive down the road. You'll be amazed. My doctor even said that a man once insisted on taking a business call on his cell phone while he was undergoing a minor operation!

There's a story in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. After a long day of teaching and healing, Jesus got up early. He wanted to find a quiet place in order to pray.

But, the needy crowds also got up early and so Simon Peter came to Jesus and interrupted his time alone saying, "Lord, everyone is looking for you."

Can you imagine that scene taking place today? Simon Peter would page Jesus on his cell phone or perhaps send him a text message, "Lord, we need you right away. Please call back as soon as possible."

Maybe that's why our Lord came before the invention of the cell phone?! If they were too busy to really listen to him back then, imagine how tough it would be to get the word out today.

AN EASY COMMAND?

But, in this wired up, overwrought world, we need to hear his message more than ever. We desperately need to hear the call of Jesus to come away for a while and rest with him. Jesus commands us as he commanded his disciples long ago, "Take vacation."

Now of all the commands of Jesus this one seems like the easiest to obey. Loving our enemy, doing good to those who persecute us ... those sorts of commands are not very easy to obey. But, the command to take a vacation doesn't seem all that difficult. Surely we can do this.

But, of course like everything else in the Bible there is more to this command than we might think. In my experience the sincere, earnest dedicated disciples of Jesus are often the worst about obeying this call to take a sacred vacation. We say that we don't think it's all up to us, but our ceaseless busyness seems to suggest that we do indeed believe it's all up to us.

AND WHO ARE YOU?

A pastor in Evanston, IL, recalls having Howard Thurman as a guest; and as he welcomed Dr. Thurman into his office, he shared with Dr. Thurman all of the things he was doing in his ministry and all of the new programs the church was starting to reach out into the community.

And after he shared all that he was doing, Dr. Thurman finally looked in his direction and asked, "And who are you?"

He said at that moment he was reminded that he was legion, legion of doing, doing, doing, doing, but never stopping to be. God tells that we are more than what we do.

Our worth is not measured by accomplishments and trophies. Our worth is measured by God's love as revealed in his Son, Jesus.

CAN'T SIT STILL?

Have you ever met someone who just can't be quiet even for a moment? They have to always have something to do. They are a bundle of compulsive energy.

And yet if you look closely you will see that there is a deep dissatisfaction in their heart.

Perhaps you are one of those people. Jesus has a word for you today. Take vacation. Take time to discover who you are in God's eyes.

But, it's not just any vacation that He wants you to take. He doesn't necessarily want you to tread your way around the steaming theme parks and come home more exhausted than when you left.

No, he wants you to take what they refer to in the Hebrew Bible as the Sabbath.

Our first lesson for today is one of the Ten Commandments. "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

WHAT IS THE SABBATH?

What does that mean?

What does it mean to have one day out of seven that is holy?

Does it mean that we don't shop at Wal-Mart on Sunday? Does it mean that we are to have blue laws that prevent everyone else from shopping at Wal-Mart on Sunday?

There is much more to Sabbath keeping than worrying about commerce on Sunday. And our attitude about the Sabbath can reveal a great deal about our spiritual health.

NO RESPECT

One preacher said that the command to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” is the “Rodney Dangerfield” of the Decalogue. It just doesn’t get any respect.

People “complain” about how they have to work on Sunday, but sometimes you can also hear in their complaining a sense of self-righteousness. They are saying in effect, “I’m so important that they can’t even do without me on Sunday” or “I’m so dedicated that I even work on my day off.”

There was an article in the Orlando Sentinel this past Friday about how more and more people aren’t even taking a lunch break. They seem to think that even an hour off during the day is too much.

Many people actually seem to be bragging about not taking any time off. In essence they are saying, “Vacations are for wimps. If you were really dedicated you wouldn’t be taking so much time off either!”

You certainly don’t hear anyone bragging about breaking any of the other commandments. When was the last time you heard someone say, “I’ve just got to commit adultery again tomorrow?!”

And yet we break the commandment concerning the Sabbath all the time.

AN IMPORTANT COMMANDMENT

But, the commandment to keep the Sabbath is very important. There is more written about this one commandment than any of the others. It’s not an old fashioned, outmoded concept. It’s at the heart of what God wants for our life.

Every Sunday we stand and say, “I believe in God the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” And when we say that, we’re not just talking about the God who created the world long ago. We’re talking about the God who continues to create and sustain the world.

We’re saying, “This is my Father’s world.” And by implication we are saying, “And it’s not our world.” Calvin wrote, “Sabbath keeping is a way of living our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God.”

Keeping the Sabbath sets apart God's people from all the other peoples of the world. It is God's way of showing us that life is not just one thing after another. There is a rhyme and a reason to our existence. There is a joy and a beauty to life that speaks of the divine.

A GIFT AND A COMMAND

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that "Sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it that God made it a command." And so every seventh day we are *required* to set time aside so that we might consider the sacred nature of life. God loves us so much that God will not allow us to miss this sacred time.

John Calvin put it this way. He wrote, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing."

God commands us to "be still" and know that He is God. God in Christ is the Good Shepherd who leads us beside the still water and (as the Psalmist put it) "makes us lie down in green pastures."

Notice that this familiar line from the 23rd Psalm is a command. Sheep are so dumb that sometimes that have to be led beside the still waters. They have to be made to lie down in the green pastures.

And we are the same way.

God sometimes has to force us to take some time off.

BED REST

Quite often when I visit an active person who has been laid low by some medical problem they tell me from their hospital bed, "I think God is trying to get my attention. I've been working so hard that I've forgotten what is really important in my life."

When we find ourselves in dire straits, sometimes what we thought was important looks pretty unimportant. And what we have ignored becomes the most important thing in the world.

INTANGIBLE BENEFITS?

The IRS refers to what we do in church as “intangible spiritual benefits.” The government can’t get a handle on what we do in the church. We’re not like most businesses.

In fact, in the church we don’t produce anything worthwhile, at least as the world defines it.

We sing hymns. We pray. We reflect. We are resting, relaxing ... enjoying being with one another and with God. But, from our standpoint these intangible spiritual benefits are the most important and real things a person can have. In fact these are the only things that will not be taken away by the passage of time.

Christians believe that this time together is a foretaste of eternity when we shall have nothing better to do than to relax and enjoy being in the presence of God. This will be our full time activity, Sabbath rest forever.

One commentator wrote, “Our ultimate destiny is not in our own hands. It is not the result of our vigorous, hard work, or even our good work. The significance of our lives is in what God is doing, not in what we do.”

THE HIGHEST PURPOSE

I know. This goes against what many of you believe to be the purpose of church. Someone once said that the church for is that place where we come to find out where we’ve done wrong and get motivated to do right.

And sometimes that’s right. Sometimes getting right with God is the purpose of our Sunday gatherings. But it is not the only purpose or even the highest purpose.

The church is primarily the place where we come to rest. We come here to rest and celebrate. We don’t celebrate what we have done. We celebrate what God in Jesus Christ has already done for us.

Some of you are sad because your vacations are over, and you have to go back to work. But, I would suggest that each and every week you can take a mini-vacation. More than that, you are required to take a mini-vacation.

This is God's vacation time. This is a sacred space and time when we get away from the hurried pace of life and consider something greater than ourselves. It is this time away with God that gives us the strength and courage we need for the journey.

WAIT FOR THE LORD

It is when we wait for the Lord.

Do you remember the familiar words of the prophet Isaiah?

He wrote,

“but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)

We hate to wait. We hate to be still. We think that we might be bored by the lonely quiet place of rest.

And yet that might be the very thing that we need.

Remember, if we do not receive from God, we have nothing to give for God.

There's a Jewish prayer that describes the importance of the Sabbath. On the eve of the Sabbath they would pray, “Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.”

I want to live my life with eyes wide open. I want to see the miracles. I want to give thanks for all the good things that God has given me. I want the rest and refreshment that can only come when I respond positively to Jesus' call to Sabbath.

Won't you join us in that journey?

He still invites us to drop all our plans and go to that lonely place where our soul might be refreshed. He still calls us to set sail and travel to the “other side” with him.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN