

Message Delivered at Christ Church

July 18 & 19, 2009

TEXT: Mark 6:30-34; 53-61

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody. It's a good day to be here, worshiping the Lord together. I hope you're going to have some fun today. Taking pleasure in life is a good thing to do, don't you think? And it's good for us...you know what they say, "all work and no play..."

Remember being a kid and getting free time? In grade school there'd be this nugget of chronological space that the teacher would drop on us every once in a while called "free time." Well...free time isn't just for kids; and I'm not going to teach on free time today, but I am going to teach on time that makes us free...and it comes from these few words Jesus says at the beginning of the reading we just heard. Here's what's going on...

Jesus has been walking around Galilee teaching and healing. And then, he sent his disciples into the countryside to do the same thing. They've done it...out there, serving the Lord and introducing people to the Kingdom. The work has been good and fruitful. They've been successful. But it's tiring being an evangelist, and their feet probably hurt, and those of us who travel for our work know how hard it is to be out of town for too long, and they've learned that sometimes there are costs to being faithful.

So they've come back, and tell Jesus about all the great things that have happened on their journey. Good things are happening. It's Good News! They've been successful. And there are a bunch of different things I guess Jesus could have said to them when they got back. Things like, "Let's strike while the iron's hot." Or "Here's your next assignment." But instead, here's what he says: "Come away to a deserted place all by your selves and rest a while."

"Come away, and rest." Isn't the word "rest" a most delightfully godly word? "Come away and rest."

Rest is a spiritual practice of the faithful life that goes at least as far back as Moses. When the Lord freed Israel from bondage in Egypt, God gave them Ten Commandments to follow. One of them—the fourth one—was to take one day a week and give that day over to God. The way to do that, the commandment says, is to rest, and do no work. In Egypt, the people of Israel were slaves. Slaves are never free from work. But the fourth commandment declares that in God's Kingdom—because God is so good--we are free once a week to rest...that if even God rested on the seventh day of Creation, so can we.

Now God gave us this commandment to rest for a whole bunch more reasons than just giving us a day off from work. This commandment to rest, and to keep Sabbath, is God's invitation to live at least one day a week intentionally free; to give ourselves an intermission from the things that make us heavy, and to trust that God will handle those things; to take one day each week to rest; and to play; and to delight and take pleasure in the world God has made and the grace God promises; to breathe in and receive to be more ready for the work that is before us. And God commanded us to take a day to do these things *so that* these qualities may find a place in the lives we live the rest of the week.

Keeping Sabbath—which sounds so old-fashioned--is the invitation to pause, and make space, and take back time, and remember that our lives are in the hands of the One who loves us beyond measure; to release, so we can be released. It is the invitation to go like this with our

lives...”here, Lord, here are the things I’m working on; here are my concerns, and my worries, and my fears, and the things that keep me up at night. Here are all the problems I can’t solve...the big ones and the little ones and the ones I won’t admit to anyone else. Here are my accomplishments, and the things I boast of. Today, on this Sabbath, I’m going to rest from all of them, and surrender them to you. I know you have work for me tomorrow. But today, I am going to take pleasure in this one more day you have given me.”

The notion of Sabbath, of course, became corrupted over the years. Both Jews and Christians have sometimes created so many rules for observing the Sabbath that we’ve sucked out all the joy and pleasure from it. Sometimes we’ve made Sabbath-keeping a heavy yoke.

For us, the problem is a bit different. Our culture doesn’t value the concepts of Sabbath. We are planned and scheduled within an inch of our lives. We eat fewer meals together. We don’t get enough sleep. We have all this technology to ease communication...but it’s hard to find a quiet place. There’s lots of entertainment to fill our time, but which may do little to feed our souls. And with a mouse and credit card, we are never without the opportunity to spend money.

It’s a cultural thing. It’s nobody’s fault. There are expectations out there. It’s a list-making, get-it-done, and get-it-done-now world. We are so conditioned to life being that way that when talking about Sabbath we may start thinking, “Oh no, one more thing to do...”

But Sabbath is not one more thing to do. It is, for a moment, doing less. It’s a place of pleasure and joy. It’s a declaration of freedom and release and trust. True Sabbath—which can happen anytime; even when it’s not the Sabbath Day—is backing out; and making space; and taking a breather—because to work well and serve well, sometimes before we do what’s next it’s a good idea to come away for a while and rest, and let God be in charge for a little bit.

We’re talking here the ancient spiritual practice of intentionally giving over and letting go, not just of our work, but our worries and our cares, as well; to make space for God to come in, and carry our burdens for a while; and to rejoice some, and stand tall; and not take ourselves too seriously; and to play some.

There’s a Jewish thinker—a rabbi—named Ed Friedmann. Friedmann made the observation that the distinguishing characteristic of all mammals is that they play. It appears that play is a vital part of the development of all mammals. Baby horses play; baby cows play; baby elephants play; baby otters play; baby humans play. Baby crocodiles don’t play. Baby snakes don’t play. There is always a time to work, and work belongs to the Lord, as well. But to never play—to be utterly serious all the time is to be utterly reptilian. There’s that phrase...”the devil never takes the day off.” That may be why the devil is the devil...he never takes a day off.

Well, Sabbath is God’s way of saying “Take a day and play, and become a little more human. I’ll take care of it. Take a nap. It will be just fine. Have a good meal with your friends or family. I’ll watch over things until later. You’ve been working hard, and there will be more things for you to do for me when you return. But for the moment, come away, and rest for a while.”

So with all that said, what does it look like to keep Sabbath in real life? How does one do it?

Well, in different ways...but here are some thoughts...

First of all, let’s understand this: We can keep Sabbath anytime. The purpose of a Sabbath Day is to set aside some time to practice keeping Sabbath. But we can observe Sabbath anytime.

To keep Sabbath is to push aside the clutter of our lives, and enter into behaviors that are truly re-creative. For a moment, we step out of our routine, and live consciously and differently. We spend time in an open space. So when considering Sabbath, we consider things to let go of...

For a while—and I know, this could be really difficult—we turn off our blackberries, or our i-phones; we choose not to log on and check emails...just for a bit, we unplug, and instead of being somewhere else decide to be where we are. We rest from work, remembering that there may be someone out there who is really glad we're not returning their emails on Sunday afternoon.

Maybe we rest from shopping...if the shopping can wait, we let it wait; and instead, make do. Really, we rest from whatever makes us hurry or scurry. Six days a week, what we have to get done determines how quickly we move. On Sabbath, we decide to move quietly and patiently, and that's what determines what we get done.

The rabbis taught that on Sabbath, we consciously rest from worry...so those things that raise our blood pressure—paying bills, or making lists, or pondering everything that needs to get done...we give those things a 24-hour rest, and let go of them. Imagine what our lives would be like if we took 24 hours each week to not worry about a thing. Think of how our lives would be different. That's what Sabbath invites us to do.

Sabbath is an invitation to the present; to God's presence in our lives, and us being present to God. It's a celebration of what is, rather than what's not. So maybe, we keep Sabbath by resting from complaining. When we complain, it's because something or someone isn't enough for us. But Sabbath is the celebration that whatever is, is enough for the moment. So I wonder...if we rested from complaining on the Sabbath how might we see the world differently?

And on Sabbath, we are even invited to rest from our grief or disappointment. A teacher named Pinchas Peli writes "The Sabbath does not do away with sadness and sorrow. It merely invites us to table all sadness for one day so that we may not forget—that we may not lose hope--that there is also joy and happiness in the world."

We put away some of these things, and instead we make some space for things we might not do during the other six days. We make space for joyful worship. To be together; with new friends and old; to share at table, and in song, and maybe be fed by a word or two; to be reminded that God is at the center of our lives; that it is a good life has given us; that our home is eternity; and that if we're joyful and feel ready to tackle what's coming tomorrow on our way out of worship, that's exactly how it's supposed to be.

We make some time for prayer...we stop at some point, and we give God thanks...simply, for simplicity is a Sabbath virtue. After "love you," "thank you" is probably God's favorite prayer. Because isn't there something to give God thanks for today...

We make some time for whatever rejuvenates our souls. If it's gardening, we garden. If it's cooking, we cook. If it's fishing, we fish. If it's playing music, we play music. If it's an action that frees us, then it's a good Sabbath thing to do.

Maybe we take a nap. Eugene Peterson writes that he goes to sleep to get out of the way for a little while. Sleep gives us rest, but it also means that for the period our eyes are closed, we, and everything that's on our minds, are completely in God's hands. If Sabbath is somehow about turning over, we do so in a powerful way when we sleep.

But whatever might bring joy, and true re-creation...that is what we do on the Sabbath...because it all comes from a good God. We have a feast...even if it's sandwiches, we

treat it as a feast. We visit a friend. We intentionally welcome the stranger. We find something to laugh about. We go for a walk, and enjoy the trees with someone we care about.

Now this isn't a laundry list of things to do, and there are times that the Sabbath can't be Sabbath. If you'll notice, though Jesus invites the disciples to get some rest, they don't actually get it. Sometimes it's like that. Diapers still need to be changed, and sometimes there are urgent things. The call to serve always trumps the call to Sabbath.

And true Sabbath is rest not for the purpose of running away, but for being made ready. Part of what Sabbath does is prepare us for our next task. Jesus didn't tell his disciples "you're done." He just said, "come and rest." There's a difference between the two.

But intentionally put God in the middle of a day; practice Sabbath as best we can, when we can, and here's what happens: we'll experience Sabbath coming to us, showing up in the middle of the rest of our lives, the middle of our work, the middle of our lives at home. We'll be reminded that we can trust God with what's before us; we'll see God's presence where we never did before; we'll find joy and pleasure and rest even in the midst of all the tasks we have to accomplish; we'll discover that we laugh more, and play more, and experience more pleasure; that maybe in the other parts of our lives we don't need to be as rushed as we are; and we'll be ready for what the Lord has in store for us next. That might be what happens.

So happy Sabbath. May this be a day of play; and rest; and laughter; and joy. May it be a day of a good meal; or a good book; or a good walk; or a good nap; or a good conversation. May it be a day of connecting with someone, if not over a table then over the phone. May it be a day of pleasure and delight. If the sun shines, may we remember God's grace bathes us in warmth. And if it rains, may we remember that God's grace is like a soaking shower. Tomorrow will come; and with it, Jesus will give us our next assignment. But after Sabbath, and with Sabbath, let me tell you...we'll be ready.