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Sabbath—Salvation for Body and Soul
Mark 1:29-39

Our culture fights the idea of *Sabbath*. Actually, we seem to enjoy our mantra of “I’m so busy.” While the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday, it is not determined by a clock, but by nature. In the winter, Sabbath may begin as early as 4:47 pm in December for Hampton Roads, and as late as 8:27 pm in June. The strict Jewish observer stops whatever he or she is doing at that point. No more work. No more phone calls. It is the keeping of sacred rest; it is the practice of taking refuge.

The problem our culture poses today is that nature has a hard time getting through to us. We don’t take resting—Sabbath— seriously. Twenty-five years ago, when an ice storm hit or high winds took out electrical lines in neighborhoods, lights, TVs, and all appliances went off. Now days, generators can kick in and more noise than ever can be heard.

While our computers and cell phones make us more productive and provide the convenience of communicating from almost any place in the world, they discourage us from resting, listening, and thinking.

Not only can we talk through those things, we can listen to music, voice recorded books, take pictures, add appointments to our calendar, surf the internet, read the Daily Press or the New York Times, play games, or turn it into a Global Positioning System. The technical geniuses are challenged to invent new ways of using the tools contained in a small package that will easily fit into your pocket...and some have been quite ingenious in trying to utilize all of the tools in a single application.

My point is, we have a hard time these days getting away from our work, others, and ourselves in order to find rest, reflection, and solace.

Mark’s text for today begins with the setting of the Sabbath. Jesus and his four disciples, Peter (Simon), Andrew, James, and John left the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus had taught and performed a healing, and went to Peter’s house. There they found Peter’s mother-in-law lying down with a fever.

He took her by the hand and healed her. Then, at sundown people from all over the town with an illness made their way to Peter's house to be healed.

In the early hours of the next morning, Jesus went out of the house and found a place of solitude to pray, think, and meditate. His solace was broken when Peter found him, telling Jesus what he needed to be doing—healing the people who had come back to his house in the early morning. Jesus simply told Peter, "It's time for us to move on to the next community. I must continue my larger work of preaching and teaching, in addition to healing.

This pattern of Jesus to observe the rhythms of life and to discipline his time is seen regularly in the gospel stories. He understood the broader ramifications of the Sabbath—creating time for rest, renewal, and reflection.

Remembering the holiness of Sabbath is a key to health, happiness, and peace. The traditional thirty-nine prohibitions against working on the Jewish Sabbath are what one scholar calls "the most precious, inestimable pearl" of Sabbath tranquility. Most of the Ten Commandments begin with "Thou shalt not...." The prohibitions against stealing, lying, murdering, and the like, if practiced with a fullness of heart, set us free to turn our energies to other things more precious—honesty, fidelity, generosity, and love.¹ Sometimes it is necessary to stop one thing before another thing can begin.

Wayne Muller, author of *Sabbath*, tells of living for a while in Santa Fe. In their backyard he and his wife created a diversity of life forms on that small plot of desert soil. Many varieties of flowers and trees that attracted many varieties of birds, animals, and reptiles. Muller tells of discovering the miracle of perennials when he planted tulip bulbs. After planting the bulbs months back, in April of the next year he watch the pointed, green leaves push their way up through the cold ground. Two days later they were all gone. They had been eaten to stubs. For the next two years, he watched the same pattern—bulbs pushing their way up through the soil for an inch or so, only to be eaten back to the ground. While he wanted all of creation to enjoy his flowers, the people at the local nursery told him to place a 10" fence around the bulbs to keep out the jackrabbits. "Ten inches would be enough." The next year he enjoyed the colorful mixture of tulips

¹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath* (New York, Bantam Books: 1999), 140-143.

surrounding the birdbath.² Sometimes it is necessary to stop one thing before another thing can begin.

Observing the rhythm of life is necessary to experience renewal. Our world is created with a rhythm. The earth tilts on its axis providing seasons of growth and dormancy. The earth rotates on its axis once every twenty-four hours providing sunlight and darkness, necessary for the growth and health of plants and animals. The sea tide comes in and goes out consistent with the gravitational pull of the moon. Low tide occurred for us this morning at 6:40am; high tide will occur in about two hours (1pm). Carlus Linnaeus, an eighteenth-century Swedish botanist, became so enamored with the rhythms of life and nature that he grew a garden that could tell time. He planted flowers that opened or closed their blossoms an hour apart.

Dr. Richard Felder of Atlanta was a concert organist before becoming a noted doctor in the field of experiential psychotherapy. In his book by that title (*Experiential Psychotherapy*, University Press: 1991) he speaks of the natural tone inherent in the earth. Its frequency is about four cycles per second—far too low for humans to hear. Felder would sometimes use music in the process of his therapy. One of the quickest ways to slow our heart rate and relax is to listen to a string instrument (piano, violin, viola, or cello) playing at a tempo of 60 to 72 beats per minute, allowing the heart rate to begin synchronizing with the rhythm of the music. Contemplation and mental clarity increase when our bodies are at a restful state. Why do you think the “Baby Einstein,” “Baby Mozart,” and the “Baby Bach” series are so successful with small children?

Taking walks, especially out of doors in nature, gets us into the rhythm of life and allows us refreshment and renewal.

Jesus has much to teach us about caring for ourselves. After the fatigue of being pressed by the multitude, he would often “go up on a hillside alone” or pull off by himself in order to connect with the spiritual and emotional energy of Abba Father. He balanced work with play and intensity with rest. It endowed him with the gift of discernment, enabled him to listen beyond a person’s words, perceive one’s heart’s desire.

² Ibid., p. 141.

Observing a Sabbath in your lifestyle has an important sensual dimension. Whether it is getting your hands in the soil to plant flowers, wading a stream to flyfish, walking a beach barefooted, or smelling the scent of a lighted candle at dinner with your beloved, your children, or even alone, the flame, smell, and sound encourages peace for our soul.

Moses encountered a burning bush and the presence of God called out to him to “put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” The rabbis interpret this not so much as a warning to Moses because this particular ground is holy, but rather that the shoes represent something dead or foreign between our feet and the ground on which we stand. With bare feet, Moses could literally feel the holiness come up into him.

The Talmud prescribes the Sabbath as a time for love-making, emphasizing sensuality and touch. At the Last Supper, Jesus took off his clothes, wrapped himself in a towel, pour water over the naked feet of his disciples and bathed them.

At the Keenagers luncheon last Thursday, I was sitting at a table in which the subject of hospital care came up. Two retired nurses recalled earlier days when more personal time could be spent with patients, even giving them a back rub with cream before they went to sleep. Today, such personal touching is replaced with more medication and a heavier load of administration for caregivers. But, the loving touch of another fosters healing and creates it own Sabbath.

What is more soothing to a young child than to be rocked to sleep by a mother or father? Observing Sabbaths rocks us and holds us until we can remember who we are. We take in the smell of salty air, the fragrance of flowers, the sound of ducks and geese, music for the heart, and memories that strengthen our souls. And, when our Sabbath is over and we return to our routine, we carry the fragrance of rest in our bodies.

Jennifer would say that I am preaching more to myself today than anyone else...and I probably am. So, give your cell phone a break. Feel the warmth of sunshine and wind on your face. Sing to your pets and children. Eat. Drink. Smell. And, remember who you are.

Psalms 147:1-11, 20c

1 Praise the Lord!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
3 He heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.
4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.
7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
8 He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
9 He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.
10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.
20a Praise the Lord!

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.