

Treasure Island: The Pause that Refreshes
Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6
June 18, 2006

Here is a headline from Monday's *USA Today*: "Lunch break become briefer as 'hour' shrinks." The article begins asking, "What lunch? More employees today are forgoing the traditional lunch and taking an abbreviated afternoon break instead, using the time they'd normally eat to keep working or get other errands done. It's a sign of just how time-starved employees have become: More than half of employees take 30 minutes or less to eat, according to a survey of more than 1,000 workers on behalf of KFC."¹

Not only is the forfeiture of regular breaks illegal; it is also unhealthy. In our culture being overworked has become a badge of courage, but people need a break.

This is not new knowledge learned in the recent past. Nearly all faith traditions teach about Sabbath, about taking a time of rest, of refraining from work. Sabbath is ancient wisdom. The word Sabbath has roots in the Babylonian word, *sappatu*, which means, the time of quieting the heart; to stop; to have cessation of activity; to living in the present moment.²

Buddhists practice Sabbath according to the lunar calendar on the new full and quarter moons as a day for feasting, meditating and reflecting on teachings. For Muslims, Sabbath is on Friday.

For centuries, in obedience to the biblical commands, the Jewish people have ceased their labor on the seventh day, beginning with sundown on Friday and continuing through sundown on Saturday. Jewish law states that work should not be done on Sabbath, and work is defined as whatever requires changing the natural, material world.

Many of the first Christians were also Jews who continued the observation of Shabbat, abstaining from work on Saturday. They also observed Sunday as a holy day, although it was a work day. The first day of the week was the day the first disciples had experience the risen Christ. They continued to celebrate Sundays as "little Easters." They would gather Sunday morning early for communion and again in the evening for an agape meal. In the fourth century Constantine declared Sunday a day of rest in the Roman Empire. At that time the rest and worship of Sabbath became integrated for Christians. Today the majority of Christians worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, the day the disciples experienced Christ's resurrection.

Sabbath is one of the treasures God has given us for living on this "treasure island" we call Earth. It is a time of stepping back from the

toxicity of life, to feel our feelings, and to gain some perspective. Too frequently, however, we bury the treasure of Sabbath beneath our busyness, our sense of self-importance, our fear and anxiety. We have come to base our worth and value upon our productivity; simply sitting to be without doing is considered a waste of time. Many of us perceive ourselves as far more indispensable than any of us ever are. If we were to stop working and doing for one day a week, the world would go on without us. I tend to fall into the fear trap of believing thinking I'm not doing the best possible job if I don't make one more visit, call one more person, write one more note, refine my message one more time.

Today we spend some time shaking off all those excuses for avoiding Sabbath time. We revisit the biblical roots and reasons for Sabbath. We seek to reclaim the God-given treasure of Sabbath.

The most familiar version of the Ten Commandments is found in Exodus 20. The reason given for keeping the Sabbath is grounded in creation: "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." The Hebrew word used for God's resting literally means "to catch one's breath." Do that right now – catch your breath. Breathe deeply for a moment. Breathe in the fresh air of God's Holy Spirit. Exhale the anxiety and impurities within. Sabbath is meant to be a time for breathing deeply, a time for renewal. It is a time for being more than doing.

The seventh day of creation was a day in which God delighted in the creation. God stopped to bless life. God created the Sabbath as a time for ceasing from labor, pausing for refreshment, and renewing life. The Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, suggests that it took the creation of rest before the universe was complete. God's creation was not finished without Sabbath to rest and reflect on God's work. The pause for refreshment is part of the natural rhythm of life. If God, who possesses unlimited resources of energy and power, needs a Sabbath, how much more do we finite beings need a Sabbath day?

There is a law in Tokyo, Japan, that the city zoo must be closed for two days each month. The law was necessary because officials discovered that the animals were showing signs of extreme emotional distress from being constantly exposed to the public. Like the zoo animals, we, too, show signs of emotional distress from constantly being "on the go." We might take a lesson from the zookeepers and from God. We need regular, weekly and daily, Sabbath time when we are removed from the things that cause us stress. It is part of the natural design of creation.

We need the God-given treasure of Sabbath - a pause that refreshes and renews.

The second listing of the Ten Commandments which we heard from Deuteronomy 5 offers an alternative reason for keeping Sabbath. This time the reason for observing the Sabbath day, is to “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 5:15). The need for keeping holy time is grounded in the Hebrew people’s experience of exodus. After years of oppressive bondage as slaves in Egypt, they were released. They were set free to live without chains and fetters. They were liberated from the pain and oppression which had weighed them down.

There is a social and corporate dimension to Sabbath. Sabbath is a social institution for everyone’s rest and freedom from slavery. “Slavery and oppression by implication are violations of the life freely given by God, without distinction of inherited or achieved status....The nature of Sabbath implies an understanding of justice that includes the right of equal access to the material and cultural wealth of the land, conditioned by personal need, labor, gift, and calling.”³

This social dimension of Sabbath means that all human beings have a right to cease their labor and productivity in order to rest in God’s presence and be renewed in God’s image. Each individual has intrinsic value, not merely utilitarian worth.

Blue laws restricting certain activities, especially shopping hours, on Sundays are rooted in the allowance for Sunday Christian worship. Laws prohibiting retail and business activity provided the opportunity for all persons to have a day of rest from labor, a sabbath day for spiritual renewal. A few states continue to prohibit car dealerships from selling or trading automobiles on Sundays. Undoubtedly there would be a great revolt if we sought to legislate a weekly day of rest in our day and age, but it would probably be a sound move for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of all persons.

For some persons to cease labor, they need access to decent wages, affordable housing, and health care. Others need freedom from oppressive dictators. Some need societal acceptance of who they are in spite of their race, creed, gender, sexual orientation, class or age. We have a lot of work to do to free people from the fetters that bind them so that they can enjoy the treasure of Sabbath rest.

Last week at our California-Nevada Annual Conference we heard that nearly fifty teams of Volunteers in Mission have gone to the Gulf Coast

since September to assist in cleaning up homes and renovating a church to serve as a dormitory for volunteers. They are using weeks of vacation or retirement to restore life and livelihoods for others. We heard from the Director of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), Rev. Paul Dirdak, a member of our Annual Conference, that the United States has entered into a contract with UMCOR, so that UMCOR is providing case management for 400,000 of the most vulnerable survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We shared our financial resources to support the United Methodist Church of West Angola with much needed school supplies and teacher support.

God's people continue to cry out in captivity. We need another exodus. Our sisters and brothers around the world long for liberation from bondage and deliverance from despair. Sabbath is a social institution, meant for the well-being and welfare of all God's people.

We need Sabbath – a pause that liberates and frees.

The pause that refreshes is meant to renew God's people for service and work, and it is intended to liberate and free God's people from oppression. In light of these meaning of Sabbath, we turn to this morning's reading from Mark's gospel. As a Jew Jesus practices Sabbath. He knows its meaning of creation and liberation from the Hebrew Scriptures. He also knows that there are exceptions to the prohibition to work. It is acceptable to free animals in danger or to tend to human life in danger. In the minds of the Pharisees, however, plucking grain and healing a withered hand (not a life threatening condition) stretch the exceptions. Thus they challenge Jesus.

Jesus does have a tendency to push the limits. He is not condemning the law, but returning to its original meaning. He is trying to show that the law is not to be used against others. The law is meant to give life. In his time, the law had become hard, not life-giving as it was in Moses' time. The Sabbath is meant for creation and liberation. It is about grace, not law. It's about doing good, not harm. It's about saving life, not destroying life.

What does Sabbath mean in our lives? We need to find a rhythm in life which includes both rest and action, Sabbath and ministry, play and work, letting go and taking on. Both are facets of a single life, both grounded in God's presence. Sabbath is a piece of time that opens space for God to be active in our lives. We reclaim a Sabbath day to attend to the heartbeat of God. A Sabbath day may include worship and prayer, time with family and friends, rest and play, reading and walking. Each day might be marked by a quality called Sabbath, a time set aside to center and focus on God.

As you move through this summer season, may you find daily moments of sabbath rest in God's presence. May we as people of faith be so bold as to follow one of the Ten Commandments and declare for ourselves a weekly sabbath day when we will rest from labor, allow others to rest from their labors, and dwell in the beauty, the love, the life-giving presence of our God.

We began by sharing the study revealing shorter lunch breaks taken by Americans. Researchers have also observed that people in the United States are not getting enough sleep and struggle through the days with "sleep deficit." True rest is becoming a rare and endangered phenomenon. A story from the tradition of desert spirituality recounts how some monks asked Abba Poemen if they should awaken those who fell asleep during worship. Abba Poemen responded: "For my part, when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest."⁴

My friends, our bodies are begging for it, our relationships need it, our society craves it, our God commands it: Sabbath rest, the pause that refreshes and renews, the freedom that liberates and restores humanity. May you reclaim the great treasure of God, placing your heads on the knees of our loving God, where you will find rest.

¹ Stephanie Armour, *USA Today*, June 12, 2006.

² “Sabbath Heart,” *Journey Into Freedom*, March 2004.

³ Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), p. 86.

⁴ Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 151.
Quoted by John S. Mogabgab, *Weavings*, March/April 1993, p. 3.

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