

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 5, 2023
Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 12:1-8

We Are What We Eat, Part 5:
Who Needs a Sabbath?

When you think about it, we live in a 24/7 world. It never stops. For one thing, our planet never stops rotating, or for that matter revolving. And that is a good thing. It's part of what sustains life. It's part of God's creation, God's wisdom.

Unfortunately, that seems to have given permission for the world to never stop working. It's become a matter of human pride and hubris. "Our customer service agents are available 24/7!" so many companies and businesses like to brag. As if that is the pinnacle of success.

But the wonders of our solar system aside, 24/7 is not what God intended for God's creatures, for all those who live on planet earth. We're supposed to live on 24/6 time. Or so the timeless wisdom of the Bible tells us.

Let's turn first of all to the very first book of the Bible. Which begins with a story, namely the story of Creation. Which tells us that on successive days, God created day and night, earth and sky, land and sea, plants and animals of myriad kinds. And finally, on the sixth day, God created humankind. And told them to be fruitful, and to multiply.

And then in Chapter 2 we read, "*And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.*" The word Sabbath doesn't appear in this passage; not yet. But God rested. In response to my sermon title we could say that God needed a Sabbath. (Interestingly the word seven in Hebrew is *sheva*. Which happens to start with an "sh" sound. Perhaps as in, shh!

And not only did God rest on the *shh-eviyit* day. But God blessed that day. Hallowed it. Made it holy. Which literally means God set it aside. We could even say that the Sabbath was God's culminating act of creation. And thus we see that there is a rhythm of time to Creation. A holy rhythm.

Now let's jump to the second book of the Bible. In which God creates a people. He heard their cries, delivered them from slavery, and made a covenant with them. Starting with the ten commandments. "*I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" "Therefore," (the word is implied), or "in return," *you shall have no other gods (small g) before me.* In other words, "I want to be your only God" (capital G). And notice that the first three commandments all have to do with the holiness of that relationship. *You shall have no other gods; you shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not make wrongful use of God's name.*

And then comes the fourth commandment. Which still comes before (and apparently is more important than) the commandments to honor their father and mother; to not murder; to not commit adultery; to not steal; to not bear false witness; and to not covet. The fourth commandment is "*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.*" He has given the seventh day a name. *Shabbat*. Another "sh" word. It comes from the verb meaning to stop, to cease. (Shh.) To stop or cease what? God is pretty specific. "*Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh (shh-eviyt) day is a sabbath (shh-avat) to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work.*"

Now, there's nothing wrong with work. On the contrary! We're supposed to work. God created us to work. To provide for ourselves and our families, yes. But not just that. To provide for the common good. To create (right along with God). To produce. To spend our time meaningfully. "But the seventh day is a sabbath to me; 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.*" And then God reminds us how, when he created the world, he did it in six days, *but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.* Made it holy. Set it aside. There's a rhythm to life as God made it. A holy rhythm. A rhythm between work and rest.

And then we come to the New Testament, and the story of Jesus. And we're reminded how rules, intended to be helpful, can become twisted. Or as I wrote in this past week's e-newsletter, how easily we can get confused between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. How in human hands, even rules can become gods (small g).

It was the Sabbath. Jesus' disciples were hungry. They were walking through a field of grain, and his disciples picked some in order to eat it. Some Pharisees saw this, and accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the law. After all, was gathering grain not working? And was working on the sabbath not prohibited by the fourth commandment?

And so Jesus pointed out how their own esteemed patriarchs had, in the past, appeared to violate the sabbath by going into the temple and eating the bread of the Presence. And Jesus said, "*I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.*" Did not God himself say "*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*"? You're confusing the letter of the law with the spirit of the law.

And on that same day, Jesus had entered a synagogue, and healed a man with a withered hand. Once again the Pharisees accused him, saying "*Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?*" "*He said to them, suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.*" Duh! And then we read, "*But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.*"

Some have said that Jesus repeatedly violated the Sabbath in order to abolish it, and that it is no longer necessary to "honor" it. But the gospels also repeatedly show how Jesus did indeed honor the sabbath. Jesus needed sabbath. And that rather than abolish it, God sent him to clarify its meaning. So that his future followers might not confuse the letter with the spirit, the trees with the forest. Even as they—we—now celebrate the Sabbath on the Sunday, the Lord's day, first day of the week rather than the last. After all, have we not read that *the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath*"?

Throughout our history, Anabaptist-Mennonites have continued to remember the Sabbath. I looked it up in our Confession of Faith. Interestingly, I didn't find it in the table of contents. None of the Confession's twenty-four articles of faith bears the title of "Sabbath." Guess where I found it? In Article 21, which is entitled "Christian Stewardship." The article begins by saying that everything in this world and in our lives belongs to God. Our time. Our money. Our bodies. Our "possessions," which includes our land and livestock (or "pets," as some of us call them). Our job is simply to care for all that God has entrusted to us. In other words, our Mennonite Confession of Faith focuses on the spirit of sabbath, rather than the letter of sabbath. (But maybe the next one should give Sabbath its own article!)

Who needs a sabbath? We all do. You will hear that not only from preachers, but from spiritual directors, medical doctors, and yes even farmers who care for their land as well as their animals. Everything God created needs sabbath. 24/1! We need it in order to remain healthy—physically, mentally, and spiritually. We need it in order that we might remain grounded in God. The one who repeatedly hears our cries, and delivers us from bondage.

In closing, I'd like to share with you a list I made of seven ways we might honor the sabbath. They're not rules. Because the only rule is that we simply honor it. Here are some principles for what that might look like.

- 1) Get re-grounded in God. We could, I don't know, participate in a community that worships regularly! (Sunday mornings seems to work well for some of us.) We could sing some "hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs" (as Paul calls them in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). We could spend some time in prayer. Read the Bible. Read other books that help you focus on your faith. As medical doctor turned Christian speaker Matthew Sleeth says, "I just want to get to know Jesus better."
- 2) Celebrate our relationships not just with God but with one another. Spend some time with family, or friends, including the church. Maybe even eat together. That's something we all like to do.
- 3) Cease. Cease what? In some ways at least, maybe it's not the "what" that matters. As long as we cease or stop something. Work is only one possibility. Cease for one day or afternoon or even an hour or two each week something that enslaves us in ways great or small. Turning off the television can also be a good choice, but again, it's not the only one. Matthew Sleeth recommends turning off our cell phones. Huh. Or maybe even simply cease talking for a while!
- 4) Rest. Naps are a great way to do that, but once again they are not the only way. Reading something you enjoy can be restful. (Some of us find ourselves reading the inside of your eyelids eventually anyway!)
- 5) Do something to care for yourself, for your health, your wholeness. Eat an orange. Go for a walk or a run or a swim. Do yoga. (Did I mention, take a nap? ☺)
- 6) Do something nice for or with our pets. For that matter, learn something from them. (I don't know about yours, but both my dog and cat live in a state of perpetual, 24/7 sabbath! They're experts, you might say!)
- 7) Finally, bask in the beauty of God's creation. A flock of Canadian geese as they fly. The stars at night. The beauty of a piece of music. Go to the symphony. Go to an art museum. Take time to notice that beauty is everywhere, if we just take the time to look, or listen, or smell, or taste, or touch.

Who needs a sabbath? Well, can I see a show of hands? I know I do!

Amen.

As I said, work and labor and jobs themselves aren't bad. They're good. Make that very good! Let's sing our final hymn together ("God, Bless the Work Your People Do," VT 528).