

Sermon: "Lord of the Sabbath"

June 3, 2018

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Sycamore Congregational Church UCC

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6 The Message Interpretation (after sermon)

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

Sermon:

There are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis, in chapter 1 and 2. They are actually quite different, so please take a look sometime, including right now if you like, if you like.

The first creation story, in Chapter 1, is the one in which God works hard for the first six "days". We can think of each these days as being one way of saying, "a long time". God creates the first people on the 6th day. This is what this scripture tells us: "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 it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." For most of us Protestants, the 7th day is Sunday. Ideally, it's a day reserved for worshipping God and taking it easier than the rest of the week. For Jews, Saturday is Shabbat; and for some Muslims, Friday is the Sabbath.

The key thing is that the Sabbath is intended to be a day of rest. Just before Moses shares the 10 commandments, he tells them about even more important than the 10 commandments:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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."

Even *before* Moses tells them to honor mother and father, he tells them that the Sabbath is a holy day, for God consecrated it. To consecrate something is to "set it aside" for a special and higher purpose. Not only are we to set aside the Sabbath for a special and higher purpose, we are to "stay in it". God doesn't want us to just start keeping one day of the week holy, but we must also stay in a Sabbath state of mind.

A Sabbath state of mind is one uncluttered by activities, even good activities. When we don't set aside time for a Sabbath, life becomes one day of work or chores after another, with no end in sight. This is harmful, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Now I know that not everyone has a life that allows them the spaciousness of a Sabbath. One of my sisters creates special effects for movies and videos in Los Angeles, as a freelancer. Her business is heavily seasonal. Employees are hired, worked long hours and then laid off after season pilot videos are completed. For her this year, that means potentially no work or pay between mid-July and September. My sister's current company asked the employees to look at their calendars in June and July and to commit to working as many seven-day workweeks as they can – until they get laid off in mid-July.

Since she has been in this business for many years, the costs to her mental and physical health are very high. Because technology keeps advancing, she must learn new software packages on her own time. As a result, she has no space in her life for a relationship, family, or friends. When I stayed with her for a couple days last summer I was shocked to see that her apartment doesn't have a single picture on the wall or object of beauty.

To cope with the demands of this life, she relies on a habit that helps her deal with stress but that has long term health effects. She smokes cigarettes, which she realizes will one day kill her.

I know some of you work in similarly demanding work environments. Others are caregivers to family members who need a high level of support, due to mental or physical challenges. Outside of our community, the working poor often have to work multiple jobs to survive.

Sometimes life's demands can be like a series of flashfloods, that strip away everything living in the path of water, including our health and our souls.

God never intended any of you, any of us to live in a barren canyon or bare apartment, devoid of beauty.

So what can we do, when we are pressed on every side?

First, be honest and recognize that we are unable to cope successfully with the demands of our lives. For many years, I prided myself on being able to work hard and long hours, until I began to see the wreckage in my own life. That wreckage came in the form of damaged relationships within my family, extra weight, bad decisions, and bitter cynicism. When we ignore our inability to cope, that is exactly when we can do the greatest damage to ourselves and others. Let me repeat that, for both your and my benefit: When we ignore our inability to cope, that is exactly when we can do the greatest damage to ourselves and others.

Usually we are our own worst Pharisees. We create demands on ourselves that we can't really fulfill. We draw rigid lines about we will allow ourselves to do, as did the Pharisees in today's story about work on the Sabbath. The Pharisee within us says, "If I lose this job I will never find another", "I have no choice", "If I don't do this, no one else will." That is the Pharisee, the one that creates artificial laws and demands. The Pharisee tells you what you "should" do, whether it gives your life meaning or not.

Tell the Pharisee within yourself, "no". Say, "I will find another path". Say to the one controlling you, "God has given me a choice between life and death. I chose life!" Or from the words of Joshua, "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord". In this case, to honor God means to keep the Sabbath.

Second, recognize those things that ARE in your control. Can you breathe? Take a moment to breathe. <had the congregation breathe three times slowly> Can you sit quietly for a few minutes? Do so, even if by doing so you become more aware of your own stress. Ignoring your own stress just makes you more vulnerable. I know it did and it does for me.

Confront your own Pharisee and say, “no, I can’t and I won’t do this to myself anymore.” I know one of you goes for a walk during lunch time. Get out of the office or your home and get a change of scenery. Not only is the change of location different, it is about reclaiming your own agency, your own right to live, to be alive, to have control over your life.

When we don’t take care of ourselves, that’s when we become vulnerable, to tripping over a crack in the sidewalk, to spending too much money, or to ignoring our friends and family.

If you are a caregiver, don’t wait too long to get help. Remember my confession that I did the greatest damage to myself when I pretended I was coping with stress. Caregivers without respite care place themselves and their loved ones at risk. Find a friend, neighbor, or pay someone, if you can, so you can get a break. Some of you do this and it is so important.

Find something that is truly yours, that you enjoy doing, that breathes life, even if is for a few moments a day. Paint, try a new recipe, grow vegetables, walk to and around the Farmer’s Market. Meet someone new. Have a conversation.

However long your Sabbath time may be; the length of a single breath, a noontime walk, or a full day per week, focus that time on you and on God. Remember the words of Jesus, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”

Claim and stick to your Sabbath, for however long it is. This is the commandment that comes before the 10 commandments, in part because taking care of yourself helps you *keep* the 10 commandments.

Jesus often left the crowds to pray in silence. He shared a special meal with his friends right in the middle of the most challenging week of his life. At the beginning of the week he upset the temple priests, at the end of the week he would be crucified. Right in the middle of the week, that was the time that he took a Sabbath – he took his friends aside from all the craziness and simply was present with them and with himself. There was no special, extravagant meal. Instead, by invoking the presence of God, he created, he recognized the spacious and interconnected nature of all life in a sacred moment. He shared a meal, a glass of wine, and said do this – care for yourselves and each other – do this in remembrance of me. When you and I take a precious moment, to care for ourselves, we reclaim our own places at God’s table – a table where there is enough time and space for everyone.

You are a beloved child of God. You deserve your place in the sun. Name and claim your Sabbath, each week, each day and in individual breaths of life. Your life and those around you depend upon it. If you do so, the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Mark 2:23-3:6 The Message Interpretation

²³⁻²⁴ One Sabbath day he was walking through a field of ripe grain. As his disciples made a path, they pulled off heads of grain. The Pharisees told on them to Jesus: “Look, your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules!”

²⁵⁻²⁸ Jesus said, “Really? Haven’t you ever read what David did when he was hungry, along with those who were with him? How he entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, with the Chief Priest Abiathar right there watching—holy bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat—and handed it out to his companions?” Then Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath. He’s in charge!”

3 ¹⁻³ Then he went back in the meeting place where he found a man with a crippled hand. The Pharisees had their eyes on Jesus to see if he would heal him, hoping to catch him in a Sabbath infraction. He said to the man with the crippled hand, “Stand here where we can see you.”

⁴ Then he spoke to the people: “What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?” No one said a word.

⁵⁻⁶ He looked them in the eye, one after another, angry now, furious at their hard-nosed religion. He said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” He held it out—it was as good as new! The Pharisees got out as fast as they could, sputtering about how they would join forces with Herod’s followers and ruin him.

May God bless the reading, hearing and living out of these words.