

Sunday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>

Sermon Title: Lord of the Sabbath

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6

Theme: Honor the Spirit of the Sabbath in all we do; worship, work, recreation

At the heart of Proverbs 8 is a description of Wisdom as a theological fusion of thought, deed, and speech, a wholeness of being as characterized by the words: Shalom and Shalvah, bringing together outer and inner peace. Indeed, both Wisdom and Peace are gifts of God, not demands of God. This fusion encompasses both the Hebrew *Dabar* and the Greek *Logos*, both the Ten Words gifted to Moses and the Word en-fleshed in Immanuel. We recognize this fusion in a popular saying: that we must not be ‘so busy with the’ work of the Lord’ that we forget the ‘Lord of the work.’

A few years ago, I invested a little over \$100 to purchase a book by O.C. Edwards, Jr. entitled *A History of Preaching*. I am now reading through the section of sermons from the early Middle Ages and I came across a sermon attributed to Caesarius of Arles from the sixth century. He writes (preaches) that when we become restless and weary in the hunger of our souls, we should ask God to put a ‘sabbath in our heart.’ He describes such a thing, a sabbath in our heart, as being ‘swift to hear and slow to answer,’ letting faith, rather than good works, be the firstborn of our heart. In our current theologies, we are prone to say: ‘we love because God first loved us.’ Yet, whether one starts with good works and then finds God, or one first finds God, and then responds with good works, the result is the same. Faith and Action meet in the middle! Dispelling the noise, we may find the quiet center, or we can find our solitude in the midst of a noisy crowd. Noise may be present in silence as easily as it may be found in sonic waves.

Richard Rohr once penned: ‘religion is one of the safest places to hide from God.’ If we strive to be religion-less in our Christianity (to use a term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer), then we need not hide from God to find our rest. Let faith be the firstborn of our heart, says Caesarius of Arles, and if it is so, then we can openly find our rest in the presence of God. Not in the Neverland East of Eden (Gen. 4:16), but in the Ever-land of an Omni-Present God (Ps. 139:7-12; Jer. 23:23). In fact, idolatry is sometimes defined as carving out a space to hide from God. Sabbath in our heart cannot be hidden; it is revealed in God’s presence. Take a time of rest to let your faith grow unimpeded. In other words, rest yourself up, rather

than resting yourself down. In Paul's Letter to Philemon, he writes: "Refresh (or Rest-up) your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus!" Take a sabbath of the heart when you are weary of good works. Don't forswear them but come back to them after you have fed your faith.

We would be remiss if we did not talk about Mary and Martha in this regard. In the story from Luke 10, Martha says: "Lord, tell Mary to come help me with the house work!" and Jesus declines saying: "Martha, Martha, you are distracted and worried about many things; when there is only need of one thing, and Mary has chosen the better part (listening to what Jesus was teaching)." Martha, take a Sabbath of the heart! Feed your faith!

Yet, on the other hand, with Jesus, it was not just about his teachings, apocalyptic or otherwise, but also about urgent action. The wild man of the tombs, the Gerasene (Lk. 8:26-39), could break every chain ever placed upon him except the personal and emotional chains of the past which tightly bound him in the deepest part of his spirit. Jesus unlocked these spiritual chains and left him in his right mind, even sending him forth to proclaim a "Sabbath" of the heart. In another act of healing mercy, Jesus broke the 18-year imprisonment of an untouchable woman, healing her "disabling spirit" on the Sabbath (Lk. 13:11). In healing the man born blind, as related in John, chapter 9, Jesus works his healing on the Sabbath, putting mud on the man's eyes and sending him to the Pool of Siloam. Like many others whom Jesus healed, he was told to show himself to the Temple Priests, or the Pharisees, to confirm the healing (e.g. ten lepers, Lk 17:11-19).

It has been debated in the past whether we should even attempt to legislate morality; all the laws in the world have failed to produce a peaceful world. Laws written on stone tablets or parchments over the centuries have not evolved into "laws written on the human heart." (Jer. 31:33). The Magna Carta and International Bill of Human Rights seem today more necessary than ever! In my lifetime with the Disciples of Christ, I have witnessed regional groups discussing among themselves whether agreements between regions should be written down and signed, or simply validated by oral consensus. In ancient times, those trying to keep and honor the Sabbath, wanted to enforce its practice with punishments, rather than trust it inside each human heart. We in the larger church have failed to come to theological agreement about basic human nature; whether inherently good or intrinsically evil. Would, could, the church ever be witness to a Sabbath Jubilee?

(The blast of the horn celebrating a restoration of basic trust.) In such a theological discussion, in any past or present time zone, Jesus declares himself to be Lord of the Sabbath, the arbiter of the heart (Col. 3:15).

In today's scripture from Mark, Jesus heals an unknown man with a withered hand while the Pharisees are watching. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus explains: "What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep?" In Mark's version, Jesus says: "Stretch out your hand!" And he obeyed on the Sabbath, and Jesus healed on the Sabbath, to send a message to the Pharisees and others, that he was Lord of the Sabbath; and that they should stop hardening their hearts, and instead, soften them. Just as David and his soldiers ate of the Bread of the Presence (1 Sam 21:6), when they were starving and no food was available to them, so also many were allowed to glean the edges of the field at harvest (Lev. 19:9), even if it was on the Sabbath, because satisfying hunger and thirst was more important than the Laws of the Sabbath, and after all, Jesus is also Lord of the Harvest as well.

The words of Jesus establish the standard that any Law must meet to be sacred, the standard of neighbor-love. The Sabbath Laws are a case in point. Jesus gives it to us directly, 'the Sabbath was made for humans, for us. We were not made for the Sabbath.' So, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and, in so doing, disobeyed the Sabbath Law. **IF** a law does not follow the standard of neighbor-love, **IF** it does not have love in its roots, it may be disobeyed with integrity. For many, Law and Gospel are antithetical; the Spirit of the Law overcoming the Letter of the Law (2 Cor. 3:6). But, strangely enough, we also find in Paul's letters a reference to another kind of law, the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). This other kind of Law is the law of love, loving your neighbor as yourself, sharing each other's burdens, a special kind of law the requires us to love one another. The summation of all law, in whatever form, is embodied in love of God, self, and neighbor. With regard to the so-called food laws, (food offered to idols, then resold for profit) Paul argues that they should be honored precisely because of the perception of those watching our examples, not because they are inherently necessary, which they are not, he explains. Laws are a mirror to the human heart, he says, but grace transforms our hearts, re-engages them to good, re-translates them inside the gospel story of love.

The image of one Bread (*ártos*) and one Cup (*potérion*) extends in meaning to all

that God provides for us to both sustain us day-by-day, and to prosper our living. Christ is the Holy Bread of Presence that unites us as one. Every Sabbath, the priests of the temple placed twelve (12) loaves of bread on the table inside the temple, the twelve becoming united into one face of God, one Bread of the Presence of God. The one face of God is completed in Christ Jesus our Lord. The twelve tribes have become one united presence through the Anointed Christ. The many priests have become one priest whose main and primary characteristic is empathy, being tempted in every way as we are tempted, understanding our pain and weaknesses from the inside out, offering mercy and grace to all (Heb. 4:14-16). Born in Bethlehem, literally the 'House of Bread,' Jesus is our one Bread of Life that "gives life to the world" (John 6:33-35). The Anointed One is the bread and wine of the new covenant, as typified by Melchizedek, King of Salem, who brought both bread and wine to make covenant with the God of Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20; Heb. 7:15-17).

Seven steps lead down into the mikveh, says a modern Jewish ritual. (Created by Matia Rania Angelou, Deborah Issokson, and Judith D. Kummer for *Mayyim Hayyim*, Living Waters Community.) The number seven is important, because God rested on the seventh day from his creation; the number seven suggests wholeness, completion and perfect peace, like the word "Sabbath." Before moving to the first step: you say: 'I come here today to find healing for my body, my heart, and my soul. I prepare my mind and heart to release the past and allow the pain to dissolve.'

While on the first step, you say: 'Here I am; I am ready to be transformed.' Move to the second step, and say: 'there is no need for adornment or artifice in the living waters.' Go to the third step and say: 'You have designed me, O God, in perfect creation.' And, then to the fourth step and say: 'I am made in the image of God; I will emerge from the mikveh as on the day of my birth.' Go to the fifth step: 'The soul that God has given me is pure. I am ready to enter the sweet waters of the mikveh.' And to the sixth step, 'May my words, my breath, my song be a reflection of your light within me.' At the water's edge, while taking the seventh step into the mikveh, you then say: 'Source of all Life, In your oneness, I find healing. In the promise of Your love, I am soothed. In Your wholeness, I too can become whole again. With Your help, I can repair the world.' Seven steps into the baptism of living waters and into the transformation of life. When you arise from the mikveh, on the first immersion, you say: 'Blessed are you God, Majestic Spirit of the

Universe who makes us holy by embracing us in living waters.’ Then, the second immersion: ‘God, heal me, body and soul. May my pain cease, May my strength increase; May my fears be released. May blessings, love and joy surround me.’ Arising we say: ‘Compassionate God, healer of my body, healer of my soul, heal me. Strengthen my ailing body; soothe my aching heart, mend my shattered existence. Make me whole.’ And, then finally, on the third immersion in the mikveh, say the words; ‘Blessed is the Eternal One who gives me the ability to remember those blessings which are still mine to affirm and the strength to arise anew each day.’

So, there is another side to Sabbath, one that, is constantly changing inside us; day by day, as we change, as we grow older on the outside, we are actually growing younger on the inside. As we decay in our outer life, we are also, at the same time being born from heaven’s womb, fresh and new, of a kind never seen before, on the inside. I love the image Paul gives us in verse 4 of chapter 4 of this Letter: “God has shone a light into our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6), has sent a shining light into our hearts,” that brings new, fresh living, renewal and hope, even in the midst of hardship, of which there is plenty. Rather than running away from the dangers of hardship, Paul encourages us to walk into the presence of God in courage, to be the bearer of good news to all.

More often than not, we want to hear the bad news first. We are fascinated by bad news, news of tragedy and helplessness, news of hopeless causes, news of frightening details that entrap us in an unchangeable fate, or a horrible destiny. But that should never be our first focus or fascination. We need to consider the good news first. What IS news worthy is NOT our sin or our hardships or our afflictions. What IS news worthy is the ever changing status of our soul, growing into new horizons and possibilities, renewed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. What IS news worthy is that Jesus has claimed us from the powers of death into life. What IS news worthy is that we are saved by his once-for-all sacrifice for each of us. What IS news worthy is the testimony of what is going on inside of us, day by day, renewing our hope and gracing our failures. Where are the reporters of the soul? Where are the broadcasters of new life? Where is the ‘breaking news’ of goodness and compassion in our world? Where are the reports of love and goodwill in our communities? Do we know them? Are we spreading these to those who have not heard?

Our lives should not be centered in fatigue, but in readiness; not in weariness but in renewed energy; not in boredom but in excitement. When you are weary, don't let the weariness into your heart. Rest up, don't rest down. Rest from your labor at the appropriate times, so you can greet the world with grace after the resting. Believe in the good news! There will always be bad news somewhere in the world, but what is notable is that good news everywhere. Lament the bad, but praise the good! The good feeds and nurtures our souls. "If there is anything of excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8)."

"Refresh your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:20)

I want you to accept Onesimus back into your heart (v12), not from compulsion, but voluntarily, not because of the profit or "usefulness" he may bring you now, but because there is another kind of usefulness that he may bring to all of us, measured not by material gain, but by the growth of the human heart.

So, Paul intentionally uses a new and different word in his conversation with Philemon. The Greek word for "refresh" is "anapepautai" which can loosely be translated "rest up." The prefix to the word carries the sense of "up" rather than "down." "Rest Up" . This type of resting is an intentional act of self-restraint, to stop, to pause, so that you can later return with intensity. The First Testament sometimes uses a phrase about God when angry with the people: "that God would not allow the people to enter into God's rest." We see this particularly with Massah and Meribah during the wandering in the wilderness. To enter into God's Rest, we must have stopped our quarrelsome and complaining ways and look for the "new" and the "unexpected," the manna instead of the full course meal. To enter into God's rest, we must use "rest up" rather than "rest down," for we still have much to do and rest is important in the overall success of our lives. First Testament professor, Richard Lowry, reminds us that in the Genesis story,

Work is a noun and rest is a verb, in other words, rest is not passive, but active. When God rests from God's labors, God is resting up and not resting down. There is more to be learned, more to be done, more to be accomplished than what we have seen before.

The ancient day of Sabbath is unique as a practice of faith. Sabbath was a time when no one worked, not the neighbor, not the stranger, not the servants or slaves, not the work animals—no one worked. Everyone rested on the Sabbath.

Everyone. You might remember that Jesus took exception to the Sabbath when people were enslaved to the Sabbath. The Sabbath is made for the people, not the people for the Sabbath, Jesus said. The Sabbath is celebrated because God rested on the seventh day from his creation of the world. As one scholar puts it, Sabbath does not say “no” to work, it only says “enough for now.” Let’s stop and celebrate our successes! Lest we find ourselves completely enslaved to our work. In the Genesis story, “rest” is a verb and “work” is the noun. You must actively pursue rest or you will not find it. You have worked hard. Now, it is time to rest. In the prologue to Paul’s letter to Philemon, Paul uses a phrase “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.” The word refreshed means that they have “rested up” and now are refreshed; they have not rested down into exhaustion. We need to “rest up.” We need to build up our strength for the days ahead. We need to restore our sanity and health. There is a song that our young people sing while in Kansas summer camp or retreats that goes like this:

I Bid You Good Night

Lay down, dear brother (sister, mother, father),  
Lay down and take your rest,  
Lay your head upon the Savior's breast,  
I love you, but Jesus loves you best,  
And I bid you goodnight, goodnight, goodnight.

Actively pursue your rest this weekend. You deserve it. You earned it. Be present to your family, to those who make your life worthwhile and meaningful. The world will get by without you while you rest. Turn off the television. Turn away from the binary and partisan promotion of news. Turn off the anger that the world brings you through the constant headlines. Restore your soul. Anchor yourself in the peace of Christ. The Sabbath is made for you. Alleluia! Amen.