

Reclaiming Sabbath: For the Rest of Your Life
(2) The Paradox of Letting Go
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
12 March 2006
Text: Mark 8:31-38

Some years ago, I decided I needed to go on a solitary retreat. I was fascinated by the accounts of friends and colleagues who had experienced insight and renewal in only the company of God and their own spirit....and I began to picture myself there. O, the deep thoughts and meaningful mysteries I would discover if I removed the ambient noise and constant activity of my life. So off I went to a friend's cottage on Lake Michigan, planning to spend the 48 hours in silence, reading, meditating, praying. After arriving around noon and settling in, I took a walk by water's edge, skipping stones and watching the gulls. I sat for a time in a comfortable Adirondack chair, musing about my life, asking God to guide its direction. I had purchased a lovely blank book to use as a journal and scratched a few lines. I ate an apple. Then I looked at a clock, and it was 2:30. Okay, okay, a little more meditation. Another walk. By four thirty I had jumped in the car and high-tailed it into the little resort town to chat up someone—anyone!—the check-out lady at the 7-11 store!—just so I wouldn't go nuts. That night I phoned some friends and asked them—begged them!---to join me the next day. The solitary retreat I had planned was over.

Even now, years after this incident, my palms still sweat when I remember how I felt during those few hours of silence and solitude. (I suspect I wouldn't be much better at it now. But I honestly don't know for sure because I've never tried it again.) What the experience did show me was how difficult it is for many of us whose lives are full and busy to let go...to disengage...to experience the vulnerability of relinquishing control of our lives for a time....and to rest in the grace of God. The biblical concept of "Sabbath" is the spiritual antidote to the hectic pace of contemporary life, calling us to restored balance between work and rest, between saving the world and savoring it, between self-absorption in daily duties and responsibilities, and worshiping the One who really does rule. During this Lenten season, we will explore Sabbath and consider how keeping it can nurture faith and can deepen our relationship with God by awakening us to God's presence and power in everyday life.

One of the reasons I think Sabbath is so hard for me, and for most of us, lies in its essential paradox. Perhaps not surprisingly, this paradox reveals the heart of Christian faith. It is stated explicitly in our gospel

text this morning, the first of three times Mark lays it out, as if he doesn't expect us to "get it" after one try. Here at the height of Jesus' popularity as a teacher and healer, he states that following him will be a losing proposition. Against all conventional wisdom, Jesus invites those who would follow him to let go of their life and take hold of true life. The paradox didn't sit well, then or now. Listen for God's Word to you, in the reading from the gospel according to Mark in the eighth chapter at the 31st verse (found on page 44 of the New Testament section of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along). [Mark 8:31-38]

To keep is to lose. To let go is to keep. It was hard to understand then, and it is hard to trust now. We can resonate with Peter's initial rejection of this paradox, his insistence that Jesus tone down predictions of his death. The human instinct for security and self-preservation is countered by a higher truth that can only be embraced by letting go of self-interest as the center of being. "Let go and let God" is the way some express it. But it is the letting go which is so hard for most of us...relinquishing control, relaxing the tight grip with which we grasp life. Jesus responds to Peter in the sharpest way possible, there's that much at stake in letting go of human rule in favor of Godly things. What will it profit to gain the whole world, and in so doing forfeit one's true life?

Henri Nouwen was a priest and author of numerous books on Christian spirituality. During his too-brief lifetime, he led both the cloistered life of a Trappist monk (I'm sure he was able to keep silence interminably!) and as a care-giver to mentally and physically challenged adults. He cautioned not to let our lives become absurd—referring to its Latin root meaning "deaf"---by allowing the voices around us and within ourselves to drown out the Word of God. In contrast, Nouwen would point out the word "obedient" and its Latin root meaning "to listen." The life of faith, he wrote, was a journey from absurdity to obedience, from deafness to listening [quoted in Muller, p. 84]. Sabbath-keeping assists us in letting go, of moving from a life so filled with self that we are unaware of God in it at all, to one which is infused with divine presence and power.

Here we can learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters whose Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, ready or not. Its time is not dependent upon the conclusion of work, when every phone call has been returned, every report completed and sent out, every project finished. If Sabbath came only when humans were finished with their work, it would never come. Our work never gets completely done. But to an observant Jew, Sabbath comes and it is time to stop. If you have been present at Shabbat dinner, you know the meal begins by lighting candles and saying prayers, and this ritual act serves as a reminder that God, and not human beings, is ultimately in charge of the universe. Remember the Sabbath

day....and set your mind on divine, not human things. Let go of all that makes your life absurd, lose that which separates you from God. Let go of the fearful clutching to the things we imagine will keep our lives safe and secure in the face of uncertainty.

One of you recently gave me a remarkable book called *Chasing Daylight*—with the telling subtitle *How My Forthcoming Death Transformed by Life*. Author Eugene O’Kelly was CEO and partner of one of the largest U.S. accounting firms, who at age 53 was on top of the world, enjoying a successful career as well as a strong family life. And then he was diagnosed with late-stage brain cancer from which there could be no recovery. The book became his way to let go of the life and future for which he had planned and worked hard, in order to take hold of something else. Significantly, the book begins: *I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live*. As poignant an elegy as it is, the book also witnesses to O’Kelly’s insights about living a more balanced and meaningful life, however long or short in duration that life happens to be. And the resounding theme from this captain of industry, who by his own admission regularly worked 80-hour weeks, is to let go of control, which is mostly illusion. To let go of the driven feeling to work harder and push further, in favor of higher priorities, of truer values that for O’Kelly included increased family time and more attention to spiritual things. To lose his life, and in the losing, to find it saved.

The paradox of letting go. Open hands, an open space, which God longs to fill. Jesus’ call to take up the cross is yet another counter-cultural invitation to true life. It keeps us from denial of the way things are in our world, and in our own hearts. Taking up Jesus’ cross reminds us what humanity is capable of, and we won’t pretend that suffering and violence and death don’t happen. Instead we will face it and allow God to do what God does with crosses—transform them into empty tombs. To take up Jesus’ cross is to act in the unshakeable hope that just as the cross was not the final word for Jesus, so it is not the final word for you or me.

St. Augustine observed, “God wants to give us all good things but our hands are too full to receive them.” Think of Sabbath, then, as a way of emptying our hands, of letting go, of relaxing our grip on our stuff and self-absorption, in order to receive what will really bring us life. Reclaim Sabbath as an affirmation of God’s good intention for you, and for all creation. Let go...and let God work God’s amazing grace in you.

TO THE

Resources upon which I have drawn for this sermon series, and suggestions for further reading on Sabbath

Bass, Dorothy C. *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951. Re-released in 2005 with an introduction by Susannah Heschel.

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

.....

In Reformed worship services, the sermon is followed by an affirmation of faith, usually one of the historic creeds or confessions that mark our tradition. During this season of Lent, I propose another way to respond to God's Word. As we explore God's gift of Sabbath and how we might receive it more fully in our lives, we will use the time following the sermon to taste a bit of Sabbath-keeping, to experiment with practices that may give us new insight on how to reclaim the sacred rhythm of rest. Last week we distributed guides to Scripture reading and a few of these are available at each entrance. Join us in reading and reflecting on God's Word each day.

Every Wednesday evening, Fairmount members and friends gather in the Chapel for worship. Candles are lit, prayers are offered with words and in music. Scripture is read and four minutes of silence are observed. I still don't know how I might keep silence for 48 hours, but I know that this service of evening prayer has become a lifeline for me, as nourishing as good food, as much a necessity as water and air. This morning I invite us to a similar kind of Sabbath worship, a time of silence and prayer of relinquishment, an experience of letting go and in that vulnerability, of finding God. [DIANE]

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor