

Reclaiming Sabbath: For the Rest of Your Life

(4) Immeasurable Riches

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
26 March 2006

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

My mother called me recently to say how much she's enjoyed the sermon series on Sabbath, which she receives weekly on cassette tape. She gushed, "I put the tape on when I go to bed and haven't slept so well in months."

Well. I guess that's one way to look at "Sabbath *rest*." (Though I hope not the predominant way on Sunday mornings!) Overall, I think Sabbath observance is more about "waking up" than going to sleep, and that was never more obvious than in a little news item I saw in the *Plain Dealer*. Seems a man was so intent on making his commuter train on time, that he left his infant daughter in her car seat when he parked and ran to catch his train. Realizing in horror what he had done, he got off the train at the next stop and took another one back, where he discovered firefighters had been called to rescue the child who was fortunately unharmed. While this example may seem a bit extreme, I resonate with the sense of moving on automatic pilot, of feeling always a little late, a little behind, and sometimes completely forgetting what is most important.

And maybe it's not too much of a stretch to call it a description of the human condition spiritually. We're so self-absorbed, so focused on our own lives, we neglect God, we forget about others, we lose touch even with our truest self. Sabbath can help us remember our need for God, and awaken us to the God of grace who animates each moment of our lives with a shimmering presence and life-giving Spirit. As one Fairmouter put it (and you'll forgive his earthy language), "Worship puts my life back in perspective. Most of the time we're so busy we forget just how damned blessed we are."

The apostle Paul may not have been thinking specifically of Sabbath when he penned the words of the letter that is our morning Scripture text. And yet, like the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, his words call us to slow down, to stop our ceaseless activity and draw from the immeasurable riches of God's grace—God's work that saves us beyond any work we do or could possibly do. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the letter to the Ephesian churches, in

the second chapter at the first verse (found on p. 192 of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along silently). [EPHESIANS 2:1-10]

The eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus became so fascinated with the rhythm of nature that he designed a garden that could tell time. He planted particular flower species that opened or closed their blossoms one hour apart, from morning to evening through a whole day. What a marvelous example of divine/human collaboration! We can't make a garden grow; we can do our part to learn, to cultivate, to plant, to tend. But God gives the growth! Instead of a traditional grass lawn, some neighbors right around the corner on Scarborough have a thick vine-y ground cover, under which they have planted hundreds of crocus bulbs. Long before Spring is evident, their yard is a defiant crowd of purple, yellow, and white flowers, each one a sign of hope for warmer and sunnier days to come.

Similarly, Sabbath-keeping requires divine and human collaboration. We can't produce that deep soul rest so necessary for spiritual growth. But God can! Our part is to stop, to pay attention, to listen, to learn. Therein lies the dynamic tension at the heart of Christian theology—God's grace and human activity.

Is faith a matter of what we do? After all, Scripture exhorts us to "work out your own salvation", warning that "faith without works is dead." Do this and you will live. Eternally. It's no wonder, really, because we live the better part of our lives based on this calculus: the measure you give will be the measure you receive. There's no such thing as a free lunch. You pay to play. The spiritual version of this is simply that if you do your part (obey God's law, follow Christ's example, "do" good), then God will do God's part (save you). Right?

Well, what part of that is actually *good* news? It really isn't news at all to see the world as a giant scale that must be somehow brought into balance. Part of us knows we can't save ourselves, particularly when we encounter the parts of life over which we have little or no control. In different ways, and perhaps to varying degrees, each of us has known raw vulnerability. We have all experienced hurts that seem resistant to healing. There are broken places in our lives that never seem to mend. We have witnessed sudden, incomprehensible tragedies, as well as the gradual—but no less painful—erosion of relationships and realities we cherish. Injuries that can't be kissed away. Pain that may be anesthetized for awhile by busyness, even by "good works," but from time to time, when the numbing wears off, we feel the pain still there; the dis-ease remains. Perhaps faith begins when we acknowledge that we can't do it; we can't save ourselves.

Sabbath time—when we stop our work—serves to help us see our true condition. Which is—and I quote again the member I did at the beginning— “damned blessed.” We sense the paradox in that colorful expression: we were created good, wonderfully made in love and for love. Yet somehow we have gotten lost and are unable to find our way home. The apostle gently reminds the Ephesians—and the church throughout the ages—of this paradox, not to arouse guilt, but to remind us of the past from which we have come. In the recognition of vulnerability, when we admit we can’t find our way, or save ourselves, “Grace strikes us” as 20th century theologian Paul Tillich wrote so evocatively.

The apostle Paul identifies grace as God’s gift that does in fact save us. A gift offered by God because of persistent love and everlasting mercy. A gift, like all gifts, that cannot be bought or bartered for. Not payment for services rendered. Not our reward for obedience or right belief or good behavior. This is not our own doing—it is the gift of God. Sheer grace.

Which makes Sabbath a time of thanksgiving, of celebration and joy. Rest for weary bodies, worried minds, worn-out spirits. A time to remember that it is God who made us, and not we ourselves; that the saving of the world—or even one part of it—is not on our shoulders. Sabbath is a spiritual sigh of relief, drawn from humility about one’s own power, and a deep trust in divine.

And something more. Did you notice how the final verse of our text seems to switch gears? Nine verses of God’s mercy and grace and then this curious final one: *For we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* Does this shift cast doubt on the grace and gift that has been so strongly affirmed in the previous section? Or does it signal something different? The good works that emanate from the life of grace are an expression of gratitude, not obligation.

Finally, Sabbath rest prepares us for daily life; for our work in the world, for the sacred tasks to which God calls us. We celebrate the freedom won for us in Christ Jesus, we delight in immeasurable riches of grace, replenishing our own supply... and then we move back out into the world of work and responsibility and pain and suffering to be bearers of God’s grace.

The divide in the Christian life sometimes described as “activism” VERSUS “spirituality” is really an imaginary one, because the two are part of the same spiraling path to the Transcendent. Activism—no matter how well-intentioned or sacrificial—without spiritual nurture—is empty, and will

sooner or later lead to burn-out. On the other hand, spirituality without expression in acts of compassion particularly to the poor whom God has called us to serve, is self-absorbed and will collapse in on itself. Friends, can we envision a church community in which God's grace is demonstrated in worship and service, prayer and action, in love to one another here and out there?

Perhaps not surprisingly, the practice of Sabbath can teach us the way to become such a church. Resting in the grace of God helps us remember who we are, and why we're here. Today we [will baptize/have baptized] two individuals, one an infant, one a seventeen year old woman. Though it is the same sacrament, there is a difference that though slight is significant, and can provide insight on the dynamic tension between grace and good works. Little Kayla has had no part in the decision of her parents to set her on this path towards God. Her baptism is a powerful reminder that God's love comes to us before we can acknowledge or return it. Olivia, on the other hand, has considered the decision for a number of years. This is her desire; this is her choice. Her baptism is a powerful reminder that God's love works on us, changes us, and sends us out into the world ready to love and serve. Both are essential. Both depend upon one another. And both reflect the immeasurable riches of God's grace toward us in Jesus Christ.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.

In Reformed worship, the sermon is generally followed by an affirmation of faith, saying together what we believe. As we have been considering Sabbath, we have used this time instead to practicing what for many of us has dropped from our regular week of activity. Today we will reclaim Sabbath through the gift of music. In worship we enjoy music in a variety of ways—through the sonorous sounds of organ, the fluid river of piano or keyboard, the soaring power of the human voice. Sometimes (especially if we don't think of ourselves as musicians) we imagine ourselves as the audience, appreciating the skill and art of others. But the Bible says "Make a joyful NOISE before the Lord." The idea is to join together in offering our praise. Neurological science has even discovered that singing stimulates the brain in a way that promotes creativity and well-being. And there's tremendous benefit from sucking in all that oxygen! I have friends (you know who you are!) who say they can empty a pew by simply opening the hymnal and act like they're going to sing. Fear not! Today we are going to try singing a new way; not as an expression of musicianship, but as a way of enjoying God, of

remembering God's goodness and grace, of praising God in this season particularly for the triumph song of life sung from the cross, and echoing from an empty tomb. Please turn to hymn _____, and remain seated as we sing about God's wondrous love. Try singing it, even if it comes out as speech. Notice the words; be aware of the sound surrounding you, encompassing us that is greater than our own voice. Thanks be to God!

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