

SABBATH TIME

10/2/05

Two polls. First, our daughter (who once lived in Alabama) talking with her friends, informally coming to an agreement on what is the first question people ask you in Birmingham. It's not "where do you work?" or "how many in your family?" Any idea? It's not hard. It's "Which church do you attend?" It's an unlikely ice breaker up here in the North; but a typical inquiry of curious Southerners.

While my daughter's poll is pretty informal and has little to no bearing on today's meditation (I simply thought you might be interested!), the second poll is an actual one, although I can't recall where I read or heard about the poll. In any case, college students were asked which of the Ten Commandment they could live without. Surprisingly, (and a good thing, I think) is that there was only one college students feel they can live without! Any idea which? Again, it's not a difficult answer if you think about it, especially given the title of today's meditation. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." As you might suspect, college students have no difficulty setting aside that particular commandment.

We recall reading about the Sabbath in Genesis in the first story of creation. After God has labored for 6 days to create the heavens and the earth, God is weary -which is interesting in and of itself of a "being" that is all-powerful! Anyway, Genesis 2:2 reads: "On the seventh day, God finished the work he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." Sabbath is necessary for God. A healthy precedent for rest and renewal has been set for humankind.

And while we recall generally that "Keeping the Sabbath" is one of the Ten Commandments, we (you and I both) would be hard pressed to cite the supporting material found in Exodus 20, verse 9-11. I don't think they ever asked us to memorize these verses in Sunday School. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is the

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. For in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day, therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.” Whew! So much elaboration, it would indicate importance if nothing else.

Yet, we are far from stunned when we hear that today’s college students would set aside this one commandment. It has been a long time since Blue Laws affected (or should I say limited) our behavior on Sundays. While some in this Sanctuary may fondly remember that supposed “day of rest,” Sundays have now become a time to get the chores done around the house, catch up on the shopping, have our children involved in sports, or visit family and friends – if not go to work. Plenty of people work on the weekend! In fact, Sundays are sometimes so hectic that we need the work week to catch up on our rest. And churches are no better role models of what Sabbath once was than the rest of society. Often church members are stretched pretty thin by a string of meetings, gatherings and rehearsals.

Of course, breaking the Sabbath is not a new thing. A whole collection of Sabbath Day stories is out there. The minister looked at a church member one Monday and said, “I’m told you went to see the Red Sox instead of coming to church yesterday.” “That’s a lie,” the man snapped back, “and I have the string of fish to prove it.” And then there is the fear of being caught breaking the Sabbath. A boy was on his way home one Sunday afternoon with his bucket of freshly caught fish when he saw the minister approaching him on the road. Since there was no escape, he walked right up to the minister and said confidently, “Reverend, see what these catfish got for biting worms on a Sunday.”

But these jokes told of a bygone day. The Sabbath isn’t what it once was. Perhaps this is partly Jesus’ fault. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus takes a break from teaching in the synagogue to heal a crippled woman. The leader of the synagogue is indignant and reprimands the crowd: “There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days if you need to be cured.”

Jesus, in turn, chides all the hypocrites who typically do forms of work on the Sabbath, such as untying their donkeys and leading it to water. Healing is a wonderful deed and it reveals God's love. Shouldn't the Sabbath be used, Jesus asks, to set such people as the crippled woman free?

So blame it on Jesus! He is certainly not the first to break the Sabbath by condoning certain work, but clearly he gives his blessing to certain acts being done on that day. And if you give an inch, people will go a mile! Which is clearly our problem today! That the Sabbath has turned into just another day of activity rather than a day of rest. Maybe we should blame Jesus, who refocused our attention on the works that could be done on the Sabbath. Because the fact is that we need to escape the works and find Sabbath time! I would suggest that this not only be a Sunday activity, but a daily one. Prayer time. Meditation. The runner who sets aside an hour for jogging. I have found that driving the car for an hour each way to Wakefield gives me time, minutes when I am forced to be seated in the car and unable to work on projects. We are a people who love busyness to the point that it distracts us. We need to set time aside.

Jesus had it correct when he spoke of Sabbath as retreat. The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." (Mark 6:30-31) Sabbath time is finding the time to breathe. The time to let the Spirit do its job on your body and mind, to set you free inside for service in the world. Jesus knew that full well. And so do we, although we have a terrible time practicing it.

Over the years I have been approached by people who have been upset by our children being confronted with so many Sunday morning options – sports, trips, charitable walks and runs even. "Why do we have to make a choice," they ask, "At the expense of church?" Certainly I object to the church having to fight for space in people's lives when it seems we are so limited in time anyway. Yet, when people approach me they seldom if ever talk about Sabbath. They talk more about more activities, more involvement, more conflicts. If they

could they would do it all! Neither they nor their children would miss an opportunity to do, to participate, to be involved.

Sabbath is more than going to church, although that is certainly part of it. Sabbath is a mindset of setting aside time to be still, something we are not very proficient at on any day of the week. Sabbath is “holy” time, the quiet time that can be so reinvigorating as well as creative. Interestingly, our word “healing” comes from the same root as words for “wholeness” and “holiness.” The implication is that in the act of taking time – finding holy Sabbath time – one finds healing. In turn, well-being!

We attended the Cumberland Fair yesterday and watched primarily the Harness Racing. Most of the races were for what I learned is called a “one mile pace.” Well, the horses keep up a pretty fast pace in that mile, generally finishing in a little over two minutes. I am struck by the fact that today’s world we also keep up a pretty fast pace, while we have a tough time pacing ourselves. Slowing down that is. There is a movement out there called “Take Back your Time.” You can go on line and read about the problem we have resisting a lifestyle that keeps up a relentless pace, day in and day out. And you can get ideas for how to set time apart for renewal.

Ultimately, what it means is that you have to take Sabbath seriously. This means structuring some time on Sunday for quiet time, but also finding times during the week to slow the pace. No easy task I am afraid. While Jesus may have been of little help in the Synagogue when he advised people of work that could be done on the Sabbath, he does acknowledge at other times that we will gain relief when we rest. So he said with understanding, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:28-29)

It’s time...to take back your time. It’s time...to rediscover your Sabbath...we need time to rest and renew our souls.