

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
2 Cor. 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6  
June 3, 2018, Proper 4B

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

How often I hear people say, "I just don't have enough time!" Sound familiar? There's so much to do – earn a living, do homework, participate in a huge variety of activities, clean the house, mow the lawn, get some exercise, do the shopping, care for children, go to meetings – add your own stuff to the list. The demands seem too great, the time too short. Our children aren't immune either – one of the confirmands talked a couple years ago about going from one sport activity to another – his and those of his family – and getting the homework done – he sighed a little and said, "It gets crazy sometimes."

We keep "to do" lists – so we won't forget anything – at least that's true for me – but just looking at them can get overwhelming. And the list of things we worry about keeps growing, doesn't it.

We're tired – worn out – worn down. And then we hear, you need more sleep, eat better, get more exercise, take a vacation.

What we all need is Sabbath – even though our first reaction is that we don't have time for it. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Sabbath – the historic practice of setting aside one day a week for rest and worship that promises a peace for those who embrace it.

Sabbath observance was a burning question at the time the gospel of Mark was written – and the argument about the Sabbath played a critical role in the life of Jesus – in fact, it was one of the factors that led to his death.

Our gospel reading sets two scenes for us – the time is the Sabbath – on any other day the disciples wouldn't have attracted any attention at all when they pushed their way through the standing grain of the field, picking from the stalks a few heads to eat as they walked along. But, they rubbed the heads in their hands – and they broke the law! Reaping, threshing, along with 37 other classes of work – all unlawful on the Sabbath. So the Pharisees question Jesus – why don't Christians keep the Sabbath laws!

Jesus points out exceptions from other scripture – he highlights the priority of human need over law – the disciples are hungry. Food is available and they eat. And then he says, “Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” He challenges every legalism which makes Sabbath a burden to bear rather than renewal for the road. The welfare of people takes precedence, even over the law.

And then there's the story of the healing of the man with a withered hand. Here, the onlookers don't speak but they are full of cold hostility. They sit watching, just waiting for Jesus to break the law. In the middle of the peace of Sabbath worship there in the synagogue, he calls out this man and heals him. Imagine – work, healing, on the Sabbath. The silence of those watching is poisonous – it says they care more about the custom than they do about their brother – they are more eager to bring Jesus down than to restore this man's useless hand.

In the words of that confirmand, “It gets crazy sometimes.”

Sabbath is made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. We know the human body and mind need regular times of rest – and the Sabbath law is a divine provision to meet that need.

The Sabbath is not just a matter of law – we all yearn for Sabbath – but how do we keep it? Is this an old fashioned idea that has become too

impractical, too idealistic, too hard to observe? And since Jesus came to overcome the law, does the commandment of keeping Sabbath no longer apply?

How about this: Sabbath is a time that opens up a space for God.

What are some of the implications for us?

Attending worship is an important part of Sabbath – joyful worship can restore us into communion with the Risen Christ and the community, the gathered body of Christ. It's a festival – every Sunday is Easter Sunday – regular attention to our spiritual life is a foundation of faithfulness. Imagine members of a worshipping community – us – helping each other step off the treadmill of work and into the circle of gratitude for the gifts of God. Rest and worship. A time to resist the tyranny of too much work or too little work and to celebrate with God and others, remembering who we really are, whose we really are, and what's really important.

Makes me wonder, though: what about those in this church who work so hard to keep it going. Makes we wonder how those of us here in worship feel when the attendance is lower than usual – that distracts us, doesn't it! And maybe some spend their time in the pew on Sunday morning thinking about what needs to be done here – that's distracting too, isn't it. Our time gathered here might not be rest or worship, might not be celebration – maybe it's not Sabbath time for some of us – it's yet another reminder of stuff that needs doing and wondering and worrying about who's going to do it.

One person who hasn't been here on Sunday morning for a long time told me the reason was about no longer being able to worship – somebody was always asking for something! Sometimes people just need to sit in the pews, center themselves, and worship. Isn't that why we gather each week?

To gain strength, a measure of peace for a little while, and leave, renewed, energized for the week ahead. Think about that – it’s one of the balancing acts we need to deal with as church, isn’t it.

Sabbath is a time that opens up a space for God. Maybe not a whole day – but a time for rest and renewal built into our lives. We have to be intentional about it – we need to take the time, to increase our awareness, to be open to the moving of the Spirit in our daily lives.

Maybe it’s looking at a garden, enjoying the colors, the display of flowers, the activity of the insects – the beauty of God’s creation. A woman who spends hours in the Glen Ridge Garden of Memory helping to make it a place of rest and beauty, wrote, “I had the wonderful experience of enjoying nature at its best in the garden. Looking up from weeding, I watched a robin splashing in the birdbath on a very hot humid day. He was having a delightful bath. Next to him a bumblebee was collecting nectar from the lovely yellow primroses and a butterfly alit on other flowers. Our two resident cardinals swooped out of the holly tree off on an outing. I felt I was truly witnessing God’s world at its finest.”

That’s Sabbath time – a time that opens up a place for God. In the midst of daily activity – activity that the Pharisees would consider work – and keeping a garden beautiful is work – in the midst of this, came a time of renewal and gratitude for God’s presence right in front of our eyes. If that’s not Sabbath time, I don’t know what is.

Lillian Daniel wrote a daily devotional for the United Church of Christ, she’s a fabulous preacher – one of the best I’ve ever heard – in it, she took on the “to do” list – she wrote, “ How long is your "to-do" list for this Saturday? What games are you driving your kids to? What errands do you have to do? Is Saturday the day you complete all that non-work related work

that it takes to manage a household? Or maybe you work on Saturdays, because you are scheduled to, or because the work from the week has simply overflowed into your weekend. What do you **have** to do today?

“Now, what would you **like** to do with this Saturday? What is the weather like outside? Who are you with? Who might you like to be in touch with? What intriguing books lie around the house waiting to be cracked open? What would make you laugh? What would you do with this day if you could do anything?

“It would be easy to tell you to simply go out and do what brings you joy. But I live in the real world right along with you. I know that there may be people counting on you today to do the things you might prefer not to do. There might be a paycheck depending on it. There might be good reasons to work on this day, whether the work is paid or unpaid.

“But there may also be some items on that "to do" list that are not essential. They may just be there because you are so used to adding to that list, that one more thing seems to be no big deal. For some of us, Saturdays, which used to be a break from work, have become our busiest days.

“Could this be a moment to examine the way you spend your time? To remember a lazy childhood Saturday when the hours stretched out as possibilities, lazy and unscheduled? Would it be the worst thing in the world to curl up in a blanket with a bowl of cereal and watch cartoons?

“This is the Lord's day. Enjoy it. Make some Sabbath time. A time to open up a space for God, to be in communion with God and each other.”

There's the challenge, isn't it – taking a quiet time to just be in the presence of God – that's Sabbath time. Time too often is on the way to

something, it's the past, it's tomorrow. Time isn't often enough right now and we miss opportunities to be renewed and refreshed.

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite writers. He's a Presbyterian minister who has a real gift for pointing out what ought to be obvious but what we so often miss.

He says, "Life is busy. It comes at you like a great wave, and if you handle things right, you manage to keep your head above water and go tearing along with it, but if you are not careful, you get pulled over and rolled to the point where you no longer know who you are or where you are going. Life is a very busy affair and in many ways that is a fine and proper thing, but there are other things about life that are also fine and proper.

Late one afternoon, he writes, I was walking to a class that I had to teach. I noticed the beginnings of what promised to be one of the great local sunsets. When I got to the classroom, the lights were all on, of course, and the students were chattering, and I was just about to start things off when I thought of the wonder going on out there in the winter dusk, and on impulse, without warning, I turned off the classroom lights. I am not sure that I ever had a happier impulse. The room faced west so as soon as it went dark, everything disappeared except what we could see through the windows, and there it was - the entire sky on fire by then, like the end of the world or the beginning of the world. You might think somebody would have said something. But the astonishing thing was that the silence was as complete as you can get it in a room full of people.

For over twenty minutes nobody spoke a word. Nobody did anything. What was great was the unbusyness of it. It was taking unlabeled, unallotted time just to look with maybe more than our eyes at what was wonderfully

there simply to be looked at. We were bound there together simply by the fact of our being human. Silently.

If we can bear to let it be, silence, of course, can be communion at a very deep level indeed, and that half hour of silence was precisely that, and perhaps that was the greatest part of it all.”

Sabbath time can be a gift anytime – in your backyard in the garden, in worship on Sunday morning, at the park on a swing, at a shopping mall, in your office, even in a classroom. These days most of us can’t take the traditional Sabbath time – but our challenge from Jesus is to ask, “How can we keep Sabbath so as to honor God?” To observe Sabbath rightly is not only to rest and worship, but also to do good – to save life – that is, to make life whole, both our own and that of our neighbor. The treasure of Sabbath is right in front of us – may we have eyes to see it, ears to hear it, and hands and hearts to share it. How will you continue to observe Sabbath time, today and in the days to come? God grant us all the wisdom to do just that.

Amen.