

“Where Do You Sabbath?”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Mark 2:23-3:6

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy.” This is the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments; as you probably know, the sabbath in Jewish tradition happens on Saturdays. In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, the reason God gives for this commandment to set the seventh day apart and not do any work is this: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it” (Exodus 20:11). This version of the Israeli covenant was written by what biblical scholars call the Priestly voice of the Torah, which was very much concerned with how God sets the rhythms of creation, dividing day into night, light into darkness, ordinary time into holy time.

To make something holy, or to consecrate it, is to make it set apart, or other, from what is ordinary. If you take a drive through Teaneck, Edgewater, or Tenafly, you will see neighbors there exhibiting a sense of otherness as they observe the sabbath, which for Jews is from Friday sunset through Saturday. Their clothes stand out in their modesty. Men wear yarmulkes or black hats. They walk, never drive in the Orthodox tradition, as a family to shabbat services. You can see that they have ordered their lives distinctly differently on this day of rest. In their homes they do not use electricity, and their homes are lit with candlelight. I have noticed that in busy places that require work on the sabbath, such as in many New York area hospitals, there are special elevators that are designated to stop on each floor on the sabbath, to honor the rest the day

requires. If observing the sabbath religiously, everything about the day shouts “Other, other, other!”

Christians shifted the sabbath day from the seventh day, Saturday, to the first day, Sunday. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that God “hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and from the resurrection of Christ, was changed to the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord’s Day and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath.” In other words, because Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday, every Sunday then becomes a day of resurrection and is therefore holy-- a time when we come together to worship and also to practice sabbath.

How do we as Christians sabbath? I am taking liberty to use “sabbath” as a verb, like when people sometimes do with the word “summer.” As in, “Where do you summer? Oh, I summer at Long Beach Island.” To be able to use “summer” as a verb, I think you have to spend at least 6 weeks of your summer on vacation. I’ve never been part of a family that “summered” but it sure sounds lovely.

“I like to verb words,” Calvin tells Hobbes in a famous 1993 comic strip. “I take nouns and adjectives and use them as verbs,” he explains to his bemused tiger, citing the word “access.” “Remember when access was a thing? Now it’s something you do.”

His conclusion? “Verbing weirds language.”¹

So, I am going to “weird” language, and use the word “sabbath” as a verb. It is a word trick I borrow from God, who, when asked by Moses for a name, gave not a person, a place, or a thing, but a verb: I AM. YHWH. I want to invite you to look at sabbath not as just a day, but as a practice, and consider the question, “Where do you sabbath?”

¹ Brandon Ambrosino, “Why ‘Medalling’ and ‘Summering’ Are so Annoying” on *BBC Culture* April 26, 2016

As Protestant Christians, we do not show such a distinctive otherness to our sabbath as Orthodox Jews. We do not wear special hats-- that is, not unless you are worshiping at Windsor chapel or in the African American church. We drive to church, unless you choose to walk for exercise, or the environment, or because you do not have a car. Our church-going habits do not scream "Other, other, other!"

Or maybe they do. I wonder what else you might have been doing if you had not come to church today. Sleep in? Brunch? Yoga? Soccer? Gardening? Cartoons? The truth is, even though Bergen County retail closes up on Sundays, going to church is no longer the normative Sunday activity it was in generations past in this country. Compared to your neighbors, colleagues and friends, you may even be seen as kind of extraordinary for having a church-going habit.

Good for you that you made it here. But then what? I like to think of Sunday as our dress rehearsal for how God calls us to act in the world. The words and practices we share in worship offer a template for how we might live our lives. The bread and wine we share reminds us that there is something Holy, Holy, Holy-- or Other! Other! Other! at work in us, forming us into the body of Christ that then goes out into the world.

Jesus modeled this intersection of the holiness we try to practice in our faith, merging with the world we live in. In Mark's gospel, his disciples plucked grain from the fields as they journeyed, and they ate and shared bread that was set apart for only the priests. When the Pharisees judged Jesus for not keeping the sabbath, Jesus told them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath." The passage then goes on to describe Jesus curing a man with a withered hand on the sabbath. Asking "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

I don't believe Jesus was violating the sabbath, but instead expanding our understanding of what it means to sabbath. Interestingly, although the Exodus passage I quoted at the beginning of the sermon gives God's rest after the 6 days of creation as rationale for the sabbath, the Deuteronomy instructions on the sabbath give quite a different rationale or reason. After giving instructions for who should practice sabbath, including slaves, and foreigners, and family members, and even livestock, the Deuteronomist writer-- another voice that emerges in the Torah-- explains, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

So while in Exodus, sabbath is tied to creation followed by rest, in Deuteronomy sabbath is tied to liberation from oppression. In connecting with and sharing the grain earth offers, and in healing another human being, Jesus honors both traditions.

When the Industrial Revolution hit Great Britain, the exploitation of workers became a big problem as the rush to turn a profit and keep pace put workers in dangerous and grueling positions. The labor movement began, and over time it cut child labor, created a 2-day weekend, and achieved an 8-hour workday for many laborers. These changes were initiated out of humanitarian concern; in the face of human misery, moral leadership emerged and created change. However, an unexpected and unintended outcome of the labor movement was that air and water quality improved in industrialized cities, which had oozed a thick grime from the soot of factories. The labor movement granted sabbath both for humanity, and for the earth.

When we set sabbath for ourselves, we may find that there are unexpected and unintended benefits to the rest we take. I am reminded of something my brother told me yesterday, when I called him on his birthday. He works for a wind energy company. He was just out on a service project off the

coast of Rhode Island, where they had installed wind turbines several miles into the Atlantic Ocean, to generate clean wind energy. What they did not expect is that the pillars that go deep into the ocean water, to hold up these massive wind turbines, started to attract mollusks that would attach to the base of the pillars. The mollusks-- clams and mussels-- soon attracted small fish that came to feed on the clams and mussels. The small fish attracted the larger fish, and even sharks. Deep into the Atlantic Ocean, in a place where there had been not much going on, a whole new ecosystem developed. Our practicing sabbath can be like that. Once we set apart a time and space for something holy, other surprising and wonderful things may also start happening. Sabbath certainly benefits the church, but it may also benefit your mental and physical health, your family, your community, or even the earth.

How do you sabbath? Where do you sabbath? You are sabbathing right now, here at church. But you also practice sabbath when you set apart space for rest. This rest may be for yourself, but it also may be a rest that allows for the restoration of creation, or a rest that allows for liberation from oppression.

May God bless this sabbath that we share today. May it grant us restoration. May it also shape us to join God as partners for the continuing act of creation and liberation.