

Sabbath Rest
Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Mark 2:23-3:6
Second Presbyterian, Petersburg
May 2024

When the Presbyterian Women studied Sabbath with a study written by one of my favorite professors from PSCE, Carol Bechtel, I met with PW at their fall gathering to kick off the study. I asked the gathered group to consider the last time they received an invitation in the mail. A printed invitation, not a Zoom link in their email or a phone call or text inviting them to lunch. A printed invitation is a signal that your presence is being requested for a special event – so special that the one who sent the invitation took time and effort to create the printed invitation, write your name on the envelope, stick a stamp on the envelope, and trust the post office to deliver it to your address.

Think now about how it feels to receive such an invitation. Perhaps for some of you, you open it with a sense of anticipation, curiosity, and joy: what is coming up, what will I wear, what do I need to think about before I can answer the invitation, who else will be there - all of these questions are thought with an element of joy and glee. Perhaps others open the invitation with the same questions but with a different tone (change to whining tone) what is coming up, what will I wear, what do I need to shuffle around so I

can answer the invitation, who else is going to be there...dread...dread...dread.

Both of our scripture lessons for today have us thinking about the gift that God has given us...the invitation that God has sent to all of us...to rest.

Although we didn't read the creation story from Genesis today, you all remember how it goes: In the beginning, God created...well...everything. The Hebrew verb for created in that story is a word that the Israelites only used for God. We are all creative people – because we were made in God's image – but only God can create the way God created in the first chapter of Genesis when God spoke creation into being from the chaos that existed.

And this story of creation in Genesis tells a story of a movement in the act of creation – God was “hands-on” we could say...with a pulse of activity as the story moves from day to day...and again the grammar of the Hebrew language helps us understand the story because the verbs are incomplete – which means that the action isn't yet finished – this creation story is not a “once upon a time” kind of story, rather it is better understood of “this is how it started” kind of story with an understanding that we still believe that “this is how it is still going” even today.

But in the story in Genesis...the seventh day of creation...the day that God rested...wasn't called a sabbath day in this story. The understanding of

the sabbath came later for God's people. Perhaps it was because Adam and Eve got something right in their work/rest balance. I don't know and scripture doesn't tell us.

The term Sabbath shows up when Moses is giving the Ten Commandments to the people – straight from the top of the mountain. Because it's not until this time in the story that God's people need to be reminded of who they are and who God is as they are preparing for what is coming next. See God had just rescued them from being enslaved in Egypt – and when you are enslaved you are only known for how productive you are...you work because your work is what gives you the life that you need...and when God rescued them from this enslavement, God needed to remind them who they are.

They are people whom God invites to rest from their work because their identity is not about how many bricks they can make in a day – their identity is in their remembering – and in their believing – that they were created in the image of God...called to tend God's creation...and also invited to rest...not just because God rested but because God makes rest holy and sacred.

In today's text, we heard the fourth commandment: observe the sabbath and keep it holy. This is a directive from God. Balance your work

and your rest. No one should work, not you, your spouse, your kids, your servants, not even strangers who happen to be traveling by at the time of this rest. Even the livestock should rest. Everyone and everything needs a balance of labor and rest. And during that break, the commandment is clear, you are to stop...and remember. Remember who God is...remember what God has done for you...and remember who you are because you are created in the image of God.

On the seventh day of creation, God rested, even though we don't believe that God needs sleep or rest to restore God's energy level. So we think of this break after six days of creating the world and everything in it as God stopping the work and taking delight in creation...in the sound of the gurgling stream, in the call of the birds, in the playfulness of the fish and the sea monsters in the water, in the growth of the trees and the flowers, in the breeze of the wind, and in the company of others. This is the delight that we are called to share in the practice of the Sabbath.

And in this shared delight – we are called to remember our reliance upon God. We can work and work and work and work – and we will never “win” that race of being more and more productive. There isn't a finish line to that contest. Even in retirement, our calendars can be filled to the point that we need to take a vacation from our retirement to get some rest.

One thing that is good to remember about the lessons we can learn from the stories of our faith found in the Old Testament is that these lessons are mostly meant to be lessons for us as a community of faith. Sure, these are good guidelines to practice on our own, but they are better practiced together – when we talk about how we make space to rest from our work to glorify God and remember who we are. Sounds like space for worship.

The scripture lesson from Mark today shows what happens to a community when they latch on to a good idea and begin to worship the idea instead of the God who invited us to the idea. The Pharisees were good church people. We like to think of them as the antagonists of the stories that we read – but really, they are better understood as us. They are the ones who knew the teachings of the stories of the Old Testament – and they took those stories seriously – and they held the community to the high standards that the commands and invitations from God extended. They just lost sight of the One whom they were worshipping. They worshipped the laws and not the One who gave the laws.

They chose to spend their time watching for mistakes instead of watching for glimpses of grace and mercy in the world. That's a tough way to live. It's an easy way to live because there are always going to be stories

of people not living the way we are called to live together – there are always going to be people who live outside of the rules that have been clearly defined – by the church and by the government. The choice – is how to pay attention to that – and how to respond.

But there is so much to do here God...don't you see it... have you looked around the world lately? We can't stop – people are hurting, people are hungry, people are not safe, people are sad, people are lonely, people are sick, people are lost, people are counting on us not to stop working...I can't even stop working when I get home from work – there are groceries to buy, laundry to do, phone calls to make to stay in touch with family and friends, Bible studies to read, and even presbytery meetings to attend, who will do all of this work if we rest – we seem to say to God. Thanks for the invitation, but no thanks.

The Pharisees, the scripture stories tell us, were often watching and waiting to trip up Jesus as he moved through the people teaching, healing, and showing them the love of God. But they chose to look past the love and focus on the action and when they did, even Jesus and his followers seemed to be breaking the law of the Sabbath.

The disciples were walking through the fields and they were hungry so they reached out, plucked grain, and ate...that was wrong in the eyes of

the Pharisees. Jesus saw a man with a withered hand in the synagogue, and this man didn't even ask Jesus to heal him, but Jesus called him forward and in front of the Pharisees, healed his hand. That was wrong in the eyes of the Pharisees.

If you asked a group of children in a Sunday School class who was right and who was wrong in this passage they could identify that Jesus and his disciples were right and the Pharisees were wrong – but remember what I told you...we (you and me...and all the rest of the Presbyterians in the Presbytery of the James) are more like the Pharisees than we are like Jesus.

Where do you see yourself looking? Are you looking for people to do something wrong...or are you looking for people to do something right, even when it doesn't fit in your understanding of what should be happening? I wonder what we learn when we hear this story again today....

I wonder what we learn when we gather around this table again today...this is a table that doesn't belong to us...and it's not for the people who always do the right thing...it's for the people of God...to come...and rest from our work...and give space to remember who God is...and remember who we are because we are created by a God who is still active in God's creation...and we are called to love God and to love one another as Jesus has shown us love...not in the keeping of all these rules...but in the practice

of how we see one another and welcome one another into beloved community.

This invitation to the table today is compelling because this invitation knows us intimately – like we’ve been made in the image of the one who is sending it – this invitation knows something about rest and relationships – that we need rest to connect with God – we need rest to connect with others – we need rest to connect with creation – we need rest. We want to share in God’s holy day of rest. This is part of our identity – this is built into our DNA.

This is part of our witness to the workaholic overstressed world. This is evangelism – this is witness – this is affirming our faith in a God that will keep creating and keep pulsing and keep moving even when we take a rest. This is an act of faith – rejecting false gods and world views that say that we have to secure more for ourselves and our families. And through our act of sabbath – our celebration of God’s rest – our sabbath becomes doxology – or praise – back to God. Because when we live by this gift of sabbath – when we celebrate it as much if not more than the wonderful invitations that come to us in the mail – we know that we are --++sustained, nurtured, and nourished.

We will respond to this invitation later in the service as we gather around the communion table, remembering who calls us to assemble and who sends us out to a tired world that needs to hear what we know...God loves you...not because of what you do but because of who God is...and we practice that we mean what we say when we honor the sabbath rest for everyone in God's creation.

Thanks be to God! Amen.