

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Sacred Time”

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Genesis 2:1-3

2Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

There is a story about a couple of lumberjacks who each thought of themselves as the best in the world. They decided to have a log cutting competition to determine who really was the more proficient. One of the lumberjacks worked feverishly throughout the contest, swinging his axe without rest to the point of exhaustion. The other lumberjack worked at a more leisurely pace. Even in the midst of the competition he took several breaks while his competitor was chopping away. When the contest ended, much to everyone's surprise, the second lumberjack had cut the most logs and was declared the winner. The first lumberjack was furious. He could not imagine how he had lost. He questioned his opponent, "How could you beat me? How could you have cut more logs? You stopped to take breaks all the while I was cutting madly." The second lumberjack replied, "Yes indeed I took a few breaks while you were cutting. But what you failed to notice was that during my breaks, I was sharpening my saw."

I attended a seminar in Milwaukee last week in advance of our National Association's annual meeting. The speaker told us that there are at least four Sundays a year in which the senior minister should not preach. Can you guess which ones? The Sunday after Easter, the Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, and you've probably guessed by now- the Sunday closest to the Fourth of July. But after being away from home for a week and finding no good excuse to take a Sunday off- here I am in the pulpit!

Here in a Michigan church, we are in that quiet time. The summer season has officially set in. Those with cottages or cabins up north are usually nowhere to be seen. The faithful remnant remains, perhaps somewhat envious. The pace of meetings and programs has appreciably slowed. And our Board of Trustees is worried about people keeping their pledges up to date during the lower attendance months of summer.

I thought that today might be a good day to consider the idea of vacation, of rest or to speak of it in religious terms, the Sabbath. A couple of summers ago I enjoyed a ministerial sabbatical. The church that I was serving gave me six weeks away from duty as part of the privilege often given to ministers for professional development and spiritual renewal. Sabbaticals are usually given after seven years of service, a practice based on the creation story in the book of Genesis in which God rested following six days of creation. Before beginning the experience I had to educate my congregation about the purpose of sabbaticals. One member of the church seemed to be opposed to me taking a sabbatical. She happened to be my wife. She wondered, "Why can't everyone else have a sabbatical? Why is it just for ministers?" Laura is always such a troublemaker. As usual, her questions were troubling but good ones. Laura raised an excellent concern about every person's need for proper rest and holy reflection. What would happen if each of us had a planned opportunity to deliberately rest

and reflect upon our time and how we use it? Actually we do. It is the Sabbath, the seventh day, a time set aside by God for us to consider the meaning of the rest of our time.

The Sabbath is the day of rest observed by the followers of God, linking them to the Creator's example found in the creation story in Genesis. For the Hebrew people the Sabbath began at sundown on Friday. All work and commerce was supposed to stop. I remember attending a bar mitzvah held on top of the University of Utah football stadium a few years ago on a Saturday night. There was a social hour with drinks and conversation. Then, right before dinner as everyone watched the sun setting over the Great Salt Lake, all social activity stopped and there was a time for prayer and song. The Sabbath was ending. And before it ended it needed to be honored and celebrated as a gift from God.

For Christians, the Sabbath has been associated with Sunday, the day in which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of understanding the Sabbath as a gift of rest and reflection however, historically we Protestants have tended to view it as a day of restriction and obligation. Sabbath used to be observed as a kind of cultural law, a time you couldn't do certain things. I remember as a child, every store in my hometown of Stanton, including all but one of the gas stations, was closed on Sunday. You didn't dance on Sunday, you didn't mow your lawn on Sunday, you didn't have a strong drink on Sunday, and you didn't appear in public having too much fun. Except for places like the state of Utah, such restriction and obligation is no longer true. Strict observance of the Sabbath tended to interfere too much with our work, our shopping, and our socializing. And so on the Sabbath time began to be used just as the time of any other day.

In her book *Receiving the Day*, Dorothy Bass writes about an occasion in which several of her friends gathered around a Saturday night dinner table. Most of them were school teachers who complained that the next day, Sunday, would not be a happy day. Great piles of papers needed grading and the students expected those grades on Monday. And so the entire evening turned into what Bass called a "whinefest." Soon the complaining turned into boasting. Someone listening into the conversation might have thought that the teachers were competing to see who had the most papers to grade, who worked the most hours, and who was most put upon by the demands of their job. Bass recalls thinking about the commandment, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." She thought about how everyone around the table was hatching plans to violate it. She said that no one would admit to planning adultery or murder or stealing but violating the Sabbath seemed to be a source of pride and accomplishment. From that time forth she has explored ways of keeping Sabbath and the importance of Sabbath for the lives of each and every person.

All of us must come to see that Sabbath is not so much a period of time to cherish or to waste, as it is an attitude about time. In his book *The Sabbath*, Abraham Heschel writes that the Sabbath is when we as human beings become attuned to the holiness in time. We become aware that time is not simply an empty square on a calendar that should be protected from the violation of secular activity. Yet time is also not just a bunch of weekend hours set free for golf, boating, gardening, trips up north, shopping or whatever else gives us pleasure. Instead Sabbath is a celebration of the very meaning of time. Heschel says that we human beings spend six days a week wrestling with the world, wringing profit, trying to dominate the space around us, amassing information, and accumulating substance and possession. We emphasize our use of time rather than our awareness of time as a gift. We have come to believe that our worth must be proven in the way we spend our hours and that our ultimate safety depends on our own good management of time. Heschel writes that God is not in things but in moments of time. Time has significance of its own and each moment in time has meaning. On the Sabbath, we seek the holiness that is in time.

In the first two chapters of Genesis we are told that God worked six days creating the world and calling it good. On the seventh day, God rested from all of the work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. God didn't use the seventh day to tweak the work of creation just a bit-to make the sun a little brighter, the sky a little bluer, or Adam just a little

better looking. God rested on the seventh day and made it holy. Heschel writes a delightful sentence which says that the ancient rabbis believed that the world would not be complete if the six days did not culminate in the Sabbath. God wasn't finished creating until a Sabbath was created to reflect upon what had been done. It was like a king who built a bridal chamber, plastered and painted and adorned. But the chamber wasn't done until it housed a bride. Similarly, creation lacked something until the seventh day. Creation was not complete until God rested and invited the holiness of time.

How might we entertain a Sabbath practice in our busy, overscheduled life? There are some modern practices that Sabbath experts suggest. I must warn you though-they are not easy! Perhaps realistically observing one of these things can bring us closer to understanding the sacred nature of the gift of time.

-It is important to observe the Sabbath as a 24 hour period. It may be easiest to celebrate Sabbath on Sunday but any period in which one can observe the holiness of time can be considered a Sabbath.

-Always make worship a part of your Sabbath, not as an obligation but as a desire or need.

- Avoid commerce on the Sabbath, try not to use any money on one day or the week.

- Don't work. Don't even think about work one day a week.

- Don't use the computer, telephone or any other electronic gadgets. This one will be especially tough on teenagers and sports fans.

- Don't fix things or tear things down.

- Don't organize or run errands.

- Don't worry, pay bills, or make lists.

- Walk as much as you can instead of using the car.

These are tough things for me to hear! I can only imagine how following a couple of these things might change my life, one day out of seven.

The Sabbath needs to be observed as a weekly reminder of the sacredness that is the days, hours, and minutes of our life. The Sabbath needs to be observed as an acknowledgement that our success in work and play is not deserved or earned but offered as blessing from God. The Sabbath needs to be observed so that we can understand that we are valued not for what we have done or accomplished, but simply because we have been given life by God.