

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4B)

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Psalms 139:1-5, 12-17

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-3:6

June 2, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church, Laurel Springs New Jersey

“You trace my journeys in my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways.”

Keep holy the Sabbath. Keep holy the Sabbath. Sounds simple enough. And let's not forget that it's number four of the Big 10. But what exactly is sabbath?

In Judaism it is known as Shabbat. During my days of clinical pastoral education at Capital Health System in Trenton and Princeton, one of my responsibilities was to deliver Shabbat bags to the Jewish patients on Friday afternoon. I think I got this job because I was more comfortable with Jewish customs than some of my colleagues. The white paper lunch bag contained some prayers, a small loaf of challah bread and a few bottles of kosher grape juice. This is what would be necessary for people confined to the hospital to commemorate a proper Sabbath according to Jewish tradition. I would walk into the room with a greeting of, “Shabbat shalom”, hand them the bag, accept their thanks, and move on until my task was complete. Doing this always made me wonder, “how well do I keep the sabbath?” I certainly go to church every Sunday. I set aside time each week for worship. But what about the “rest” part? I certainly don't devote an entire day to prayer and focusing on God and not doing anything else. I'm entirely too busy for that.. even though I was retired.

So what is Sabbath, exactly? In Abrahamic religions, (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Sabbath is a day set aside for rest and worship. According to the Book of Exodus, the Sabbath is a day of rest on the seventh day, commanded by God to be kept as a holy day of rest as God rested from creation. The practice of observing Sabbath originates in the biblical commandment, “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. “

In our hyper productive, “always on” culture, we often conceive of rest as a way of being more productive. Over the weekend, I will get a jumpstart on next week's activities and projects. I'll grocery shop and meal prep so I can have more time and get more done during the week. Our society tells us to take time to rest so that we can work harder and get more done later.

But in scripture, if we take time to examine God's priorities, sabbath is an art and a science and the pleasure for its own sake. God does not rest on the seventh day for the purpose of getting right back to work on the eighth day. God rests on the seventh day and commands us to follow this example because Sabbath has inherent value completely apart from work.

Sabbath has a kind of beautiful purposelessness that makes it holy. We often think we're taking a break when we scroll social media for 20 minutes during the week or veg out in front of the TV on an evening or weekend. And while feeding our dopamine circuits with some quick hits is all

fine and good, it is not the type of holy rest God is talking about in Scripture. Many people who take on Sabbath as a real spiritual discipline struggle for weeks or months to actually practice it and not just fill it up with more distractions or more work like doing laundry or buying groceries.

Sabbath is rest that is designed to deepen our connection with God and one another. That's why Sunday-the Lord's Day-our Sabbath day is our day to worship. Notice that Jesus in particular uses Sabbath to feed the disciples – in a way that makes the Pharisees angry and to heal a man with a disability. This really ticks the Pharisees off. And so for Jesus, Sabbath is very much rooted in the physical body. Feeding and healing people are physical acts, true incarnational encounters.

When we take time to truly rest, our minds and bodies heal and grow stronger. The same is true for our souls in our relationships with God and one another. Throughout any given week, our connections to God and to each other go through any number of micro-tears, stresses, and small injuries that break them down. Sabbath time is the intentional application of rest for the purpose of healing and nourishment. We spend time with God and one another purposely devoid of stress and strain, so that we may enter a new week with our grounding and our connection stronger than they were before. Spiritual muscle is built during Sabbath.

But let's go a little deeper and look at the incarnational nature of Sabbath, the ways in which God works through our bodies to help us know rest and healing. In our gospel reading from Mark today, we read of the man with the injured or disabled hand- "withered" is the word that was used. Jesus does not reach out and touch the man to heal him as he does in some of the other miracles in the gospels. Mark tells us that Jesus says to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretches it out and his hand is restored. Jesus invites, even commands, the man to reach toward him, and in that reaching, the man is healed. On the sabbath, God stretches out God's arm toward us to connect with us, and Jesus invites us to stretch out our arm toward God in answer. The result is healing, strengthening, and new life.

How could this image of Sabbath change how you practice it? If Sabbath is designed to be a time when God reaches towards us and we reach out towards God and that mutual reaching creates healing, that suddenly makes Sabbath a much more active and participatory practice. We participate in our own healing and reconnection by stretching towards God and stretching towards one another.

And stretching can hurt a little bit, sometimes hurt in a good way, in a way that means progress. If we are stretching, moving away from our comfort zone, that means we are growing. Paul describes this entire process for us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh."

So, spend some time this week observing your relationship with God and with others. Take note of the breakdowns and the fraying of the connections. Then on your Sabbath day reach out and stretch toward God and your loved ones. That could mean reading scripture, attending worship,

making a phone call to a loved one, going for a walk-in nature to pray by yourself or with others. Take part in active recovery, sabbath that creates healing and new strength.

And remember that we practice Sabbath not for the purpose of throwing ourselves back into more work. The healing and growth of sabbath is for the glory of God that shines forth in us as fully realized humans beings. "The Son of Man" is Lord even of the Sabbath," Jesus says. The healing he brings us when he tells us to stretch out our hand towards him is holy and beautiful in and of itself.

"Keeping the sabbath" across generations in the church has often turned into grim adherence to strict traditions rather than true rest and refreshment. It was as if people were supposed to be hard at work resting! We sometimes think of Christianity as hard work – and it undoubtedly is. We have to work against our old familiar sins and pray for God to help us increase in love and generosity.

But at the heart of it, Christianity is not about work. Suffering and struggle are vital parts of this journey we call being human. They each have their own unique spiritual value, but the suffering and the struggle and the work always lead somewhere else. And that's somewhere else is Joy. Consider the joy the man in our gospel reading this morning must have felt as the healing surged through his body and restored his hand. Savor the joy in God's voice as he calls us and directs us just as he did the boy Samuel. Jesus says to us directly of his entire message to us, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your Joy may be complete."(John 15:11)

So, let's be like the man in today's gospel. Let us reach out our hands, our hearts, our minds and our souls towards Jesus and each other each week as we practice Sabbath. And may we feel the outstretched grace reach back towards us. Amen.

Deacon Naomi