

Sunday, July 22, 2018 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Rhythm of the Christian Life

Texts: Psalm 23 and Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Our gospel from Mark and our beloved Psalm 23 remind us that spiritual hunger is real and the satisfaction of spiritual needs is a most important matter. Through these lessons, Jesus is concerned to provide for our basic physiological needs and the hunger of our souls. Jesus encourages "sabbath" rest to address the hunger of the soul and he practices it to show us the importance.

With these lessons, our focus will be on our need for Sabbath. Yes, Sabbath rest, according to scripture is key to the balance we need in life to be the best we can be. We need sabbath rest to be the compassionate people we want to be and to be the people God intended us to be.

Sometimes when we think of sabbath rest, we think of recreation and our anticipation of relaxation, especially during these summer months. A few years ago, I read a psalm that was written in the style of Psalm 23 about the delight of summer recreation. We'll let it give us a smile!

Recreation is my shepherd; I shall not stay at home.
It maketh me to lie down in my sleeping bag,
It leadeth me down the interstate each weekend.
It restoreth my sunburn; it leadeth me to state parks for comfort's sake.
Even though I stray on the Lord's day, I will fear no reprimand for I am relaxed.

My rod and my reel they comfort me.
I anoint my skin with oil; my gas tank runneth dry.
Surely, my trailer shall follow me all the weekends of the summer,
And, I shall return to the house of the Lord this fall.
But, by then, it will be hunting season, and that's another psalm. (Anonymous)

Summer is a time to focus on our need to get away or just be in a state of “rest” for renewal of body, mind and spirit. We learn from a study of the word “sabbath,” that sabbath rest is not only about “recreation” or the fun that come with relaxation from work or other demands. Sabbath rest is about consecrating time to listen to the still, small voice within, to pay attention to our inner wisdom and to be in the presence of our loving God.

A few years ago, Wayne Muller wrote what has become a spiritual classic. In his book, *Sabbath*, he speaks about how to find this balance between work and rest. First, he says we must recognize that we can't do it all! We move into a danger zone called “burn out,” when we try.

Finding the rhythm between work and rest is key. “There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale.” (*Sabbath*, c. 1999, p. 1))

Throughout this book, Mr. Muller uses the word Sabbath both as a specific practice and a larger metaphor, a starting point to invoke a conversation about the forgotten necessity of rest. Sabbath is time for sacred rest; it may be a holy day, the seventh day of the week, as in the Jewish tradition, or the first day of the week, as for Christians. But Sabbath time may also be a Sabbath afternoon, a Sabbath hour, a Sabbath walk--indeed, anything that preserves a visceral experience of life-giving nourishment and rest for body and soul. (ibid., p. 27)

What is your rhythm? What works? What doesn't? What spirit do we follow? The Spirit of God or the spirit of the world? The spiritual life is often marked by existential bifurcations: Are we enticed to serve the god of every day busyness or the Spirit of God who calls us to prayer and holiness. This is our ongoing struggle. Jesus is attentive to the practices of his disciples and is aware of the pulling and pushing we all go through daily.

When we enter the Christian life, our hope is that we find a plan for “sabbath” breaks so we may support our need for a growing, vital faith experience. As your pastor, my hope is that when you enter this sanctuary, this time we have set aside for worship, that you find peace, nourishment, and strength to face another week. My hope is that with this worship time, we become available to the insights and blessings of deep mindfulness and treasured stillness.

The prayers and songs and words we use are to help us be equipped to go out into the world to be caring people, ready for the daily pulling and pushing of life. My Buddhist friends I lived with in Thailand for a few years liked to talk about meditation and worship cultivating right understanding, right action and right effort. Yes, we can express our “sabbath” in Christian terms preparing us to do the same.

Certainly, we live in a complex, unstable world on many levels. If we do not retreat and rest as Jesus suggested, how can we find our way to live the compassionate life that is to be characteristic of the Christian person. The relationship to the Good Shepherd, Jesus the Christ, is essential to our finding spiritual nurture and care so that we may shepherd others.

I read with interest about the daring rescue mission in the treacherous confines of a flooded Thai cave that saved all 12 boys and their soccer coach a couple of weeks ago. It was a grueling, 18-day ordeal that claimed the life of an experienced volunteer diver but the rescue was a success. Part of the rescue work was the determination of people around the world to give support to the rescue efforts. The response of the majority of the boys who were rescued was to offer 9 days as novice Buddhist monks and their coach was ordained to be a monk.

The spiritual aspect was in response to the physical rescue; it was gratitude for the rescue, the gift of life. That is the purpose of our Christian rhythm; we want “life” —life with God to be enriched, perfected, meaningful. Sabbath rest is a time to give thanks, to pray, to listen, to be fed. Honoring “sabbath” for the soul is saying “thank you” to our risen Christ for being our spiritual nourishment.

We did not read the verses between Mark 6: 34 and Mark 6: 53 in our lessons today, but, if we go back, we'll read about the miraculous feeding of the crowds of people who wanted to be near Jesus. On Sunday, July 29th, we'll read this account of the feeding of the five thousand from John 6. This parable was important to all the gospel writers; you'll find it in some form in Matthew 14:13-21 - Mark 6:33-44 - Luke 9:10-17 - John 6:1-14.

It was important to Jesus that the disciples address the physical hunger of the people as well as their spiritual needs. He cared about the reality of their physical needs along with a recognition of the need for spiritual food.

The gospel of John says that Jesus is the “bread of life.” We observe the symbolism of the scripture. Jesus was the bread of God come down from heaven (in a miraculous way) that gave life to the word just as bread gives life to the body. God's spirit, known in Jesus, gave people hope, renewal, and decision to lead lives of mercy and goodness. We know we want and need this for our rhythm as we try to live faithfully as Christians.

We are glad that the early church's story of Jesus was not so concerned about proving the miracle of the feeding. The concern was to acknowledge that spiritual hunger was real and parallel to the physical. In this story of Jesus feeding people, we celebrate the relationship of a loving God who wants to feed us with “supernatural food”—the food of God's compassion and care.

As one commentator said, Jesus did not offer “seven secret coping strategies” to get work done faster. He did not offer “nine spiritual stress management techniques” to enhance our effectiveness. He offered the simple practice of rest as a natural, nourishing, essential companion to his work of caring and loving the world. “Learn from me,” he invited and “you will find rest for your souls. Come away to a deserted place and rest for a while.”

Other scripture lessons also put the importance of sabbath rest in perspective:

Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul

Ecclesiastes 3: 1 To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 4: 6 Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Matthew 6: 28-29 Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; and, yet, I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these.

This summer, may we commit to simple practices that can take a few hours or a few moments. Let us remember that Sabbath time is time off the wheel, time when we take our hand from the plow and let God and the earth care for things, while we drink, if only for a few moments, from the fountain of rest and delight.

We close our sermon with these words by John Greenleaf Whittier (1872) from the hymn (UMH #499) "Serenity:" May God grant us, as the lovely hymn suggests, some "serenity" spent in God's presence.

*O sabbath rest of Galilee! O calm of hills above, where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity interpreted by love.*

*Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain
and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace. Amen.*