

# *Practicing Sabbath*

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 20, 2003

### Sermon Background Study

#### *Scripture Passages*

*Deuteronomy 5:12,15 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.

<sup>15</sup>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.

*Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV)*

<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. <sup>54</sup>When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, <sup>55</sup>and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>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.

*Compassion . . . shepherd . . . rest*

We often live frantic lives. We fill our days with so many activities and obligations that it can sometimes feel like we are barely hanging on. It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus and his disciples were often pushed hard by the crowds that came seeking healing and teaching. In today's passage from Mark, Jesus knows that his disciples<sup>1</sup> desperately need some rest and renewal. Understandably, Jesus tells them to get away, to find a deserted place and get some rest. Again, perhaps paralleling our own best intentions, the crowds foil the disciples' plans. Jesus and his helpers simply cannot escape. Nonetheless, Jesus has compassion for the surging crowds and, like a good shepherd, sets aside his own needs and gives the throng what they had come seeking.

We misread the story if we think that all Jesus had in mind for himself and his disciples was a little time away from the office.

#### Sabbath

Of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to practice Sabbath is the most richly detailed (Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Out of his love and genuine concern for his people, God commands that they rest on one day out of seven. This rest is to be extended to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (see Galatians 3:28 for a thought-provoking parallel) – even the livestock! Further, this rest is explicitly tied to God's redemption of his people from bondage in Egypt. Sabbath is to be a holy time, set apart for God, in whom we find true rest.

Jews marked observed Sabbath on Saturday but marked days from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath began about 6pm on Friday. Because Jesus was resurrected on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, Christians came to adopt Sunday as the principal day for worship.

<sup>1</sup> You'll notice in the scripture passage that Jesus uses the word "apostles." This is the only occurrence of "apostle" in Mark's Gospel. Usually, of course, Jesus' closest followers are referred to as "disciples" in the Gospels. "Disciple" is akin to student or apprentice. "Apostle" means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." Here (6:30), Mark probably uses "apostle" because in 6:7 Jesus "sends" the disciples out in two-man teams to spread the Good News.

For many of us, we manage to make vacations and other so-called “downtime” every bit as frantic as the rest of our lives. But if the “rest” of which Jesus speaks isn’t simply downtime, what is it?

### *Practicing Sabbath*

Recently, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA urged its clergy and congregations to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. Calling on both scriptural teachings and centuries-old Christian traditions, the Presbyterians articulated well the larger sense of Sabbath among God’s people. They noted that the “gift of Sabbath” serves many purposes:<sup>2</sup>

#### Sabbath in Jesus’ Day

The Jews were God’s chosen people. Of all the nations on the planet, God had made a covenant with them! For hundreds of years, ever since the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews had struggled to stay true to YHWH, to resist the pressures of cultural assimilation by their oppressors. There were several potent symbols of Jewish distinctiveness – and they were non-negotiable. Sabbath-keeping was one of these symbols. By definition, Jews were those who kept the Sabbath.

In Luke 13, Jesus heals a crippled woman whose body had been in bondage to Satan for 18 years. To the dismay of the local synagogue leader, Jesus heals her on the Sabbath. Jesus’ confrontation with this leader is not really about the legal niceties of Sabbath law, but about Jesus’ frustration that so many Jews are unable to see that the great Sabbath day, the day of Israel’s release from bondage, was breaking in upon them all. Thus, after the confrontation, Jesus teaches not about the law, but about the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:18-21). As Rabbi Arthur Waskow recently wrote, “With Shabbat, we get what Jewish tradition calls a foretaste . . . of the Messianic Age, a higher Eden.”<sup>1</sup>

1. This is from an article, “Radical Shabbat,” in *Sojourners* magazine. The article is available online at [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net) in their magazine archive.

- “Sabbath is for our joy and our rest.” John Calvin<sup>3</sup> wrote, “Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing.” As God rested on the seventh day to rejoice in the goodness of his creation, Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is!
- “Sabbath is for deepened communion with the Living God.” Sabbath is a time that we set aside for God to shape us within.
- “Sabbath draws us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and all creation.” In addition to a Sabbath day, God commanded that his people honor a Sabbath year. Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vines were not to be pruned. The land itself was to have a Sabbath to God. After seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee, when land was to be returned to its original family, for it was God’s land, not the Israelites’ (Leviticus 25). In the Jubilee year, slaves were to be freed, just as God had redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. The Sabbath is about the need for and goodness of rest, redemption, and renewal.
- “Sabbath is profoundly prophetic.” Again Calvin: “Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God.”
- “Sabbath is for our life in community.” Sabbath is not a private gift from God. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as the entire community of God’s people.

This study took more time to write than most. I guess that is because I always associated “Sabbath” with no work and stores closed on Sunday! But as I read in preparation for writing this study, I gained a deeper appreciation for the true meaning of Sabbath. It is about much more than simply my leisure! It is about God, and about community, and about reconnecting with God and one another as we pull ourselves away from the craziness of our daily lives. We do need to rediscover the gift of Sabbath!

<sup>2</sup>The quotations and much of this section are taken from “An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift,” written by the Sabbath Keeping Work Group of the PCUSA General Assembly in 2000.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin was one of the great Protestant reformers and a near-contemporary of Martin Luther. Calvin was the founder of what is known as the “Reformed” branch of Protestantism. The Presbyterian Church USA is the largest Calvinist/Reformed denomination in America, as the United Methodist Church is the largest Wesleyan denomination.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15 The Sabbath commandment</p>	<p>Day 2 Leviticus 25 The Sabbath year and Jubilee</p>
<p>Day 3 Amos 8:1-6 The Lord warns those who wish the Sabbath to be over so they can get back to work (v.5)!</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 13:10-21 Jesus heals on the Sabbath and tells parables about the Kingdom of God.</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 14:1-6 Again, Jesus heals on the Sabbath and confronts the Pharisees.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Scott Engle's new SS class, *Something More*, is at 9:30!!

We've begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

We meet in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary.

**Please join us next week!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We don't really make much of Sabbath keeping anymore. In the Bible, Sabbath is a gift from God and an honor due God. Should we try to rediscover this gift? If so, how? Why? Should we restore the practice of keeping every seventh day as the Lord's Day . . . keeping it holy? Do you think that we are talking about the activities of a single day or the ways in which we order our lives? The Presbyterian working group I referred to in the study, suggests some simple Sabbath acts in which we might engage: seeking rest from daily occupation, sharing with others in worship, taking time with God's word, engaging in acts of compassion, and enjoying activities that refresh and renew the spirit. Are there others you might add to this list? Which of these would most help you to rediscover the gift of Sabbath?
2. When the practice of our faith turns to something like the Sabbath, we have a tendency to make it all about rules. But Sabbath keeping is not about following arbitrary rules. It is about listening to God's guidance as to how we can go about building the sorts of lives that we all seek and that God wishes for us. Avoiding your job on Sundays isn't going to make God love you anymore . . . and shopping isn't going to cause God to love you less! How do we avoid letting a discussion about Sabbath keeping degenerate into rule-making?