

Remember the Sabbath

In recent weeks I have offered meditations, beginning with a few thoughts on the meaning of spirituality, and have followed that with some thoughts on peacemaking, the importance of human rights, beauty found in art, nature, and church buildings, and how such things play into our spiritual life. In this meditation I want to focus on a part of our spiritual life, that in some ways has been overlooked or forgotten in our society - that is, the Sabbath. I think you can all remember a time when Sundays looked much different than they do today. I know that in my hometown in the 50s and 60s, the only business open on Sundays were gas stations and one deli. The day always seemed to be quieter than others. Today, Sunday's look no different than any other day of the week, and so much more noisily hectic.

In the first creation story in Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth, plants, trees, animals, and humankind, then calls all that was created good. But on the seventh day he rested and declared that day blessed and hallowed. Then, in the Book of Exodus he hands down the Ten Commandments, and in the fourth of those commandments we are told to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy (hallowed). But what does it mean to keep it holy?

It is good that we gather together on Sunday mornings for worship. That, most certainly, is a part of remembering and keeping it holy. But is there more to it than that? In the 12th chapter of Matthew Jesus is accused twice by his critics of breaking Sabbath law. In the first, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field and being hungry the disciples pluck some grains to eat. In the tradition of the time this would have been considered work, and his critics say, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." In the 7th verse Jesus replies, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice...". In the second instance, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. Again, he is accused of breaking Sabbath law. This time he asks, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep? So, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Jesus does not deny the importance of resting on the Sabbath, but he demonstrates that the law must not supersede the need for mercy, compassion, and doing that which is good. Acting in such ways is also to be considered ways in which we keep the Sabbath holy.

Jesus declares that "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath." In other words, it is an opportunity to rest from the labors of the week, something that is easily overlooked in a consumerist society such as ours. Perhaps the fact that anxiety is so prevalent in this society is because we have forgotten the importance of taking time for rest, and for focusing more on that which is holy.

Peace, grace, and love
David