

Finding Sabbath in Community
Psalm 1 and 1 John 4:7-13, 19
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Trinity Sunday

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It's summertime....and the living is anything but easy!

In the past week I've heard similar stories. Last week of school...teacher appreciation gifts...end-of-year picnics and recitals and sports banquets. Or, if none of that resonates with you, fill in the blank with your own stresses: colleagues on vacation that lead to extra work for the rest of the office...even a "carefree" summer home requires cleaning and organization. There's a lot of work to do before we can relax!

Some of us have more on our plates – too much. Care of elderly parents, stress of illness or finances-it's too much. We crave Sabbath, but for many it may feel like a luxury OR an impossibility.

That's why we'll be thinking about Sabbath together for the next few weeks. Pastor Chris kicked us off last week when she said, "And then, God took a deep breath, and saw that it was good, and called that moment 'Sabbath.' Sabbath, that moment in creation when we pause to savor this miracle – this life - this world that God so loves."

God's commandment to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" springs directly from this love. The love God had then for the Israelites AND the love God has for us now. God knows that we need Sabbath, which is why it's on God's top 10 list.

However, MaryAnn McKibben Dana – a minister who writes candidly about her family's efforts to keep the Sabbath -- calls God's exhortation to "remember the Sabbath" the "cute commandment" or the "one we don't take seriously¹." Professor Dorothy Bass, another "Sabbath keeper" tells of going out to dinner with a group of Christian colleagues on a Saturday night. One

¹ **Sabbath in the Suburbs.** Chalice Press: St. Louis, MO. 2012. Page 4.

started out with “oh – I have so many papers to grade tomorrow!” A second chimed in, “I do too! AND I have so much writing to do!” Soon, Bass told us, each was trying to top the others with how much work they had planned for the Sabbath!” They never would have bragged about plans to commit adultery or to kill, but overloading the weekend with work was second nature².

For many of us, Sabbath really isn't on the radar. We look around our community – even our church community – and we don't have many Sabbath role models. I certainly don't claim to be one! And although there are plenty of voices in the broader culture telling us to take time off, it's because they want us to be spiritually nurtured.

These voices can be confused for Sabbath...but Sabbath is NOT –

1. “Me time.” Me time is great! I love me time. Please, take some! But, the purpose of “me time” is to honor, well, “me” – not God³. Even “me time” can be a kind of work. When we're encouraged to get a mani/pedi or to make it “Miller Time,” we're still “doing,” even if we are doing very pleasant things. Sabbath is a time to simply “be.”
2. And Sabbath is not about resting so that we will be more productive when we get back to work. When I was in business, Steven Covey was all the rage, and we were encouraged to “sharpen the saw” – the moral being that if you take time “off,” your time “on” is more productive. A great suggestion for workplace effectiveness, but not for Sabbath.

So that's what Sabbath is NOT. Then, what is it?

1. First, Sabbath is simply shutting down. It is being and not doing. It is shutting down so that we can remember who we are. And WHO we are, *is a community of God's people in the world.*
2. Second, Sabbath is shutting down to remember who we are NOT. We are not God. We don't cause the sun to rise and set. When we think that our work is so vital that the world will stop spinning if we don't do the laundry or send one more e-mail, we inflate our own importance and run the risk of forgetting who – and WHOSE – we are.

² Unpublished lecture at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, c. 2001.

³ Winner, Lauren. **Mudhouse Sabbath**. Paraclete Press: Brewster MA, 2003. Page 11.

When we remember WHOSE we are, we can't help but remember that we are a community. One made up of people like those in today's Psalm. The Psalmist describes his "happy" (or blessed) community as people who "delight" in God's laws – including God's commandment to set aside a holy day each week. They delight in this day because "they are like trees planted by streams." God's people are nourished by living water, sunlight and breezes. They – *we* – are fed and watered by God's goodness, and so we set aside time to receive God's nourishment.

The Psalms contrast God's way with "the way of the wicked." To be candid, when I first selected this Psalm, I thought about reading only "selected verses" – then we wouldn't have to use that pejorative word. I don't know about you, but it makes me very uncomfortable!

But I can understand why the Psalmist is a little crabby. He is trying to live in God's way, and others scoff at him. I imagine that each and every one of us can think of a time we tried to do the right thing and were mocked. It feels lousy, and unfair.

So I think that's why we need our community. Sabbath is so radically counter-cultural that I don't think we can do it alone. We need a community of support. And while alone time is vital – much of our Sabbath can be WE time, not ME time. God's gift of Sabbath time was a gift to the entire people of Israel, and it is a gift for us to explore together.

What does a Sabbath community look like? I can think of a few examples – First, a Sabbath community is just that – community. It isn't comprised of people going it alone, but rather of people doing it together.

McKibben Dana and her husband started by creating Sabbath at home with their three young children. Every Saturday they simply slow down. Play games, bake cookies, go to Farmer's Markets or festivals without feeling the pressure to see and do everything. And they aren't rigid about it. Sometimes Sabbath is just an afternoon or an evening, but it happens every week.

Then Sabbath community extends. Whether Sabbath is Friday night or all day Sunday...it becomes time to share with a broader community of friends who agree to slow down together. Maybe share a meal, take a walk, host a playdate of board games.

We see signs of Sabbath within our secular culture as well. You may have read about a new tradition called “Friday night meatballs.” It’s exactly as it sounds. It started with a family who offered to make a simple pot of spaghetti and meatballs on Friday and to invite the first eight people who RSVPed. Old friends or perfect strangers....single people, folks with kids – they all gather around the table. Sarah, the founder, describes Friday Night Meatballs as “a way to try to get back to basics, to strip away the need for perfection and satisfy the need for community.”⁴

Light-hearted examples like this remind us that those around us may not crave worship or church – but they crave Sabbath time in community. Churches are learning from this and following suit. One of the new (and yet VERY old) trends in the Christian world is “dinner church.” Early Christian worship was simply a gathering at someone’s table, enjoying food together before praising God in prayer and song. New churches are springing up that simply worship God around a meal – our own Kristie Finley is leading one of these dinner churches out in New Jersey, so ask her about it!

Next, a Sabbath community is FUN. If it’s work, it goes against the very definition of Sabbath, right?! Sabbath today is not about rules or the things you CAN’T do. It’s about hallowing time together. That’s the idea behind Playground Church which we’ll offer again this summer. Families come together as a church community on Sunday mornings. We play – we swing and slide and run – and we also sing and pray. ALL of those activities are a way to worship and praise God.

Sabbath community is also about accountability. And I think this is one of the biggies. One of the biggest challenges today is “FOMO” or Fear of Missing Out. Many of us want to jump off the roller coaster and set a more relaxed

⁴ www.Fridaynightmeatballs.com. Accessed on May 29, 2015.

pace for our families...but we want some reassurance that we won't be going it alone.

If we're in community together, and I say to you, "My life just isn't my own anymore! All my time is spent driving my two sons to their six sporting events, cello lessons, fencing, interpretive dance sessions and culinary classes. My family doesn't have time to eat together, let alone observe the Sabbath!" If we've committed to be part of this church community together, you might gently – lovingly – say to me, "Amy, I wonder what it would look like for you to set some boundaries for your children? Could you help them prioritize the activities that most life-giving and joyful? I wonder if your family might be able to create space for Sabbath time together?"

And if we were a community focused on all that is life-giving AND all that is joyful, I wonder if we might become a very different sort of community.

As Jesus said, Sabbath was made for people – not people for the Sabbath. God created the Sabbath because God knew we would need it. It's tempting to believe that the Sabbath might have been helpful 3000 years ago but modern people no longer need it. *But what if God created the Sabbath precisely because we would need it now?* What if God knew that people in every time and place would be distracted and worried. We would always need a way of calling ourselves back to God and to one another. And so we have Sabbath.

Our second reading for this morning also tells us what matters. John says that we LOVE, because God first loved us. "Whoever does NOT LOVE, does NOT know God."

John's words remind us why we NEED this Sabbath community, now more than ever.

I know that not everyone here has been following the public debate this past week or two, but there have been many conversations – both on-line and face-to-face – around staffing at the high school. I'm not going to go into that here, primarily because I don't pretend to understand all the issues and I certainly don't think it's my place to offer a solution! However, I've listened to many of you, and I hear that we are troubled by the lack of civil dialogue.

When adults hurl insults and insinuations at each other, it does absolutely nothing to further the dialogue or to guide our leaders to good decisions. All it does is feed more anger and nastiness. So let's be clear: We don't have to agree on ANYTHING to be kind to one another!⁵

I know what John would say about this because he's pretty darn blunt. John says "Those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars (1 John 4:20a)."

Ouch! Let's just say it straight up, friends: If we do not love other people – if we do not love our brothers and sisters in this world, then we *do not love God*.

Oh sure, we can say that we love God but John would say that we are liars. He would say that if we don't love the people around us, how can we possibly hope to love God?

No one sets out to be a hater, and I certainly don't think that anyone sets out to model hatred and vitriol for our children and youth. But sometimes, when we passionately believe that we are right, AND when we are convinced that there's a lot on the line, we forget ourselves. We forget our brothers and sisters AND we forget ourselves. We forget that *each and every person is a child of God*. And, I am convinced, we forget that *WE are children of God, made in God's image*. And we need to remember.

How do we behave? What do we do? How do we LOVE one another for real?

⁵ I didn't make this up but I can't cite an original source other than to say it's everywhere on Facebook & internet!

Well, maybe we remember that we are the body of Christ in the world. To be a body means to be ONE. Not just a bunch of individuals, but one COMMUNITY.

Just as our Triune God is not just three separate identities but ONE God.

(If you are reading this, imagine three lit taper candles. Each one represents one person of the Trinity. Alone, each has a flame. When the flames are combined, they retain the same shape and appearance yet shine a bit brighter. This is a way that we can try to envision the Triune God)

--God the Creator would not gossip about God the Son because they are ONE.

--Jesus Christ would not publicly humiliate God the Holy Spirit because they are ONE.

--The Holy Spirit would not allow the Creator to go hungry and homeless because they are ONE.

Friends, we need this. We need our Triune God who shows us how to live and how to be the body of Christ in the world.

We need Sabbath. We need time to remember WHO and WHOSE we are.

And we NEED each other: We need this community. We need to walk this path alongside other seekers. Alongside brothers and sisters who will hold us accountable when we stray onto the paths of snarkiness or selfishness. AND who will support us when we stick to the paths of kindness, generosity, and radical acceptance.

Help us to figure this one out, God, and to figure it out together. And help us to love one another God, because you first loved us.

AMEN.