**Summer Sabbath**

**Mark 6:30-34**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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This church, this congregation, has a long history of sending out adult and youth mission teams to do service work in other places. By show of hands, how many of you have been on one of our church mission trips or sent one of your kids on a mission trip? Okay, keep your hands up. Let’s add to that people who have been on mission trips through other churches or organizations. That’s a lot of people!

Mission trips are amazing and transformative experiences. In fact, they often have as much, if not more, impact on those who are serving as on those being served. That’s why, if you’ve ever been the person to pick someone up after a mission trip, you know there is a predictable rhythm. The car, bus, train, or plane arrives. The team members pour out and run into the arms of their families. Your own child, spouse, friend or family member gives you a big hug – and begins to talk. And they talk and they talk and they talk. They have so many stories to tell. They have had mountain top experiences, conflicts and struggles, moments of tears, and moments of deep spiritual joy. They talk and they talk some more – until, sometimes in the car, sometimes at the kitchen table or on the living room couch, they suddenly fall into a deep, deep sleep. And you may not hear from them again for ten or twelve or fifteen hours.

This is where we pick up the gospel story that we just heard. The disciples have just returned after their first experience being sent out to teach and to heal as Jesus instructed them. It’s their first mission trip. And, just like we do, they come back full of stories and can’t wait to tell Jesus everything.

And so, the stories come tumbling out – all twelve talking at once – and for a while, Jesus just takes it in. Eventually, though, we see that he understands that they will need more than to share their stories. They will need rest. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while,” he says – as soon as he can get a word in. Notice the imperative. This isn’t a request or an invitation. It’s more of a command – come away and rest. And, of course, in his words we hear echoes of the fourth commandment – “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy”.

Jesus knows that when you are out in the world doing God’s work, there comes a time when you need to rest – because if you don’t, you won’t have anything to offer when you head back into the world again. Of course, the same is true in our secular lives, as well. Americans are known for working hard – working, on average, more hours per week than any of our European counterparts. Quite frankly, as much as we grumble about it, we like to work. We have a long heritage of a great work ethic – and we appreciate the benefits that can come with hard work – money, status, and material belongings.

We’re not particularly good at taking time off – and even worse at taking Sabbath. It’s important to understand the distinction between the two. A day off of work is a good thing, but we tend to use our days off to do more work - laundry, grocery-shopping, errands, and house-cleaning.

That is not Sabbath. That kind of day off would not give the disciples the rest they need after their time in mission. Sabbath is about real rest, about doing nothing, what we would call “wasting time”. Eugene Peterson, in his book “Working the Angles”, describes Sabbath as a time to do only two things – pray and play.

Peterson takes this from the two times in which the commandment to keep the Sabbath appears in the Old Testament. The first is in Exodus, where God commands we take Sabbath because we are made in God’s image, and in the process of creating all of life, God took the seventh day to rest. We do it because God does it. And when we do it, we have the time, the space, to pray and align ourselves again with God.

The second time the commandment appears is in Deuteronomy. Here the reason for Sabbath is somewhat different. For four hundred years, God’s people were slaves in Egypt and never had a day to rest or to be in community with one another. They never had a chance to play. So, Sabbath creates that time for relationships and fun.

To pray and to play are deeply connected. One brings us closer to God, the other closer to our family, friends and neighbors. Both provide spiritual rest and renewal that don’t come when we fill our non-working time with other obligations!

So, what does it mean in practical terms to take Sabbath? It means that one day a week, you set aside for your spirit. One day out of seven - from evening until the next afternoon. It feels strange to us that Sabbath should begin in the evening. We think of the day starting in the morning. However, in Genesis, when we read of God’s great acts of creation, God begins God’s work in the evening. While we sleep, God is busy creating, healing, and offering grace in the world and within us. Then, in the morning, God invites us to join in celebrating God’s work. The daytime hours of Sabbath are time for contemplation or prayer, music, laughter, joy in community with people we love or care about. Because those are the things that refresh the spirit.

Many of us will take vacations this summer. We will head off to some deserted place – or at least less populace place. We will seek out a spot that is beautiful – near a lake, river, or ocean, in the woods or the mountains - and there we will spend hours at play. My hope for you is that you will also set aside time to pray – time when you allow silence to enfold you and you seek out God’s voice, God’s grace, God’s beauty. When you lie down in green pastures or beside still waters and God restores your soul.

So often, vacation time is when we have glimpses of what Sabbath is really meant to be – and the beauty of it is that it doesn’t have to end when vacation ends. We can find ways to take Sabbath, real Sabbath, even in the normal patterns of our work and our days. Maybe not a full day at first, though that is the goal. Start with a few hours or half of a day and don’t schedule anything. Leave that time open to meet God in prayer and play.

As Pastor Tim so eloquently reminded us last week, God has work for us to do – holy work. As people who follow Jesus, God sends us out into the world to speak out for the marginalized, to challenge the systems of power that allow for oppression, to feed the hungry and care for the sick. All of that takes energy and courage and a deep commitment to God’s kingdom values – justice, love, health, and abundant life.

In a secular world that has a whole different set of values, we can only maintain that courage and commitment through remembering who we are and who God is. There is a pastor who tells the story of having the wonderful theologian Howard Thurman as a guest preacher in his church. The pastor, long a fan of Dr. Thurman’s, wanted very much to impress his mentor. So, when Thurman arrived at his office, the pastor set about showing him the church and telling him all about the many things he was doing in his ministry and all of the wonderful, faith-filled programs in his church. When he finished, Dr. Thurman looked at him and simply said, “And who are you?”

We take Sabbath not only to be in relationship with God and with our neighbor, family, or friends, but because those relationships help us to discover or remember who we are. To stop doing and listen to God’s voice within, because it is from our identity as children of God, from our assurance that we’re forgiven and loved, from our convictions about what is just and what is wrong, that we find the strength to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus models for us stepping away from the busyness of life for time spent with God. He goes to a mountain side to pray. He goes to the lake. He goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. And, in this story from Mark, he instructs the disciples to go a deserted place and rest. Ironically, this time, their rest is not meant to be – at least, not yet. No sooner do they try to get away then people find them and begin to ask for Jesus to teach and to heal them.

It’s a good reminder that the needs of the world won’t go away. The only way we can continue to meet those needs is if we take care of our own spiritual needs. And often, we don’t even know what those spiritual needs are until we have taken Sabbath. Until we have cleared away the mental and emotional clutter that comes from striving for success and comfort in our secular world so we can listen to the sacred

.

So, I challenge you to do two things during these summer months. First of all, make a commitment to how and when you can take Sabbath more often than on your annual summer vacation. And secondly, when you do take Sabbath, listen to what you need to restore your soul, to give you confidence in God’s love for you, to strengthen your resolve to make the world a better place. If you do, you, like the disciples, can return to God’s kingdom work refreshed and resolved and ready to have new stories to tell. May it be so.

Amen.