

“Taking Sabbath Rest Seriously”

Sermon by Reverend James Brassard

Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12-15, and Mark 6:45-48

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In the Northern Hemisphere it's summer. A time of vacation, rest and renewal...but not necessarily for all of us. The word is out—Americans take less time off and enjoy fewer days of vacation than just about any other industrialized country. Our average vacation time is 12 working days, or just over 2 weeks. Germans, who are known for being such hard workers, get 6 weeks. The French get five—along with many other national holidays.

When economists compared worker productivity, Americans are not significantly more productive than our German and French counterparts. We make more money because we work longer hours. Almost all the extra cash we make we spend purchasing the things less harried Europeans do for themselves—like cooking real meals and eating them with their families, taking care of maintaining their own homes, and spending time with their children.

Jesus commands his disciples to take periodic rest. As we see in Mark's gospel **this is not easy for Jesus.** When he leaves a large crowd he was teaching and healing, the crowd chases him around the lakeside and meets his boat as soon as he and the disciples arrive. So he has to feed 5000 people. Then he heads off to the mountains to relax and recharge himself. The disciples decided to go back to town and leave that afternoon by boat. Late that night Jesus notices that although they have been rowing non-stop, they are not making any progress.

You can't miss the irony here. Rowing all night and can't make it across. I've been on the Lake—it is maybe 3 miles across. I used to row my cousins this far every day while on summer vacation when I was 12. The “all work and no rest” disciples are engaged in an “**exercise in futility.**” When they get in trouble because of an approaching storm, Jesus has to go out and rescue them.

We see here Biblical permission for sincere followers of Jesus to take time off! This **sounds easy but for many people it is not!**

We all know people who burn the midnight oil. And it is not just procrastinating college students attempting to do a whole semester's worth of work during finals week. They operate under what I call the “**myth of efficiency.**” You know people who try to convince you they work well under great pressure and produce “quality work” even when exhausted. I had a good friend who accepted a job with a noted workaholic and insisted on taking a day off every week. “I can do a week's work in 6 days but can't do it in 7.”

Some of the most well meaning and sincere disciples I have known are also the worst about Sabbath keeping and leave taking. They admit it, saying, “*I can't shut it down.*” When they are leaving town they take a laptop computer, a Blackberry, and a briefcase full of work journals and professional reading. This ceaseless activity—whether it is in the name of saving the world or salvaging your company's future...is fueled by the conviction that it is up to *them* to set the world right.

There is a very **old story of man in a small town in Scotland**. He was involved in everything: the pastor at the only church, the mayor, and the operator of the only market in town. As the years passed, more and more responsibility got heaped upon him. Suddenly the man shocked everyone by leaving his store twice a day---at 8:30AM and 5:30PM-- and driving to the small train station at the edge of town. There he would stand and watch as the train came in and stopped. The mail was dropped off and a few passengers disembarked. Then he would watch the train leave the station and then he would drive back and resume his ceaseless workday.

One day a townspeople asked him why he did this.

“That train is the only thing that comes and goes in this town without me pushing it.”

Sunday morning worship gives us a taste of Sabbath taking. Here there is much activity. The buzz of renewed friendship. We sing, pray, listen, meditate. **As the world sees it, we do nothing useful, productive or essential.** We are here relaxing, resting, and simply enjoying being here with one another and with God. Christians believe that these Sunday mornings are a foretaste of eternity when we will have nothing better to do but to rest from our labors, to relax and be in the presence of God—not just one day a week but always. Our destiny is a Sabbath rest forever.

The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is central in both versions of the 10 commandments found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 5, after commanding that they do no work on the Sabbath—and that they let their animals rest and give their servants and slaves the day off, the writer tells them, “To Remember you were slaves in Egypt before God delivered you out of bondage.” Now that you are liberated from ceaseless toil—don't become an oppressor yourself. Take the Sabbath off and just as importantly; give it off to those who work for you.

For years there were “Blue Laws” that prohibited work on Sundays. In Bergen County, NJ, where packed roadways and towns run into each other, the Blue Laws are still on the books. Every four years the Mall owners, claiming the church is trying to control people's lives, petition the county council to hold a referendum to lift the blue laws. Every four years the voters, barely half of whom are Christian, vote overwhelmingly to keep them. People still find plenty of time to shop at night or on Saturday. In fact, on Saturday from 11-5 the traffic is horrendous. But on Sunday you will find smooth sailing as you are visiting friends in the county. The citizens of Bergen County have decided they **need protection against their own inability to set limits**. So they like the blue laws.

In Andrea's hometown, Prospect Park, NJ, which is becoming predominately Pakistani Muslim, you can still get a citation for washing your car on Sunday.

In Exodus 20 we are told to honor the Sabbath because God rested after creating the world in six days. We are to **follow God's example by resting one day a week**. By following God's example we are demonstrating our faith in God's loving care for us.

If you are “**Generation X-er**” your defining TV show is “**The Simpson's.**” The animated series is still running after 20 years. In the first year of the show pastors and critics complained about its irreverence. “The Simpson's” always makes sport of religion; however, the Simpson's are the most church going family on TV. There is an episode during the initial season where Bart is asked to offer the blessing for the family dinner. His prayer, *“Dear God, thank you for nothing. Dad worked and got paid and bought this food, which my mother prepared, and we are about to eat. Then its my turn to do the dishes. Thank you for nothing. Amen.”*

Since we are no longer an agrarian society, we don't witness first hand how food grows without our efforts. Like Bart, we can come to think everything in life is the result of our own efforts. As a young child we spent summers on my grandparents' farm in Iowa. We arrived early enough for planting season and during the hot and humid days of July and August you could almost see the seed corn growing and you could certainly hear it. The cornhusks popped and snapped loudly.

You knew that God's creation was producing the harvest. It was amazing. Just **toss the seeds** onto the rich Iowa soil and God took over. Two months later the corn was several feet taller than I was.

Sundays were for church and picnics. Farmers took Sunday off to go to church and have a meal and spend time together. It was wonderful spending summer Sunday afternoons with all 14 of my first cousins. The meals featured fresh corn cooked outdoors. Dessert was homemade **hand cranked** ice cream. There was no doubt about it--Sunday was a holy day of rest and recreation.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in a published sermon she gave at Duke Chapel ten years ago, noted that the commandment about the Sabbath is the longest of the ten commandments, taking nearly a third of the Decalogue. The Sabbath is the only one of God's creations called HOLY, the rest are called "good." The **sanctification of time at rest and worship** preceded the sanctification of persons.

Brown also pointed out that observing the Sabbath has always kept God's people from being **absorbed by the alien culture where they resided**. As slaves in Egypt they belonged for six days a week to Pharaoh, but on the Sabbath they belonged only to God. The Sabbath was not simply a day for recovering their strength. It was not free time but **freedom time**. It was a time to recover their identity, a time to remember who and whose they were.

By the time of Jesus, the Hebrews had compiled a list of 234 specific tasks prohibited on the Sabbath. The basic idea was to cease and desist from all acts of creation, to stop competing with God so we might remember that the world was created by God totally without us.

Tilden Edwards suggests it is important to find ways to specifically withdraw on our Sabbath rest. Take the phone off the hook, don't check or answer your office e-mail, don't shop. In short, do something that signifies that we are observing a Sabbath.

For some people—sure some here today...worshiping and reading and relaxing on Sunday cuts them the wrong way. Some people insist on doing active things. If you must be active --do something not related to work. Don't cut the grass or go shopping. Take a bike ride or take a hike. Go swimming, go fishing, have a picnic. Just make Sunday different.

I think the need to keep a Sabbath is as great as ever.

The Economist magazine (June 17, 2006 pages 73-74) reported that a new magazine was published this month. It is not really new - **Success** is the resurrection (the writer's term, not mine) of a magazine first published in 1897 by Orson Swett Marden, an entrepreneur and author of several self help books including, **GETTING THE MOST OUT OF LIFE**. The new publisher is writing to reflect the contemporary workplace "where success is measured less by money and titles and more about the **work-life balance**." The first issue contains an article about men leaving work to become full time fathers.

The Economist detailed how the new economy has invented new types of jobs. There are "**Binge workers**": These are mostly found in investment banking firms and related law firms.

In this area there are people who produce proposals during the government contracting season. I knew several of these people in New Jersey. During the two-month “**deal making time**” they worked around the clock, coming home only to sleep and change clothes. Not surprisingly, divorce and health problems were prevalent in these jobs. So is job turnover. Goldman Sachs and other firms are launching programs called “**Encore**” which is aimed at easing back workers, mostly women, who have spent time out of the industry and want to get back into it—albeit at a less than all-consuming pace. Without a regular Sabbath—these people are resorting to frequent sabbaticals—sometimes known as short-lived “RETIREMENTS.”

There are also “**extreme jobs**” found in companies with **global responsibilities** and “**always on**” **communication**, which **leaves little room for balance**. These folks are burning out and finding their personal lives destroyed by work. They are producing periodic “sabbaticals” where the worker cuts all ties with the company until they do something else to regenerate themselves.

Not everyone is on board with trying to help people balance work and rest. **Martha Stewart's Omnimedia** was called to comment on work-life balance movement. Martha abruptly told employees to leave if they were not prepared to work weekends and long evening hours over the coming months for no extra pay.

Europeans watching this American movement for work/life balance are somewhat amused. American firms offer far fewer paid holidays. Occasional sabbaticals—usually without pay—may just be the local alternative to Europeans' longer annual leaves and more humane workweeks.

The purpose of observing a Sabbath rest is to build a healthy rhythm into our lives.

Lets face it-- Americans have horrible habits. We don't eat well. Few of us exercise with any kind of regularity. We consume twice the energy of everyone else and produce most of the global warming that threatens the earth. Our families hardly talk—Johnny's nose is next to his video game and Sally's ears are connected to an iPod. Dad is watching sports on TV and Mom is cleaning up after everyone! Where do we find our spiritual core and connect to each other?

When I first started in the ministry twenty years ago I became close with a very ambitious and highly driven colleague. After ten years his wife was about to leave him. So he asked a mature friend in his church, a partner in a Pittsburgh law firm, how he could change. His wise friend suggested this pattern to introduce balance and healthy rhythm.

Withdraw Weekly, Retreat Quarterly and Abandon Annually.

My colleague started to take Fridays off and became unreachable except if you ran into him at the athletic club or fishing along the river. Instead of one long annual vacation (he used to be away the month of July) he took regular four-day breaks each quarter and then a longer, albeit shorter, vacation in the summer.

Withdraw Weekly, Retreat Quarterly and Abandon Annually.

You might stop me about now and say, “**Look who is talking.**” Sunday is work day for you. You are right—Sunday is a workday for me. That's the bad news. The good news is that is the only day I work! Yes—from before 6AM until I get home from Worship around 1pm—I am fully engaged in doing my job the best I can. But Sunday is still a day of worship and recreation for me. I love singing. I love hearing the scriptures read. I enjoy hearing the choir or soloists and instrumentalists share their gifts. I enjoy the children's sermons. I get a thrill out of greeting people before and after worship.

I shut it down when I head home. When Andrea and I set out to purchase a home we established clear criteria. Small – no space for grown kids to move back in and live after college. A large and secluded back yard and a beautiful swimming pool. The pool requires work to keep up but it is worth it. We used to be members of a neighborhood swim club—(like Whitehall or Belair Swim Clubs) mainly for kids to have other kids to play with and run around without my supervision. At this stage of life we need a place to retreat and read and eat and laugh.

If you read the Gospel of Mark you will find that 66 times the word "Immediately" is used to describe the almost hyper-kinetic life of Jesus. Jesus is in demand 24/7. Yet we also see Jesus getting away frequently to rest and pray.

Jesus practiced what he preached. The early disciples didn't get it.

He healed on the Sabbath and the Pharisees condemned him for it. But Jesus was consistent. **Love people - not a set of rules.** Do God's work—heal and be a reconciler/ but **set aside time** to pray and recharge.

I think there are **many ways** to find the work-life balance. They require that we make some choices and follow them. Set aside the time to take Sabbath and establish specific acts to make sure your Sunday is different from the rest of the week.. You will have to re-evaluate your practices as your place on the life cycle and family cycle change. **No "one size fits all."**

Just as the Sabbath was designed to save us from our instincts, sometimes God sends friends that offer serendipitous grace. A good example was offered by a man who shared a story at the **wonderful** party that celebrated Ed and Gloria Godfrey's 50 years of marriage. Ed was the person who organized the girl's soccer program in Bowie. As in any beginning, Ed had to scramble to get the first set of coaches. He hit up all his friends. One friend accepted the job and then got a major promotion at work. He went to the pre-season meeting with every intention of backing out of coaching. When he walked in Ed gave him the list of girls and their phone numbers. The guy felt he couldn't let Ed down.

All that year when the work demands would start to overwhelm him he would have to stop and leave the office because a group of very enthusiastic young girls needed him coach their team. You can't let kids down. Coaching turned out to be the best thing he ever did. It kept him his life in perspective.

I don't know how you will keep the Sabbath. Maybe you already keep a good balance. Maybe you need the Commandment to protect you from your instincts.