

Sermon “Sabbath Work”

Baccalaureate Sunday, June 3, 2018

Scripture Readings: I Samuel 3:1-10, Mark 2:23-3:6

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Our first scripture reading is I Samuel 3:1-10. The Bible abounds in call stories, from the Creator’s “Where are you?” in the garden of Eden, to YHWH addressing Moses at the burning bush, to Isaiah’s vision in the Temple, which we read last week. Today’s story of the call of the boy Samuel is one of the most memorable and charming. (*Feasting on the Word*) The only child of older parents, Samuel is dedicated to God by his mother Hannah and training to become a priest under the tutelage of old Eli, whose eyesight is dim during a time when visions are rare. Our reading is the first episode in the transitions from the moveable ark to the fixed temple and from the age of judges to the age of kings. This pivotal time in biblical history marks the movement from the old tribal confederacy—in which Israel understood itself as a theocracy led by charismatic judges—to a monarchy led by Saul, David and Solomon respectfully. Hear now God’s word.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room;³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.⁴ Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!”⁵ and he said, “Here I am!”⁶ and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.”⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if the Lord calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 2:23-3:6. Several hundred years after the time of Samuel, our gospel reading marks another transition as our faith is stretched in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We learn from Mark that Jesus both amazes and angers the respected leaders of the religious community with his unconventional teaching. We also learn in this confrontation between the old and the new that change is never easy. Those who challenge our religious rituals and practices are not always welcome. Like the Pharisees, we too can become offended by those who by questioning our beliefs unwittingly expose our hubris. Hear now God’s Holy word.

²³ One sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵ And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷ Then Jesus said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Amen.

The title of the sermon – Sabbath Work

Text: "...he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'
Mark 3:5b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the gift of rest, introspection, and pause in each of our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

The title of today's sermon "Sabbath work" is an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction to illustrate a rhetorical point or to reveal a paradox. Other examples of an oxymoron are: *bittersweet, conspicuous absence, deceptively honest, devout atheist, friendly takeover, genuine imitation, jumbo shrimp, old news, seriously funny, the sound of silence, three in one.*

The title of the offertory anthem sung by the Westminster Choir during today's 10:00 a.m. worship service is *Christus Paradox* by Alfred Fedak, which presents a series of paradoxes about who Christ is to us, both our lamb and our shepherd, our death and our life, our judge and our savior...contradictory yet interrelated characteristics that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Paradoxes enrich our lives.

Today, we are invited to reflect on the paradox of Sabbath work as we honor the third commandment "Remember to keep Holy the Sabbath Day." What did it mean for those who came before us and what does it mean for us today? What is the work of Sabbath to which we need to attend and what are the consequences if we do not?

In a recent DVD series on the Ten Commandments presented during the Adult Education Forum, theologian Joan Chittister offers this insight. "Among all the cultures of the ancient world, the celebration of Sabbath as a tribute to the dignity of humanity is unique to the Hebrew people. On the Sabbath, life changed. The privileges and expectations of standard roles and relationships ceased...Sabbath demands justice for every living thing. Every living thing requires time to renew itself both physically and spiritually."

She goes on. "There were two ideas in the ancient world about time: The first was a common understanding that leisure was a privilege only of the gods. The second was that humans were slaves to be used for the sake of the few free men who owned them. But Sabbath gave—no Sabbath required—rest for everyone, slave and free, human and animal alike. No one could give any other living thing—man or beast—work to do on the Sabbath! Sabbath made equals of us all."

That is why the Hebrews developed such detailed laws of what work could and could not be done on the Sabbath. There were exceptions to honor life; however, the healing of the withered hand was not life threatening and therefore forbidden. The interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees invites us to stretch our hearts and minds in not limiting God's ways through our narrow definitions and understandings. God created the Sabbath to offer rest and renewal, not as a prohibition to doing good works.

Some of us may have memories similar to the one shared by Dr. Chittister about being at her grandmother's on Sundays. A good Presbyterian that her grandmother was, absolutely nothing

happened on Sunday except church, Sunday school and the family meal. Or like my mother Betty Denham who was raised Christian Reformed, Sundays consisted of church, Sunday school, the family meal and church again.

Although Joan did not much like being at her Grandma's house on Sundays, she learned from her experience that Sunday was a different kind of day...it was a time set apart to be still, to listen, to reflect on who we are and to honor the One from whom we came, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being.

I think it is fair to say that we have come a long way from Grandma Chittister's house. In a world with its relentless emphasis on success and productivity, in a culture where we are bombarded with continuous and instantaneous information on our ever-present televisions, laptops, and cell phones, and in a time when one day runs into the next with little distinction, we long for a quiet Sunday afternoon at grandma's house. We long for sacred time, for moments to ourselves, and for introspection and reflection on the meaning of our lives.

This, it seems to me is the work of Sabbath, which is necessary to keep our bearings and hold our rudders on the waters of life. We need to relearn the discipline of being still, of opening our hearts and ears to what God is saying... and listening deeply.

*In a time when the word of the LORD was rare; and visions were not widespread, young Samuel responded to God's call by saying, *Speak, for your servant is listening.* With all the noise in the world today we need to learn the art of listening to God and to inner voices.*

Wayne Muller, in his book *Sabbath*, encourages us to honor the rhythm between rest and work within our lives, a rhythm that renews us and gives us creativity, insight and perspective. Time and time again, it is in our solitude that we find the company of God and it is in our silence that we hear the voice of God.

In the same way that the dormant days of winter prepare the ground for the new growth of spring, times of listening and introspection provide opportunities for transformation and personal growth and times of rest and reflection renew us for the work we are called to do. It is this rhythm in life that builds our character, deepens our joy and reminds us that we belong to God.

On this Baccalaureate Sunday as we honor you our graduates, we are grateful for the hard work that has brought you to this place. As you continue to respond to God's call and grow in knowledge and experience, may you learn to rest, to reflect, and to listen for God's voice in your lives.

These words are for our graduates and for each of us. May we not forget the work of Sabbath by honoring silence and the One who created us. May we listen to the One who calls our name in the middle of the night. May the One who joined us in our humanity and who calls us to serve stretch us beyond our short-sightedness. May we rest regularly in the company of the One who lives in our hearts.

Let us not forget the gift of paradox in our lives which inspires us to work towards wholeness on the Sabbath and to celebrate the mystery of one God in three persons. Amen