

“Which Will It Be: Do Good or Do Harm on the Sabbath Day?”

Second Sunday after Pentecost
I Samuel 3:1-10, II Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 3, 2018, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 4, dedicated to the memory of Miriam Grace Shimeall Shanahan, to the memory of Sarah “Nell” Cole, to Kevin Cubick for his 15 years as our Tenor Section Leaders, to the youth and adults on our 2018 Youth Mission Trip, and always to the glory of God!

“Which Will It Be: Do Good or Harm on the Sabbath Day?”

I Samuel 3:1-10, II Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When Moses climbed Mt. Sinai and God provided to him the ten commandments, there were some commandments that were inevitable. The First Commandment called for Creator of the Universe to be the One and Only God for all people for all time. That made sense. That was inevitable. In fact, the first three commandments concern themselves with our relationship with God. The last six commandments talk about relationship with humanity – no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting.

The Fourth Commandment stands alone. It is also the longest commandment. It too seems inevitable because it harkens to something that happened on the first page of the Bible. In Genesis 2:1-3, when God finished creating the heavens and earth, *“God rested from all the work God had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.”*

Let’s be clear here about God’s resting in Genesis. God didn’t rest after creating the universe because God was tired. God rests because God is Holy. Everything that God does is holy. God rests. God is holy. **Rest is holy.** That is simple math.

Rest shows us who God is. God has restraint. Restraint is refraining from doing everything that one has the power to do. We must never mistake God's restraint for weakness. The opposite is true. God shows restraint. Therefore, restraint is holy.

Although the Bible doesn't speak of Sabbath for many generations – all the way from Adam and Eve to Moses and Miriam, God never forgets how important it is to set-aside one day for Rest.

It is the Fourth Commandment which harkens to this seventh day of creation when we read in Exodus, Chapter 20:8-11:

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Remember, God enshrines the fourth commandment for Holy Rest. And holy rest is all about pausing, breathing deep, prayer and

In the generations that pass between Sinai and the coming of Jesus, something gets lost in the interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. The meaning of **true sabbath** gets lost. **Rest becomes retreat from reality.** Instead of Restraint from working, people become slaves to Sabbath laws that they create.

It is into a mindset of slavery to Sabbath that Jesus steps into a field harvesting grain in Mark 2:23-3:6. There on the Sabbath Day, Jesus plucks heads of grain to feed the hungry. Immediately, he finds himself in hot water with the religious leaders of his time. They claim he can't do that on the Sabbath. He claims that he stands in the tradition of King David who did the same thing to feed hungry companions years before.

But, Jesus is not done. He goes from the fields into the synagogue – or from the proverbial frying pan into the fire. There he meets a man with a withered hand. He asks the pharisees if it lawful “to do good or harm; to save a life or kill on the sabbath?” When they are silent, Jesus is angered at their hard hearts – so he heals the man. They head out – on the Sabbath - to plot his destruction (that seems like work to me). How can you “plot destruction” on the sabbath and not call that work?

Somewhere between Genesis and Jesus something gets lost on the seventh day. It is no less than humankind that gets lost. Humanity forgets who the Creator is and how the Creator rolls on questions of Holy Rest. As Jesus says, “*God made the Sabbath for humankind. It was not humankind that was made for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27).

What does this mean to you?

When I was young teen, the best sermon I ever heard was on this text. I shared this story when I preached in my home church, St. John’s UCC in Lansdale, PA on Mother’s Day three weeks ago – which was my mom’s 90th birthday.

The sermon was delivered by The Rev. Dr. John Touchberry – my mentor and hero as a young man. John said, “*God made the Sabbath for Humanity. God didn’t make Humanity for the Sabbath. In other words, God calls us to find Sabbath rest – to take a break and be restful.*” That was music to my ears! THAT day, when I sat down to Sunday dinner, I told my mom and dad I didn’t need to go to church anymore on Sundays because Dr. Touchberry had said we could sleep in and did not have to come to church.

As mom served one of her delicious roasts, she responded, *“That is not what he said and that’s not what he meant. We go to church on the Sabbath Day. We don’t sleep in.”* **I told her we did not hear the same sermon.** And, thus began my lifelong pursuit to misunderstand preachers and misinterpret the Word of God – all while loving my mother’s great cooking. Poor mom... Nothing ruins a Sunday roast for a mom more than a mouthy teenager.

But, Dr. Touchberry was right. We all need a break once in a while. We need to sleep in once in a while. We need holy rest. But I will say, that too many Christians take most Sundays off at that shrine I like to call, “St. Mattress of the Springs.” There is sleep, but no real holy rest there.

Jesus raises the most important question for each of us about Sabbath when he asks, *“is it lawful to do good or harm; to save a life or kill on the Sabbath?”* He wants to know. He is more concerned with “Holy Compassion” than he is with “Holy Retreat from the World.” He wants his followers to follow God in the way of love and justice; compassion and mercy on the Seventh Day as well as the other days of the week. The Fourth Commandment is meant to be a refugee not a prison. It protects the needy, the displaced and the powerless. People don’t save the Sabbath. The Sabbath Saves us.

The meaning of “rest” to a person who is hungry is food. The meaning of “rest” to a man with a withered hand is healing and to use his hands for prayer and thanksgiving. Jesus heals Peter’s mother who is burning up with fever on the Sabbath and then she offers him hospitality. He heals a woman who was bent over for 18 years and can barely breathe on the Sabbath. Her rest comes in standing up straight again and praising God. If a person is starving, withering, dying of a high fever or suffocating from being bent over, “Rest” is found in food, a strong hand, a broken fever and breath from standing straight.

Judaism has a beautiful understanding of “Shabbat” or the Sabbath Day. In Judaism it is believed that during the week, everyone has *n’shamah* – a soul. But on Shabbat it is believed that everyone receives *n’shamah y’terah* – an additional soul. This suggests that there is some kind of undeveloped facet of personality, a spiritual dimension, of which we remain unaware in the normal course of events. On Shabbat each of us is given the time to enrich ourselves by developing or creating this extra spiritual dimension (adapted from Pinchas Peli, Siddur Lev Shalem: For Shabbat and Festivals, the Rabbinical Assembly, NY, NY, 2016, p.46).

May we nurture the *n'shamah y'teirah* - “the additional soul” in our lives. Created by God in Christ for compassion and healing what is broken in our lives and in this world, may we see each Sabbath Day as the day to develop or create extra spiritual space and time for living fully into the soul which God has given us from our birth. In so doing, we will “Do Good” on the Sabbath Day.

The Good we do will be good for us, good for Others and Good for God. Amen.

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