

From the Pulpit

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“Sabbath: Stopping Time for One Day”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;

Matthew 6:16-, 16-21

(1 of 9 in Lenten/Easter Sermon Series –
“Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)

March 5, 2014

The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014, dedicated to my friend, Denny Griffith, to our dedicated staff of First Church who work morning, noon, and night to bring hope, love and beauty to life at First Church and dedicated our families and loved ones and always to the Glory of God!

“Sabbath: Stopping Time for One Day”

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While we have been digging out of the second harshest winter in the history of Ohio’s Capital City, Lent has been approaching. Today, we step through the snows of early winter into a season which will move us to the cross and finally the empty tomb and the resurrection of our Lord. Last night, while we were feasting in Parish Hall, one member told me, “I have been really looking forward to Lent.” Early this morning, these words resonated in my spirit. I have been really looking forward to Lent this year. “It’s About Time” has been our theme for Christian Education all year. This Lent, it’s about time for Sabbath.

I pray for you each day. I pray this Lent, in which we will saturate our souls with Sabbath, will be a true and lasting blessing for each one of us. As Sabbath becomes more real and more alive for us, I pray that hitting the reset button we all call “Lent” will really matter in our lives. It’s about Sabbath time. Let us pray...

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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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On one of the bleak mid-winter days of January in which schools were closed because of ice, snow, and sub-zero weather, I was visited by a Tiger Scout. The Tiger Scouts are forerunners of Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. This Tiger Scout was in full uniform as he entered my office. He looked sensational. His name is Elias Ewing. Elias is the oldest son of Eric and Christa Ewing. He and his dad stepped into my office to talk through his scouting book entitled, “God and Me.” This book explores a child’s relationship with God. It is quite good. It begins with Genesis and the Creation Story. I sometimes wish I could step back in time and have my relationship with God be as clear and simple as this...

As Elias stood by my right knee pointing to his pictures of God's creation of the world, he told me how each of the six days happened – from darkness to light, from vapor to water, from nothing to land, to plants, to creatures and ultimately to Adam and Eve. In all of this, God always finished with “It is good.”

With the six days completed, I looked at Elias and asked why his book had no seventh day. I said, “*Elias, what happened on the seventh day?*” He looked surprised. “*Rev. Tim, don't you know what happened?*” I smiled and responded, “*I know, but I want to know if you know.*” He took a deep breath, sighed, put his hand on my knee and looked me straight in the eye and said, “*God was so tired after six days of creation. He was exhausted! It takes a lot of energy to make the world. So, on the seventh day, he slept all day long.*”

After three years of theological education at Yale, 29 years of pastoral ministry, thousands of books and hours reading about Genesis and everything else God-related – I had just heard the best theological definition of Sabbath in my life. **God made the heavens and the earth and all that is therein. God was exhausted. God slept all day long.**

Years before, a layman speaking to a clergy gathering in which I was present, prophetically scolded all the pastors with these words, “*DO you think you are better than God? All you clergy - Do you take a Sabbath day to rest? Do you leave the work of the church and sleep, read, rest, play? If you don't your actions are saying, 'I think I am better than God. Although I teach 'God needed rest,' my life says, 'I don't.'*”

Another way of getting at this question was posted on the wall of the Preachers Training Ground – the Homiletics Room at Yale Divinity School. The sign said, “***Preach what you Practice.***” My confession to you on the Ash Wednesday is that I don't fully engage and practice Sabbath. I am embarrassed to admit this. But, I commit to do something about this. I am choosing this Lent to change from a 24/7 life to a 24/6 life – only then can I preach what I practice.

How about you? Do practice Sabbath? How and when do you take time to restore, replenish and rejuvenate your soul? In the words of Elias reflecting on the First Sabbath established by God Almighty, “Do sleep all day when you are exhausted?” How will you spend Lent re-sabbathing?

In the Zohar, the books of Jewish mysticism, Sabbath is the name of God. It is not just a day of the week. Rather, Sabbath reflects all that is essential to God. Sabbath is God – through and through. We are seen as a living and being within the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being within us. Living within the Sabbath, within the essence and being of God, we are called to create and receive and live into Sabbath as a foretaste of the eternal, a foretaste of paradise. Essentially, on the seventh day, God gave the world a soul. With our soul deeply and essentially connected to the Eternal One, the Divine Source of Being, we are called into a deep holiness.

On the Sabbath, we should rise – like the sun – with God in our hearts. Thoughts of God, thoughts of the holiness, thoughts of others in need of God, and all a peace which passes human understanding should be in our souls. This should be true all day and through the night. We need to be open to God's spirit. While the other six days of the week are committed to commerce,

people, wrestling with the world and the stuff of work and life, running here and there being Human Doings (not necessarily being Human Beings), the Sabbath is different. It needs to be the day which calls us the Infinite, the Eternal, the High Ground, the Holy Ground.

In his book 24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life, Dr. Matthew Sleeth calls this “Stop Time.” This is a great image. We stop. Think about stopping. When we stop, we look, listen, feel, receive, share, laugh, love, and live. When we stop, we breathe easier, walk with purpose, laugh from our bellies, and love deeply. When we stop, we turn off our cell phones, turn off our TV’s and turn off our computers and ipads. This is a huge step to honoring Sabbath.

It is hard to honor Sabbath in our 24/7 world. Honoring Sabbath is not only an act of faith. It is an act of courage. One of the most courageous men I looked up and admired as a child was Sandy Koufax. He was the left-handed ace for the LA Dodgers in the early 1960’s. He was also a practicing Jew. When Game 1 of the 1965 World Series fell on Yom Kippur, he refused to pitch. It was a Sabbath day. It was a Holy Day. As the best pitcher in Baseball, there was a lot of pressure on him to pitch Game 1. But he would not do it. By honoring Sabbath, Koufax truly placed God first. Along with his teammates, Sandy Koufax went on to win the 1965 World Series and the series MVP. Later that year, he was selected as Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year. He was my hero. I wanted to pitch like him. But, I also wanted to be a man of faith like him.

Our society has no more Sabbath. Our schools hold events on Sundays, our children compete in sports leagues on Sunday mornings, and most stores are open. The space and time of Sabbath has been swept away. It is gone. Unless we claim it back in our individual lives and in the life of our community of faith, it is never coming back. We must stop time to experience Stop Day. We have to claim it for ourselves. No one will give it to us.

In the weeks ahead, we will take baby steps to reclaim Sabbath. We do this through our study of Matthew Sleeth’s book 24/6. There are small groups being set up in homes and here at church throughout the season of Lent. When you get an email or call, respond. Take time to be holy. Take time to be with your sisters and brothers of faith at First. We will reclaim Sabbath in worship each week – welcoming preaching on Sabbath and music and prayers drawing us into Sabbath rest. We will have adult education focused on Sabbath. We will do it in our homes, in our hearts, in our actions toward a more sane and sacred Sabbath in our lives.

It will take baby steps. I don’t expect you to attain the mystery of God in Sabbath rest in only 40 days – with a money back guarantee! Last night I was talking with Cori Rowley about Wythe. He is now taking baby steps. She said *“He stumbles and falls. He does flips sometimes. But, he keeps pulling himself back up.”* Taking baby steps for Sabbath may throw us off at first. We may stumble and fall. We may do flips. But, we need to pull ourselves back up and try again. We may experience withdrawal symptoms as those who are addicted to work, to things, to technology, to constant 24/7 motion. But, given time, we can learn the steps for Sabbath. Take my hand. Let take our baby steps into Sabbath together. let’s admit we are exhausted from our constant work, motion ,and lack of

sleep. Let's reflect the spirit of God, the one we claim to worship and glorify. Those other days can be utterly exhausting. If you don't believe me, ask God about it.

Let's remember Elias' words – get some rest. Sleep all day if you need to. Remember if Sabbath was good enough for God to create, it is good enough for us to establish, to re-Sabbath and to recreate. Amen.

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