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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Mark 2:23- 3:6

IT'S ABOUT TIME: SABBATH

There is a wonderful gift we have been given, but we have not even fully unwrapped it. We've torn back the paper just a bit to get a peek, and we have shaken the package gently out of curiosity as to what is inside. Many of us decided that what is in there is out-dated, so we haven't finished unwrapping it. Perhaps we could have opened the gift just to be polite, but we know that's not the best motivation. Some said that if we opened the package, it would probably be like a gift from a mother-in-law that we would feel obligated to use anytime she was around. And the giver of this gift seemed to be around all of the time. So what do we do with this gift we're not sure is a gift that we want?

This sermon series has been called: 'It's about time.' So far, it has been about how scripture guides us to understand our past, present, and future. But now it's about time to focus on something that could redefine our understanding of ourselves week by week, that being the gift I've been talking about - the sabbath day.

An interest in observance of the sabbath and defining what we might do and not do on one day a week seems to be counterintuitive when many seem to not be able to get everything done in seven full days. We have new technologies that are offered to seemingly help us manage our efficient use of time, but many, even children and youth, have schedules that seem to be out of balance and out of control. Do we actually need to turn back to a concept of weekly rest and re-creation, a concept which was established back when people primarily did physical work every day of their lives?

Some of us are understandably skeptical about sabbath observance being a gift worth opening because of harsh restrictions about what couldn't or mustn't be done on the sabbath some decades ago. Those of us of a certain age might remember the

constraints of blue laws and in some families, rules that seemed to ensure that we were miserable on the day called the sabbath. Some would say, “We’ve been liberated from that straitjacket, and we’re not about to climb back inside of it.” Let me be clear - I am not suggesting a return to early to mid-20th century practices. However, I am asserting that we need to return to the spirit of sabbath observance that goes back much further than that.

The protestant work ethic has helped to define our society, and when it was coupled with the protestant rest ethic, there was some sense of balance. You haven’t heard of the protestant rest ethic? John Calvin, who founded Presbyterianism, spoke of it as sabbath, as the time when, as he wrote, we “cease our work so that God may do God’s work in us.”¹ The rest ethic didn’t start with protestants – it, of course, was developed within Hebrew society, and was listed as one of the ten commandments of God, perhaps because of human reticence to accept it as the gift it can be. We know about that reticence. In recent years in our society, there have been economic and cultural forces that pushed us to believe that ‘more is always more.’ This kind of thinking asserts that ‘Life will mean more if you produce and consume more things.’ Or ‘Your life will be fuller if you fill it to overflowing with activities.’ By buying into this kind of mindset, however, we can lose our vital connections with our Creator, with one another, and with ourselves. Some folks have an identity shaped primarily by what they do, what they produce, what they accomplish, what they purchase – and if they do more of all of those things, then they think they can be a bigger somebody.

However, the sabbath offers us a chance to step back from that rat-racious way of thinking and living. What do we do with the sabbath day? The translation of the Hebrew is termed sabbath ‘observance,’ but that could be mistaken for sitting back and watching it from a distance. In English, the commandment is also described as ‘keeping’ the sabbath, which could be mistaken for one more thing we could possess and control. The Exodus version of the commandment tells us to ‘remember’ the sabbath, which could lead to the faulty assumption that it is something of the past just to keep in mind and to keep in the past. The words at times get in the way, but what is intended in the commandment is for people of faith to receive this freeing discipline as one of the Godly gifts that enables us to live out

in trust our identity as beloved children of God in relationship with the Creator and the rest of God's creation. Yes, during the week we work, using God-given skills to address the needs of a small segment of the rest of God's creation. Then, in a healthy balance, we are urged to take a break to experience the needed 'rest' that allows us as part of creation to be re-created.

Some years ago, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor described her re-discovery of sabbath this way: "I continued to work seven days a week until (recently), when I decided to obey the fourth commandment. One day a week, I would lie back in God's arms. One day a week, whether or not my work were done, I would live as if I were free ... One day a week, 'should,' 'ought,' and 'must' had no power over me. On Sundays I did not worship the clock, the dollar, or my superego. I worshiped God instead, whom I trusted to run the world for one day without my help ... It was sabbath, and its effect was immediate. Relationships became more spacious. Prayer became more spacious. Time itself became more spacious ... There was never enough time to get everything done, but I finally understood that there never would be." ²

What do we do with that kind of sabbath experience? Perhaps we might talk about embracing the sabbath and allowing it to embrace us. The commandment, as found in Deuteronomy, carves out space for the best kind of rest, done in a holy way, ever being mindful of similar needs of all of God's creatures. The commandment is put in the context of the deliverance of the Hebrews from having to work seven days a week as slaves in Egypt, with the sense that holding onto and being held by the sabbath could lead to deliverance from other kinds of slavery. As Christians, we are not only enriched by the Jewish heritage of sabbath, we augment our sabbath time which comes on the first day of the week for us as a resurrection celebration that sets the tone for the other days of the week.

In the Gospel of Mark, we hear how Jesus refused to be ruled by the narrowest of human-instituted sabbatarian rules so that he could embrace the spirit of sabbath as given by God. He understood sabbath was not intended to be a restrictive obligation, but instead to be a freeing gift. It was not to be used to wound, or to ignore need, but as an occasion to celebrate the healing and wholeness God desires and enables. We need not repeat the error that some of the religious leaders in

Jesus' day made by formulating or enforcing narrow restrictive dos and don'ts in regard to the sabbath. But I offer these suggestions as ways to not just tear open the gift-wrapping, but for us to be open to sabbath as a vital gift of God to be embraced.

Sabbath is not a time for the obligation of worship. Rather, it is a time to freely join together to enjoy God's all-permeating love. In corporate worship, God's word and sacraments inform us that sabbath is not just about taking a day off, but about celebrating God's activity in creating the world, in giving liberty to captives, and in overcoming the powers of death. We need worship that renews, restores, and refocuses us. And then I would suggest that we find ways through the remainder of each sabbath day to continue what got started with worship as a way of bringing a needed balance to our lives.

Embracing the sabbath is not one-size fits all, because some of us feel overwhelmed by the pressures and the ever-increasing pace of our lives, and some of us live with other stresses. The sabbath, as a gift from God, invites us all to step back from certain activities that exhaust us and find what we need for renewal. For some people, that will be taking time to enjoy art or music or nature or time with family. If you don't get much exercise during the week, it might be a good time for a bike ride or a walk. If you exert yourself physically in your work during the week, it might be a time to read and nap. Some find a sabbath break a great time to disconnect from e-mail and texting and screen time in order to strengthen our connection with others, including God and our own selves. Some are enriched by visiting those who are otherwise cut off from the worshiping community. As you consider what it would mean for you to embrace the sabbath and to embrace the Giver of the sabbath, I invite you to be intentional about what you will do and what you decide not to do, by your own free choice, on this day. There never will be enough time to get everything done. The sabbath though can become a time we can grow in learning to leave certain things in God's hands in order for us to find renewed energy, direction, and joy for each week ahead. We have been given the great gift of sabbath from a liberating God. Our lives will be richer if we tear open the wrapping to receive and explore this good gift as one that can bring renewal to our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.viii.29.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Remember the Sabbath," *Christian Century*, May 5, 1999, page 510.