

“To God Alone the Glory”

Dt. 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2, 2024, Pentecost 2, dedicated to Marc and Kalyn Danneberger as they begin married life together and to G. Dene Barnard, our Organist/Choir Director Emeritus, in thanksgiving for his Jubilee Year – 50 years among us – 30 in music ministry and 20 as a member & always dedicated to the glory of God!

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

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When Moses climbed Mt. Sinai and God delivered the Ten Commandments to him, there were some commandments that were inevitable. The First Commandment called for the Creator of the Universe to be the One and Only God for all people for all time. That made sense. 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 second 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 the simple equation of sabbath.

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."

God enshrines the fourth commandment for **Holy Rest.** **Holy Rest** is all about pausing, taking one breath and then breathing deep, praying and giving God alone the glory.

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 all the minute Sabbath laws that they create. They become anxious and punitive rather than restful and peaceful.

It is into this 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 his disciples and those who are hungry. Immediately, he finds himself in hot water with the religious leaders of his time. They claim it is unlawful to 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 by taking the Holy Temple Bread (like our communion bread) and feeding his hungry companions.

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 is 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. Declaring that Jesus has “broken yet another Sabbath law” the Pharisees head out – on the Sabbath – to plot his destruction – which sure seems like work to me. How can you “plot destruction” on the sabbath and not call that work? Clearly, they are working to destroy him while he was working to heal them.

Somewhere between Genesis and Jesus something gets lost on the seventh day. Actually it is the God followers who get lost. They have sadly become more interested in being punitive and hurtful to their fellow believers than worshipping God and giving God all the glory. They attack others rather than practice Holy Rest. Humanity forgets who the Creator is and how the Creator rolls on questions of Holy Rest – and lots of other God-given, God-driven interactions. 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 – today? We could have many interpretations. But, could we agree that we are here to worship God – alone? We are here to give all the glory to God?

On a day like today, when we celebrate our beloved George Dene Barnard for his fifty years among us, it is easy to forget the real reason we are here. We

are here to glorify God in all that we do, say and sing. Through half a century with us, Dene has made this easier to remember, because he is a man who has spent his life focused on giving God alone the glory – in his life, in his worship leadership, in his music and in what he has done, said and sung.

In the words of Senior Minister Emeritus, Rev. Dr. Chalmers Coe as he lifted up Dene 20 years ago as Dene transitioned from Organist/Choir Master to Organist/Choir Master Emeritus, *“Dene has devoted his remarkable gifts – devoted them with this place, and with these people, and has done so with unswerving fidelity, with exquisite taste and with incomparable skill...”*

On June 1, 2003, Chalmers went on to point out that 30 years before Dene arrived, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Boynton Merrill, First Church had hired Rev. Donald Kettering, who was an ordained minister and a gifted music minister. Kettering authored a well-known book, *Toward a Singing Church*, and guided us to become just that – a singing church. As Dr. Coe said, *“Followed by Edward Yohe and John Schaffer, the program truly reached a flowering fullness under G. Dene Barnard – who then carried us forward in faith.”* As Chalmers continued, we need to remember, *“we will not be saved by beauty in general and the music in particular...we are not saved by anything we do. We are saved by the grace of God which we come to know in Jesus Christ.”* (Chalmers Coe, 6/1/2003). Amen.

Returning to our Gospel lesson, Jesus doubles down as he raises the most important question for each of us about Sabbath as he asks, *“is it lawful to do good or harm; to save a life or kill on the Sabbath?”* He really wants people to sort this out. He is more concerned with “Holy Compassion” than he is with “Holy Retreat from the World.” He wants all people to follow God in the way of love and justice; compassion and mercy on the Seventh Day as well as the other six 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 by nitpicking. Rather, the Sabbath is part of God’s weekly and ongoing plan to Save us from ourselves.

So what is HOLY REST?

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** so that he may use his hands for prayer, thanksgiving and service to God. 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.

As Judaism has developed over the past 2,000 years, they have grown into a beautiful understanding of “Shabbat” – one which we can all embrace this 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’teirah* – **an additional soul**. They believe there is a 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”** within 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.

And to you, Mr. Barnard, “Shabbat Shalom” – Good Sabbath – on this Sabbath and for many years to come. Amen.

