

Order of Service
A Practice of Sabbath
Sunday, September 21, 2008



Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Sunday comes again

And we return home to our Fellowship.

Together we laugh, we sing, we cry, we embrace the silence.

We shape a Sabbath that provides what we need:

Centering, healing, and love.

Let us worship with each other once again.

Meditation and Prayer

When one among us sheds a tear of sorrow,
For a loss or a struggle they find hard to bear,
So will we also share that tear in our own eyes.

And when one among us smiles wide with joy,
For a blessing or gift from the hand of Life,

So also will we share that smile,
So wide that it reaches from one corner of the hall to
another.

May we remember. We are not alone.

By moving through the sorrow and the joy together,

We come to something like Peace.

Now in silence.

Amen.

Reading, Wendell Berry, "Sabbath"

Writer and poet Wendell Berry wrote extensively about the Sabbath experience. In this poem, he uses the image of a forest to symbolize that seventh day of rest.

How long does it take to make the woods?
As long as it takes to make the world.
The woods is present as the world is, the presence
of all its past and of all its time to come.
It is always finished, it is always being made, the act
of its making forever greater than the act of its destruction.
It is a part of eternity for its end and beginning
belong to the end and beginning of all things,
the beginning lost in the end, the end in the beginning.

What is the way to the woods, how do you go there?
By climbing up through the six days' field,
kept in all the body's years, the body's
sorrow, weariness, and joy. By passing through
the narrow gate on the far side of that field
where the pasture grass of the body's life gives way
to the high, original standing of the trees.
By coming into the shadow, the shadow
of the grace of the strait way's ending,
the shadow of the mercy of light.

Why must the gate be narrow?
Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.
To come into the woods you must leave behind
the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.
You must come without weapon or tool, alone,
expecting nothing, remembering nothing,
into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf.

Sermon *A Practice of Sabbath* Rev. Bruce Davis (2216)

Even though I was standby, they put me into first class on the trip to Seattle from Washington, D.C. By good fortune I was asked to consult in the Clinton

healthcare reform planning. It's not that I am so bright about health systems. I was invited because of the unique work in population prevention that Group Health had achieved. Unfortunately the work in D.C. was usually on the weekend, which made for a seven-day work-week at least once a month.

Frankly, I couldn't conceive of how I could get all my work done in a reasonable number of days. Too often a Saturday was spent getting "caught up" (as if there was such a thing as "caught up") and Sunday afternoon was spent often on a writing project of some sort.

I didn't like this way of living. It made me tired and I often got headaches. My family didn't like it much either because my arguably useful service in the world was at their expense. It also meant that I thought about just one thing all the time: work.

I kept my eyes peeled for role models in positions of responsibility to see how they managed their lives better than I did, and so on this particular trip back to Seattle from D.C. I was seated next to Microsoft's Director of Marketing. Like me, he was working on the plane, but when lunch was served, we took time for a chat. I asked him how he was able to cut off the flow of work at the end of the day to get home. His response? "The flow of work is endless. I only get about a third of it done each day, and there's a new list of demands tomorrow. I work until I'm just too tired to work any more. Then I go home." Frankly, I didn't find his answer too helpful!

He and I are not alone in this addiction to work. It doesn't feel like addiction when I'm in the midst of doing all those good things, but the inability to *stop* once I'm started is very much an addictive pattern. This is the pattern of our American productivity culture. Many of us are devoured by their work until they just can't do it any more.

Now, I'm not denigrating the work that I did or that anyone does. Living our accountabilities in work as human persons is right and honorable. But to keep going and going to the point of exhaustion is insane.

There is only one answer to such madness. Cease! Desist! Stop it! Get out of town! The demands of another stump to remove or another report to write will never go away. I am reminded of the catch phrase of the Nike company, "just do it," only I would suggest that for this purpose it be rephrased: "*just don't do it!*"

That's exactly what the word *Sabbath* or *Shabbat* means. As Jews all over the world are preparing for the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana in the next two weeks, it is fitting for us to reflect on the meaning of the word, "Sabbath." It doesn't mean Sunday, or Saturday, or Seventh Day, or God's day. Sabbath is rest, intermission, ceasing from labor. This wonderful word appeared for the first time in the Hebrew Scripture in the book of *Exodus*, written approximately three thousand years ago. It's said by Moses to the Israelites, "Tomorrow is a sacred day of ceasing." Who says so? God says so. From now on it's the way we are going to live. No two ways about it.

Sabbath is a profound, confident "No!" to the infinite demands of work in our lives. But what is work? Is it what we are paid to do? Is it our job? Is it what we have to do but don't want to do? What is my work when I'm retired? My friends who are retired say they find their world busier than ever!

For me it's work when I'm trying to be as efficient as possible, getting the job done as fast as possible and as well as possible. Productivity is part of work for me. How many units can I build in how much time, always with the goal of getting as much done as possible. By this model of work there is never enough time to get everything done.

What if we take a time out from whatever "work" may be in our lives? What's left? For me there are three things that emerge.

- First is the experience of peace and quiet. When I'm really working my mind is going a mile a minute. When I say that profound and confident "No!" to my work, I notice that my mind calms down. A practice of meditation over the years has been a great gift in settling down like this, in retreating from incessant doing to being.
- Second, for me, is play. The word "play" connotes something quite different from "work" for me. Play is easy about time, flexible about outcomes, forgiving of judgments of self and others. The fact that my *job* at Evergreen is often "play" by this definition should not be taken by you all as reason to stop paying me.
- Third, for me, is family connections. Work implies making good use of people and the skills and energy they have to achieve the needed outcomes. That meaning of *family* is not about getting anything at all done. It's about

being together, and *playing* together. A beloved community, like Evergreen, is an extension of what family means to me.

In the Hassidic tradition of Judaism we meet a figure named the Baal Shem Tov. The writings about his exploits blend history, mystery, and magic into stories of great wisdom. Here's a favorite of mine:

The disciples of the Baal Shem Tov planned all week for the Sabbath meal. They wanted it to be perfect in all ways to honor the greatness of their holy rabbi. When the sun finally set on Friday evening, everything was just perfect.

The evening began with the lighting of the candles. With solemnity and steady hand one of the disciples stepped forward and lit each of the Sabbath candles. When he lit the last of the candles, the Baal Shem Tov began to chuckle to himself.

The disciple lighting the candles looked around to see what was wrong--if there was something amiss with his clothing, perhaps--but everything was as it should be.

Later, they began the Sabbath meal. The disciples gave the Baal Shem Tov the first bowl of the soup that they had labored so long over.

He tasted it.

"Heh, heh, heh, heh!" He laughed and laughed.

The disciples were appalled. They rushed to taste the soup, but there was nothing in it that tasted...humorous.

Still later, they were singing the Sabbath songs.

Oh, what strength a righteous woman has!

There is no treasure rarer than this!

Happy is the heart that relies on her,

For such a heart can lack for nothing....

As they sang, the Baal Shem Tov began to laugh and laugh, as though he could not contain himself. So began their Sabbath.

It was the custom of the disciples that, on Saturday night, after the spirit of the Sabbath had passed, they would choose one question among them,

and present it to the Baal Shem Tov.

This Saturday, there was no debate as to what question they would ask. "Holy master, why did you laugh during the Sabbath--three times?"

In answer, the Baal Shem Tov said, "Come with me."

All the disciples crowded into the Baal Shem Tov's carriage. He drew the curtains over the windows, and they began to travel swiftly.

Several hours later, when he opened the curtains, they were in a distant village. None of them had ever been there before.

The Baal Shem Tov went to the leaders of the village. "Bring everyone to the village square. Now."

When the Baal Shem Tov stood looking out over that crowd of faces, he said, "There is still one family missing."

After a few minutes, the people realized, "It must be the old bookbinder and his wife. They live on the edge of town; they must not have gotten the word."

When this old man and this old woman entered the village square, and the old man saw who it was who was calling for him, he began to wring his hands. "Oh, Holy Master. I know I have committed a great sin. I only ask forgiveness."

"Bookbinder, tell my disciples and these people gathered here how you spent your Sabbath."

Fearfully, the old man glanced at the illustrious students of the Baal Shem Tov and began to speak. "I am an old bookbinder. In my youth, I could earn enough that we had what we needed during the week, and something special to greet the Sabbath. But as I have grown older, there has been less and less.

"Finally, this Sabbath--for the first time--we had no Sabbath candles--and only a few crusts of bread for a Sabbath meal.

"My wife was determined that we would observe the Sabbath as well as we were able. And so, just before sundown, she went through the motions of lighting candles that were not there.

"As she did, I saw...a flash of light. And I understood for the first time that the light that I had thought came only from the candles was also coming from her. I shouted out, 'I love you'--in the middle of the holy blessing!

"I got control of myself, and went back to observing the Sabbath with due respect.

"But then later, we were beginning our humble meal. We had only warmed water for soup. But I tasted it. I felt...nourished.

"At that moment, I realized that the nourishment--which all these years I had thought came only from the soup--actually came also from her, from our being together through so many Sabbaths.

"And before I realized what I was doing, I jumped up. I kissed her!

"Shocked at my own behavior, I sat back down. I stayed in my seat properly until later, when we sang the Sabbath songs.

Oh, what strength a righteous woman has!

There is no treasure rarer than this!

"Singing these words, I realized what a great strength she was in my life.

Happy is the heart that relies on her,

For such a heart can lack for nothing....

"Suddenly, I knew that, in spite of our great poverty, while I had her in my life, I lacked for nothing.

"And then, before I knew what I was doing, I jumped up. I grabbed her by the arms. We began to sing and dance together.

"At last, I got control of myself and sat back down.

"Holy master, I know I have defiled the Sabbath. Please, tell me: what must I do to be forgiven?"

The Baal Shem Tov looked at his disciples. "When this man and this woman spent their Sabbath in such deep and holy love, I was there with them, and I shared in their joy.

"And when he spoke his love for that woman, not only I but the angels in

heaven heard--and they smiled. And when he got up and kissed that woman, acting on that deep love--the angels in heaven saw them, and they laughed.

"And when the two of them joined their hands and sang and danced their joy, the angels themselves began to sing and to dance. And the Eternal Heart itself heard them, and it was warmed.

"On a Sabbath of such perfect joy, who wouldn't laugh?"

It isn't a question of whether we should include Sabbath in our lives or not. The only question is when and how. For me, being a recovering workaholic, I look at my Sabbath in five ways.

- Every *day* I take two half hours to do as close to nothing as I can humanly do by sitting down and meditating. It's that Nike slogan again. Amid the continuous flow of demands: "Just don't do it!"
- Every *week* I take at least a day for play. Relaxed, smiling and laughing, time with the dear ones in my life, capital "P" Play. Like rowing my boat or picking tomatoes or dancing with my granddaughter, Charlotte.
- Every *month* I try to take a whole weekend with Mary and the family. For me cooking is play, and I love to set the table with their favorite dishes.
- Every *half year* I take a retreat for a week or more. Often this is a meditation retreat of some sort. It's a week of doing as close to nothing as I can envision. Often Mary and I go together.
- Every *decade* I take a sabbatical. Notice how the word "sabbatical" has that same stem of Sabbath or ceasing the work.

Each of these episodes of "time out" contains the experience of Sabbath. But notice one other thing. Each comes out of a commitment to dynamic, responsibility-taking activity. What I call "the practice of Sabbath" is the result of the back and forth between work and ceasing from that work. We commit ourselves to work for family, community, and world; then we withdraw into the depth of silence and the joy of play. Our growth, personally and spiritually, arises from our dance with work and Sabbath.

Most of us have a pretty good sense of where our work is because we follow through with its demands every day. The bigger question we must face into is this: where will you find your Sabbath? Here on Sunday morning? Out on the golf links with your son on Monday afternoon? Alone on a silent mountain hike before the snow begins to fall? Again, Wendell Berry shares one of his Sabbath moments:

When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests
In his beauty on the water,
And the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
And am free.

May it be so for us all, that we just *stop* sometimes. And rest, and play again.
Amen.