

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Sabbath time for God and God's time for us

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Leviticus 23:1-8

Luke 10:38-42

If you were to ask my two Session Clerks about my many failings, I am pretty sure that amongst them they would say "And you can't get her to take time off." This, by the way, is not true (I would say that, wouldn't I?) but on days when I am working I do tend to cram a lot in. Over the past few weeks as many friends and colleagues have been expressing their care for me in a stressful time, I have lost count of how often I have been told "Don't forget to take care of yourself as well." Or "Make time for yourself." Or "Take it easy." I want you to know that I have taken the advice: and the witness to that is that there are a lot fewer weeds in my garden: weeding being a quiet, therapeutic activity in my life. It may not be that for you, but we are all different.

Taking time out from the daily routine is something advocated by all and sundry to all and sundry in this 21st century. We who live in the computer age can find so many ways to be busy. All of us need a rest, a break, a re-focussing. And the good news I bring you today is that God not only offers us that rest: he orders us to have it! He orders us to have it and he wraps it up as a gift.

But wait a minute, how would you feel if you went to a lot of trouble to select a gift for someone: If you had chosen it to bring joy and benefit to the person for whom it is intended, and then when you visited their home weeks or months after you have given it, you saw it still sitting, all wrapped up and now getting dusty? You wouldn't be too happy to see that, I think. There is nothing so insulting than to give a gift to someone and seeing it sit, or having it returned unopened. And yet that is what many Christian people are doing regarding God's gift of rest, of Sabbath.

Many of us are too busy and find it hard to stop. We will "just" do this or that while we have a minute. We find it hard to switch off, because all these things which we could be getting on with are still there, looking at us, demanding our attention: the meals to cook, the house to clean, the emails to write, the grass to cut, the shopping to fetch - whatever. How can we possibly take off a day each week? Some others of us are not busy enough, with far less to do than they have known, time hangs heavy on their hands, so they don't think they need or deserve a rest one day a week.

But when God commanded his people to take a day off, it was not just if they deserved it or if they could fit it in. It was, like all his gifts are, given to us absolutely, with no strings attached. It was given because of his love for us and his care for us, and not because we deserve it. It was - it is - a gift which God knew, long before the psychologists and self-help writers of this age, that we need most when we think we need it least. And so God ordered us to take a Sabbath - much like a doctor gives us a prescription, or, better analogy, an inoculation to prevent us getting ill.

The initial order to take a day off comes in the ten commandments and is related to the creation story. But what we read in Leviticus today shows God prescribing for not just the weekly day, but the seasonal times of rest and celebration. Celebration. That is important. Too many of us grew up in a vague atmosphere of Sabbatarianism, when the day that God gave us was one with a slightly dreary tinge to it. In the Scotland of the last century, there were long periods when Sunday was not a day of celebration but of prohibition. Sunday, of all days. The Christian Sabbath is not the same as the Jewish one - although we can learn a lot from each other. The most important difference is that we do not take our Sabbath of rest on the Sabbath itself: which is from Friday sunset to

Saturday sunset. We have Sunday, the day of resurrection. And if there is one thing that the day of resurrection should remind us of, it is that we have very good reason to celebrate.

In our worship here on Sunday mornings I always try to maintain a spirit of joy and celebration, though at some times this will be more marked than at others. The day is our gift from God and the reason to celebrate comes from the resurrection of God's Son: who is also his gift to us. And so the day off which we are given is not simply for having a long-lie and an afternoon snooze, although within the context of Sabbath both are possible: the day we are given is for what Moses calls "holy convocation": coming together with God's people in praise and worship before him.

God gave us Sabbath to rest, yes, to rest in his presence and to discover him. We discover God in us and ourselves in him. Some of the secular gurus say that taking a day off will make us more productive the other six days of the week. But that is not what a Sabbath is for. It is not a case of rest for one day and you will be able to do even more in the others. A Sabbath, spent in rest and discovering God - in worship, in nature, in other people - will make us whole people. Sane people. People who know our priorities.

Some of the old Sunday patterns of Christian life have been hypocritical. In the days when middle class people had servants, the Sunday was not a day of rest for them. They might have been able, or ordered, to go to church - possibly in their free time in the afternoon - but in the rest of the day they had a large Sunday lunch to prepare and clear, and the other meals as well. There must have been many a servant, and many a wife and mother in poorer households, who knew very well what Martha felt like. Or thought they did, anyway.

Any time I have read this story of Mary and Martha with groups, I find that far more people relate to Martha than to Mary. Some relate in a slightly shamefaced way, acknowledging that busyness is their temptation and their snare. Others get quite angry with Mary and with Jesus. "He ate the food, didn't he?" one woman said to me once. And I expect he did. But that is not the point.

Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, but then she sounds as if she wasn't really ready to have him there. She was, as Luke puts it, "distracted by her many tasks." She had Jesus in her home and she couldn't enjoy his company, because she made other things more important. How like Martha we sometimes are!

We invite Jesus into our lives, we make a commitment to be his disciples, and then we allow all sorts of other things, some trivial, some less so, take charge of our lives, so that we have no time to pray, we say, no time to worship. No time to sit at Jesus' feet and absorb his teaching, his love, his way of looking at the world.

"Where does the time go?" It is a common question we hear and ask. In this month when we are looking at the stewardship of our time, each of us should consider very carefully just where our time does go. If we know that we are not as focussed in our times with God as we ought to be, why not? What is getting in the way? Have you picked the wrong time of day for your prayers - or maybe no time of day at all, assuming that a time will magically appear? If Sunday morning is a difficult time for you to come to worship, why? What is calling you away from that time, and can it be done at another time, if it needs done at all?

Mary sat, absorbed at the feet of Jesus. She was not thinking about household things: when she would get the shopping or wash the dishes, or make the meal. That doesn't mean that she was necessarily a worse housekeeper than Martha - it may even mean that she was a better one: what it means is that she was able to give Jesus her whole attention, not just a part of it. That is something that takes practice and discipline. For Mary it meant saying "No" to her sister, in word and in action. It is not an easy thing to say no to family.

I read a fascinating book a couple of years ago written by David Shepherd, a Christian academic who decided to practise Sabbath more deliberately. Each week he wrote a reflection on what he had learned. At the beginning he allows us to see him reasoning to himself things like: I quite like tinkering with plumbing, so why not try to mend that dripping tap? He lets us see him put under pressure by his father to help with D.I.Y when he knows he wants to be resting and absorbing Jesus. One week he finally realises how much his wife did to allow him his day of quiet! This is his final conclusion:

"Although it is increasingly obvious that the world around us will refuse to stop for a minute, let alone a day, the greatest danger against which we must guard the Sabbath is not from outside, but from within. The gate to the Sabbath, the gate that we must guard, is not to be found at the local supermarket; it is to be found deep within ourselves. It is there that we feel the pressure to do and do and do some more. It is there that the decision is taken to fling open the gates to the business and busyness that fills our lives.... If we wish to keep the Sabbath [we must] mount a constant guard at the gates of our heart against our own relentless refusal to rest." ("Seeking Sabbath")

To take no rest is not a macho test. It does not make us better or stronger people. To take the gift of God and discover him more as we unwrap and use it is a blessing to ourselves and can also be a blessing to the world around, as they see the difference that a Christian Sabbath can make. So do what God says. Take care of yourself. Take some time out. Take the gift that God has given you, open it and use it to the full.

Amen