

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 16

Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

August 26th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Redeeming Sabbath

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

It used to be said that if one sat in a café in Paris long enough, the entire world would walk by. Having never been in Paris, myself, I couldn't say. But sitting yesterday for a bit over an hour at Peet's even here in Mill Valley, I could almost translate the saying to our town. The incredible parade of people in and out – shoppers, walkers, the studious, the workers, the conversers, the readers. Meanwhile, a steady stream of vehicles rolled past, busy as any street in San Francisco.

Conversation around me ranged from, “So what wireless service do you use? (None of your business. . .)” to hedge funds, shopping lists, work, the vagaries of the stock market. Every other passerby had a cell phone stuck to his or her ear. Even a walk on a beautiful late summer afternoon might be wasted time if there was a friend, loved one, or coworker to speak with.

It was, quite frankly, astonishing even for me, who is a frenetic and sometimes obsessive worker, to sit still in the middle of all the activity. And on a *Saturday*, no less. During the normal work week, much of this business is exported to the city nearby or wherever many of us work. . . while our children and grandchildren are kept on the move at school, preschool, or by beleaguered parents who stay and keep the household up and running.

We are the always on culture. Except when we're off. And we practically never are. We are all together, busier than a hive of bees, convinced of our own need to be more productive and more efficient with the short time we have been given. We are possessed by a sea of choices, goods, services, the clamor of news, music, television, internet. Between a river of resources we consume as a matter of course and a tenuous Creation straining under the load, we are made blind to the simplicity that so many of our ancestors took for granted.

Just speaking this tempts me to stand up and shout, “Stop!” for a moment. Have we forgotten the healing effects of a sound of the wind in the trees, the smell of a fresh air, the passing warmth of a fleeting summer, or the moisture of the fog on our faces? Have we lost as a collective community the ability to be utterly silent, wordless both in lips and minds, before our God?

So at a time when well over forty members of all ages of this community are preparing to gather together on a retreat entitled, “Keeping Sabbath,” and in a place and an age where Sabbath is more considered a luxury than a requirement . . . well, we get this Gospel reading!

It is vintage Luke, beautifully and vividly written. At the center is a crippled woman, bent over with the weight of years, and – perhaps Luke intended us to note her symbolic posture – heavily burdened with what Luke depicts as a draconian application of religious tradition. The leader of the synagogue who challenges Jesus for healing on the Sabbath seems to be completely out of touch with the needs right in front of him. As he does elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus reminds all who will hear him that the Sabbath is not an end unto itself. It is meant for us and our relationship with God and one another. It is a classic tale of legalism versus grace, easily inviting us to embrace the temptation to demonize Jesus’ opponents; even worse a religious tradition that cannot be divorced from our heritage as Christians.

But to do so, quite frankly, is to condemn ourselves. For we are as good as any society throughout history in trying to enforce rectitude through legislation, be it a bill moving through government, a careful compromise on canonical provisions for our church, or a policy in our own community that will make everything crystal clear. Don’t get me wrong, we probably need rules in many places, and good ones at that. But the word “good” begs the question. How do we know what serves us best and what doesn’t, what is “good” and what isn’t?

The question of today’s Gospel is about Sabbath: Our desperate need today as a community to recover it from the seemingly endless parade of sports, practices, gadgets, the ever-increasing demands of work, and a sea of noise – that need will not be served by bringing back the strictures of the now abandoned and somewhat romantically remembered blue laws. Nor by deliberately depressing a frenetic economic engine upon which so much of our livelihood depends.

In all honesty, healthy spirituality cannot be legislated or economically engineered! It must be cultivated, beginning within our own hearts and in our own unique lives. Perhaps most of all through a determined and joint effort with our friends and families to say “no” at

regular intervals to all the distractions from the gift of simple Being – life itself, given to us moment to moment by a God who wants almost desperately to love us out of all that robs us of well being.

Betsy, with her sermon last week, left us with the image of a tired runner finding remarkable pleasure in the cool, clear, refreshing water of a mountain stream. This is the image of Sabbath as it should be, a flowing current of refreshment, and not once or twice a year for the well-planned vacation, but the careful, deliberate, regular weekly rhythms that our spiritual ancestors cherished for their livelihood and the earth itself. Of tilling deep into the resources that cannot be purchased, marketed, or packaged: the resources of our own hearts and breath. Of engaging our faith as do Jesus and his disciples and the community gathered and then responding with humble silence and quietude for a time. The pleasurable resource of rest that lifts us out of the anesthetic effect of overwork and the madness of being overwrought with performance and productivity. The well-spring of simply being present in a moment that intersects with God's eternal moment. Where we simply *are* without being defined by a million tugs and pulls at our tender existence.

And in fact, the restoring a sense of Sabbath is about restoring justice for ourselves and all who walk with us. Indeed, Joan Chittister puts it this way:

The rabbis taught that the purpose of Sabbath was threefold. The first purpose of Sabbath, the rabbis said, was to free the poor as well as the rich for at least one day a week, and that included the animals, too. Nobody had to take an order from anybody on the Sabbath. The second purpose of Sabbath, the rabbis teach, is to give people time to evaluate their work as God evaluated the work of creation, to see if their work, too, is really life-giving. And finally, the purpose of Sabbath leisure was to give people space, to contemplate the real meaning of life. If anything has brought the modern world to the brink of destruction, it must surely be the loss of Sabbath.¹

Jesus, in a way that would affirm the best of the Jewish tradition, refuses to let Sabbath be anything less than attentive and renewing. For the burdened and harassed people, Jesus stands up to the powers that will co-opt and collapse Sabbath into a hollow shell of tradition – a habit rather than a true practice: an enforceable dictum rather than a life-giving discipline. The woman, bent over and crippled, epitomizes the tired lives of her people overwrought with enforced traditions that seem devoid of meaning. A great irony is that Sabbath, Jesus tells all who hear him – and to their great shame – has lost its purpose and meaning if it is only to

¹ *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* by Joan D. Chittister, O.S.B., Harper Collins, 1991.

be harshly inflicted.

It is a further irony for us that we, too, can be this woman – not crippled by an overzealous enforcement of Sabbath, but out of a lack of true Sabbath altogether! The call of Christ is to move beyond the hollow shells of our consumer-driven culture, our insatiable appetite for things rather than life, our obsession with performance and productivity rather than simple being. We are called back to the substance of who we are as human beings, to be restored like this woman; made whole and upright as created reflections of the Divine – lovingly connected as we were made to be, with Creation and each other just as God’s greatest joy is connected at the most intimate level with all that is.

Phyllis Tickle has said:

From the beginning of Judeo-Christian religion, there have been a number of ways of creating those little interruptions in normal life, those places where we can engage the mystery, those places of harmony and integration. A good Jew two thousand years ago would have known that one of the ways of interrupting life and meeting with the spiritual was the Sabbath. We used to keep the Sabbath. We used to set it aside and say, "Here is a time. Here is an interruption in one of the dimensions that informs life in which we will stop, and we will honor the Spirit of God. . ." We would honor the time before that consumption and the hours after that consumption by an interruption of all other habits. We would hallow the time around that event--the Eucharist or the Mass or the Communion. That's what the Sabbath was, and it had built around it time and place.²

Our challenge as a community is to hold this place and time, this sacred now, despite all the forces that seek to encroach on it, eroding our time together to celebrate what we have received, what we have given, and even to find a bit of rest for the sake of all the human family and the Good News of God in Christ.

Sabbath, after all, is not ultimately about law, but about compassion: compassion for the needs of our bodies and minds to rest. Compassion for our loved ones and neighbors and their needs. Compassion for all the creatures of God and their renewal. Compassion for the sea, land, and air, that they may also rest refresh. And radical identification with and for the God of compassion, who revels in all that has been made and calls it good.

² “Everyday Spirituality,” a talk presented by Phyllis Tickle at St. Peter's Catholic Church, Memphis, Tennessee, January 13, 2002.