

July 18, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Taking the Sabbath Seriously** by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Genesis 2:1-3

It is clear from a close reading of the first pages of Genesis that **God and his creation are bound together in a distinct and delicate way.** This is the presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible. It is the deepest premise from which good news is possible. God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation. The binding, which is established by God, is inscrutable. It will not be explained or analyzed. It can only be affirmed and confessed. The poetry at the beginning of Genesis announces the deepest mystery: **God wills a faithful relation with earth.** The text invites the listening community to celebrate that reality. The binding is irreversible. God has decided it. The connection cannot be nullified.

A critical part of the binding and of the celebration is conveyed in the last part of the narrative – the part we read just now. “On the seventh day God rested.”

Three times in this great creation hymn God blesses her creation. Blessing is used of living creatures (1:22), blessing is used of human creatures (1:28), and now blessing is used of a day (2:3). The seventh day is hallowed, made a holy time, set apart from the other days of the week that provide time for ordinary human activities. It is made God’s own possession.

In the Bill Moyer's program on *Genesis* that was broadcast on public television a few years ago, Walter Brueggemann comments, "The creation of the Sabbath shows that God is not anxious about the world. On the seventh day he doesn't show up at the office. He lets it be. That shows some confidence on God's part – that the world has coherence and vitality. The creation of the Sabbath is an antidote to the enormous anxiety we have about the fragility of the world." The celebration of a day of rest is, then, the announcement of trust in this God who is confident enough to rest.

The rabbis taught that we are to emulate God. On the Sabbath no one is to work or interfere with the created order in any way: no lifting, no carrying, no cutting, no trimming, no pruning.

There was a time in many of our memories that the world took the Sabbath very seriously. I wonder if we passed the mike around what stories we would tell. Reflect on Sundays of your own childhood. What flavor do those memories have for you?

I, for one, remember a time when all stores except gas stations were closed on Sundays, when a community wouldn't think of scheduling an athletic event, when nothing interfered with going to church and having a special dinner with the family. Those days are long gone.

In Hebrew it is called the day of *menuha*, "rest," better translated serenity, harmony, peace. *Menuha* is the essence of the good life and a foretaste of the life to come. The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things and of space and of doing; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.

Our lives can be compared to running a marathon. I'm told that extended rest is an essential regimen for the physical recovery of those who run in a marathon. Many athletes, however, try to return to hard training too quickly.

Joe Henderson, a columnist for *Runner's World*, says, "Runners make the incorrect assumption that once the soreness in muscles is gone, then they are recovered. But thousands of microscopic tears in the muscles can take four to six weeks to complete their healing." Henderson recommends that marathon runners take a day off from regular training for every mile run in a competitive race.

Gregory Florez, president of First Fitness, Inc. says, "One of our studies revealed faster recovery for muscle tissue by marathoners who did not exercise for a full 10 days after the race. But taking time from the running trail can be difficult for some people."

Runners aren't the only ones who don't want to get all the rest they need. With many things to do and goals to reach, taking a weekly day of rest for spiritual renewal can seem impossible. Nevertheless God instituted the Sabbath principle not just for the sake of our bodies, but also for our souls and spirits.

As important as rest is, the Sabbath was never meant to be just a rest stop along the way of our busy lives, making it easier for us to work hard the rest of the week. As the late Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel put it in his book, *The Sabbath*, "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude, but the climax of living."

The end of the Genesis creation story proclaims that the Sabbath is part of the created order. It is not

simply “down time,” what’s left over after all the chores are done. It is intentional. It is purposeful. Heschel says, “The Sabbath itself is a sanctuary which we build, a sanctuary in time.”

In the creation poetry, the introduction of the Sabbath comes at the climax of creation. It belongs to the whole narrative of creation. When our lives are not lived out of that narrative, but are lived in a narrative of production and consumption, then the Sabbath becomes an add-on that has no particular meaning. I like very much the statement of M. Tsevat, who says that the Sabbath is the one day every week in which he hands his life back to God so that he can remember that it is not his own. That acknowledgement that we belong to a generous God changes how we live the other six days of our lives. It is necessary to stop producing in order to acknowledge that our lives depend on receiving as well as asserting.

In his book *Does God Have a Big Toe?* Marc Gellman tells a story titled *No Lists on the Sabbath!* It goes like this:

*I know you wish you could have lived in The Garden of Eden. I know. Great weather, no problems, good food, and water that doesn't taste funny. But believe me when I tell you that the Garden of Eden was no piece of cake, because Adam lived there, and Adam was a list maker. In fact, Adam was the worst list maker of all time.*

*The elephant woke up one morning to find his trunk stuck through a huge leaf on which Adam had written in berry ink, Elephant list for today:*

- 1. Dump all the broken branches outside the garden.*
- 2. Hose down the dirty dishes.*
- 3. Squash some coconuts for lunch.*

*The monkey woke up one morning to find a banana peel tied around its tail on which Adam had written in berry ink,*

*Monkey list for today:*

- 1. Dump the rotten fruit outside the garden.*
- 2. Pick bananas for supper.*
- 3. Don't eat the bananas before supper.*

*Come morning, almost every animal woke up with a list, and all day long Adam would scurry around checking up on the animals and pestering them to see how they were coming with their lists.*

*One day the animals got together and said to God, “This guy Adam is such a pest! Can't you move us out of here? Or better yet, can't you move him out of here?”*

*God said, “Wait for the Sabbath. There are no lists on the Sabbath.”*

*On the morning of the seventh day Adam woke up bright and early to make his lists. He went to get his berry ink pot to write out a list for the elephant, but the ink was dry.*

*“No problem,” said Adam. “I will just go out and pick some more berries for the ink well.” But when Adam came to the berry patch, all the berries were gone.*

*“I bet this is the work of the monkey,” Adam complained. “But not to worry, I will scratch out my list for all the animals in the sand on the beach.”*

*Adam took a stick and started writing lists in the wet sand. But a wave came along and erased all the lists. Adam thought this was very strange, because the Garden of Eden was near a river. He had never before seen a wave that big in a river.*

*So Adam sat down to rest. And he felt good just resting. Then the monkey came by. "No lists on the Sabbath!" he chirped.*

*The elephant came by and trumpeted, "No lists on the Sabbath!"*

*And the animals all wished Adam a good day of rest.*

Now I know what some of you are thinking: all very nice, but with all the demands on my life, Sandy, you're lucky I make it to church, let alone honor the Sabbath. Where could I go to find such a Sabbath place anyway? How do you expect me to take a day out of my busy week?

Let me leave you with this quote from Matthew Kelty:

"There are places one can go, a scene one can create, a haven for one's heart. The reason they seem scarce is that no one wants them; there is a small demand. But lovers always manage to find a place to go where they can be alone for a while. So can you."

Let us pray:

Now

O Lord,

Calm us into a quietness

That heals

And listens;

And molds our longings

And passions

Our wounds

And wonderings

Into a more holy

And human

Shape.

—Ted Loder