

SERMON
June 3, 2018
Hungry and Broke: Two Sabbath Stories

Thank you, Katy. And thank you to all for your welcome and hospitality!

It's been good to be with you all this weekend:

- In Deb Napolitan's living room over iced tea and blueberry scones
- In Katy Heinzel's home eating pizza while it poured rain
- Gathered at the river at Darlis & Howard's place for ice cream

So far, I've especially enjoyed the chance to hear some of your stories:

- How many of you came to Community – and why you stay
- The early joys and frustrations of having the freedom to process your decisions as a congregation
- How Parrot Gallery began & how for the first seven years you drew on new Community artists each month - without ever repeating an artist!
- The way that Beauty itself has been a kind of angel for Community – God's gift that nurtures and shapes you
- How the Holy Spirit continues to move and delight here – like a brightly-colored parrot

It's been fun for me and Dave to learn more about life at Community; and we look forward to doing more of that later this morning!

Our times of storytelling have reminded me a bit of story slams. Over the last ten years, we've enjoyed going to the ones hosted by First Person Arts in Philadelphia (and I'm excited to have recently learned that Lancaster has a story slam, too!)

Three rules for most story slams:

1. True story happened to you, the storyteller.
2. Told in 5 minutes or less.
3. Relate to the theme of the night.

The themes chosen for story slams are often ones that will likely prompt different kinds of stories. For example, one night the theme was *Broke* and we heard stories of broken objects, broken bones, broken relationships, and broken stereotypes – as well as one story of being financially broke.

But regardless of the night's theme, it never ceases to amaze me how often people use that open mic opportunity at a story slam to tell stories to a room full of strangers that reveal a deep spiritual longing or their attempt to process some kind of religious or spiritual experience.

Hungry

The theme of the first story slam I ever attended was *Hungry*. And I'll always remember the story told by that night's winner.

"Tommy" told us that he had gone to Catholic school - where he often heard dire warnings from his teacher about the dangers of peer pressure. But she knew he was a good kid, and he got along well with her. He was also intrigued as a child by the beauty and mystery of the worship services at the Catholic church across the playground; and he loved serving as an altar boy there.

One day when he was about 10-years-old, Tommy showed up to get ready for the service and was quite startled to discover his friend casually holding a 2-pound bag of the round communion wafers. The bag was open and, as Tommy described it, his friend was hungrily eating the host by the fistful - like potato chips!

"Don't worry," his friend said, "It's not Jesus till the priest blesses it." Thus reassured, Tommy joined his friend in having a pre-service snack.

The next day, the two boys were called to the principal's office over the intercom. It seems that Tommy's friend had stuffed the open bag in his coat pocket when he left the church - not realizing that he had left an obvious trail of wafers all across the playground!

Confronted with this evidence, the boys had no choice but to confess.

When she heard from the principal what had happened, Tommy's teacher was mortified. "I am so disappointed in you!" she said to him sternly. "What in the world got into you?"

On the spot and feeling terrible that he'd disappointed his beloved teacher, Tommy wracked his brain for an answer. Then he held up his hands and blurted out the only thing he could think of: "It must have been peer pressure!"

Teaching moments

If we had a story slam this morning, I can imagine that some of us might have Sabbath stories to share. There would likely be some true tales we could tell of teachers and preachers and parents who also just didn't get it; some elders and bishops we've known who - like Tommy's teacher - didn't realize how hungry and open we were as children to experience the beauty and mystery of God; and how receptive we would have been to less judgment and more teaching moments offered with grace. I've heard some stories like this at Frazer Mennonite; and I have a story or two of my own that I could share.

It might be tempting to let these stories cause us to resist or altogether dismiss commandments like the one to practice Sabbath. After all, the first thing we might notice in the text is how decisively Jesus resists the Pharisees - those self-appointed Sabbath police:

- They catch his disciples plucking grain and immediately pounce, “Look! They’re doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath!” But Jesus handily dismisses them. “Don’t you know that David himself entered the house of God when he was hungry and ate the bread of the Presence? (Like so many hungry altar boys!) As you know, only priests are allowed to eat that, but David even gave some to his companions.”
- Then the Pharisees put Jesus under surveillance - what he will do when he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and meets a man with physical brokenness? But Jesus challenges them with a pointed question, “So - is it lawful to do good – to save life - on the Sabbath?” When they respond with stony silence, he looks at them with anger and then his anger turns to grief at their hard hearts. Shifting his attention to the man, Jesus says, “Stretch out your hand.” The man does and his hand is restored.

What Jesus is trying to do is to turn these frustrating interactions with religious folks who just don’t get it into teaching moments that offer new life! He interprets the Law for them, and holds out a renewed Sabbath vision that he hopes all who have eyes will see. The goal? Reminding them of what God really had in mind. Pointing them – and now us - to God’s good and true purpose: “The Sabbath was made for humankind,” Jesus says, “not humankind for the Sabbath.”

As one commentator has said, it’s not so much that we HAVE to practice Sabbath. It’s that we GET to!

Sabbath-keeping

This week, I came across an article about Sabbath-keeping by Christine Sine (<http://mennoworld.org/2017/06/16/the-world-together/living-into-the-sabbath/>). Sine is founder of Godspace, a community of voices from around the world who “notice, explore and experiment with fresh ways to connect more intimately to God, more effectively to...neighbours and more responsibly to creation.” <http://godspacelight.com/about/>

Sine draws from a number of sources as she explores the meaning and practice of Sabbath:

- Francine Klagsbrun, author of *Jewish Days: A Book of Jewish Life and Culture*, calls the Sabbath a miracle “because no such day existed until it appeared full-blown in the Talmud”. Her father, an immigrant from Russia, remembers no labor laws regulating working conditions when he arrived in the U.S. “People worked long hours, seven days a week, without rest...But imagine, more than three thousand years ago the Bible commanded that all work stop for an entire day every single week, and not only for the ancient Israelites but for all who lived among them, including slaves. And not only for people, but for animals as well. What a revolutionary practice that was. What a miracle!” Klagsbrun explains, “the rhythm of the Jewish calendar flows around this day of rest and reflection. In every week of every month of every year, the Sabbath arrives to re-create that moment after Creation when God rested and the entire cosmos was in peace and harmony... a unique gift,” she says, “that is only fully appreciated when used.”

- Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel understands the seventh day of creation as the day when God created “tranquility, serenity, peace and repose”. When we practice Sabbath, we enter into “the rest and harmony of life as God intended it to be....one day out of every seven we have an opportunity to glimpse eternity, to experience the joy, the tranquility, the peace and the abundance of life as God intended it to be.”
- “No wonder Jesus healed on the Sabbath,” says Sine. “No wonder he constantly criticized the legalisms and restrictive rules the Pharisees had inflicted on the people that robbed them of their joy and freedom. He wasn’t downplaying the importance of Sabbath as a holy day, he was giving the Jews a glimpse of what Sabbath was meant to be, the culmination of their week, the goal of all else they gave their time to – a glimpse into the wholeness, and abundance of God’s shalom future when all will be healed, fed and provided for. Imagine what a difference it would make,” she says, “if we all viewed Sabbath as a day for connecting to the joy of fellowship with God, for enriching relationships with others and for enjoying...God’s creation.”

Still revolutionary good news

God’s Sabbath commandment was revolutionary good news when it was first issued, and it is still revolutionary good news today. While we may not literally be enslaved in our time and place, the tyranny of busyness and unrelenting work still very much affects many of us and those we love.

Pope Francis laments this tyranny in the new documentary of his life that came out this weekend. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOmY8i-uBcY> “We live with the accelerator down from morning till night,” he says. “This ruins mental health, spiritual health, and physical health. More so, it affects and destroys the family and therefore society.

“On the Seventh Day, [God] rested. What the Jews followed and still observe was to consider the Sabbath as holy. On Saturday, you rest. - One day of the week, that’s the least! - Out of gratitude, to worship God, to spend time with the family, to play, to do all these things,” he says. “We are not machines!”

Now I don’t know about you, but what the Pope says about our need for Sabbath-keeping rings true for me. (Funny thing about spending time with a text and writing a sermon – tends to drive truths home in my own life. I’m reminded of how I’ve struggled to make time for Sabbath at every stage of my life – as a student, young mom, busy working person. But when I’ve practiced Sabbath, I know it. And with I don’t make time for it, I know that, too!)

So how might you and I more fully reclaim the practice Sabbath today? Sine is not in favor of rigid rules for Sabbath-keeping. No one wants to go back to the legalisms of the past! And the life-giving rhythm that makes sense at one point in our lives might need to be adjusted when a change in a job or other life circumstance happens. The point is that Sabbath-keeping is a gift - whether graduating from high school and going on to college or retiring and moving into a new season of life.

For some helpful practical ideas, Sine turns to Tilden Edwards, an Episcopal priest who researches Sabbath keeping. In his book, *Sabbath Time*, Edwards urges Christians to be flexible and creative in their practice of Sabbath.

- “He recommends that Sunday be a time to combine worship with play and relaxation; and then advocates adding [another] regular rhythm of disciplined spiritual renewal...during the week.”
- While Sunday may still be the best Sabbath day for many of us, it can be a required work day for others. Pastors and health care professionals may find that scheduling Sabbath rest on Saturday or Monday works better.
- For students and teachers who feel pressure to prepare on the weekend for the coming week, beginning Sabbath at sundown Saturday means Sabbath is over by sundown Sunday – leaving time for work week prep after that.

A story worth telling

As Sine says, when and exactly how we celebrate Sabbath doesn't seem to matter much. What is important is to set aside that regular restorative time as a holy Sabbath. To rest, refresh, and connect intimately with God, others, ourselves, and creation. To allow God to heal us. To glimpse God's eternal world – and then allow the rest of our time and life commitments to be shaped by those holy encounters!

Even when we don't feel like setting the time aside or when it seems that we're just too busy, God still calls us to practice Sabbath. In fact, maybe those are the times when we need this life-giving practice the most!

Are we always going to get this right? Of course not. After all, Sabbath is a spiritual practice.

The good news is that we don't have to be perfect or put our best foot forward or to try to clean ourselves up first. In Sabbath time, we are invited to just come and bring our authentic selves before God and one another – along with our weary bones, our broken places, and our deep hunger for the holy.

There God meets us; hears our stories; knows us and loves us; accepts who we are; and promises to do holy work in us - nourishing us and restoring us for God's good purposes in us and in the world.

Because as Jesus reminded his followers, “The Sabbath was made for humankind!”

Now that's a story worth telling!