

North Congregational Church

United Church of Christ



"The Rhythms of Sabbath"

A Sermon by Nada Sellers
preached at North Church on 7-19-09

Genesis 1:1-2:4 & Mark 2:23-28

INTRO: Start by asking people to take up rhythm instruments or to use hands on thighs or on pew to "clap" with me. "Follow me....try this: X XX X XX and then shift XX X XX X." Have people do each for a while – see if they can improvise off this... then stop folks and put 1 and 2 together. (sort of like cheering at a baseball game)

Thank you!! Wow – did you notice how that felt? All around us and within us there are rhythms: One hears the sound of the rain, gentle or heavy, pulsing or pounding; if you stop and close your eyes many of you can probably get in touch with the sounds of the ocean as it rises and falls, spreading out over the sands, running back under its incoming swell and crashing down, only to repeat itself again and again. Try the rushing of a moving stream or the lapping of lake water.... And then there are the sounds of buses and cars and motorcycles; there are the songs birds and dogs and crickets; the hums of helicopters and airplanes, trucks and heavy equipment, school buses on their rounds, the train as it rumbles through the edge of town, blowing its horn in warning. How about the household rhythms found in sounds like the washer and dryer or the dishwasher and the vacuum cleaner? Or how about the sound you make as you walk along, wearing flip-flops or clogs or your favorite dress shoes? What about your interaction with music as you listen in your kitchen or your car, maybe in the shower or as you relax?

There are also many rhythms at the core of our everyday lives – rhythms of schedule, and daily responsibilities; aspects of a collection of days or a week, or a series of weeks. Can you think of the rhythms that appear in your own life? How does time flow in your week and what patterns emerge? Think about the seasons of Spring and Summer, Fall and Winter. Or what about breathing, in and out, in and out. Take a minute or two and turn to your neighbor and after introductions, try to identify some of the rhythms that happen in your life? *Allow discussion....*

Okay – anybody notice something surprising? What rhythms did you come up with? (work, study, practice, travel, medical appointments etc. etc. --- walking the dogs, library books due, sleeping/waking, exercise, taking out the trash/recycling, what about Sabbath or worship?) Let's take a look this morning, at the origins of the Sabbath.

"In the beginning..." or more accurately "In *a* beginning," as if the text were pointing out that there are endless numbers of beginning in the cycle of life, "God created" or "when God *began to create....*" (R. Schulman-Shalomi as quoted by W. Muller, *Sabbath* Bantam Books, 1999, p35) So, "In a beginning, when God began to create..." is how the very beginning of the first account of creation starts. God began to create and is still apparently creating. God created light and dark, day and night, earth and sky and sea and all that teeming, swarming, squirming, fluttering, darting life, in six days and on the seventh "God rested and was refreshed," if you read the description of Sabbath beginnings in Exodus 31. More accurately, God literally rested and "exhaled" on completing God's creation; God's great six-day inhale is the creation of the world, and on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, God exhales and rests. So the beginning of all creation moves within the rhythm of the inhale and the exhale – the rising and falling of God's breathe. (p. 36-37)

Our Genesis account also describes the seventh day of God's creative action as much more than simply a day off... God rests on the seventh day, but here's the kicker: "On the seventh day, God *finished the work* that God had done, and God rested..." Apparently, there was work to finish on the seventh day – it wasn't all done. And just what was this "work?" The ancient rabbis teach that on the seventh day, God created peace and serenity, rest and repose in its

deepest sense. Until the completion of Sabbath and the beginning of deep peace, creation was unfinished; only after the birth of rest as God births it, was creation completed. (p 37)

It is from these beginnings that the practice of Sabbath rest becomes a holy commandment. Speaking to Moses on Mt Sinai, God says: "You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you... Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord...It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and God exhaled." (Ex 31:12-17)

As Jewish law developed and was codified, along came the institution of 39 separate laws which stipulated the types of labor or activity that were prohibited on the Sabbath. (Cf. *Wikipedia*) These have to do with activities that carry creative abilities or which exert dominion or control over one's environment; the first 11 categories have to do with the activities of baking bread (planting, plowing, harvesting, winnowing), the next 13 are activities required to make a garment... The next 9 categories involve leather making, and the final six prohibitions have to do with building houses. If God could rest in creating the universe, God's people would also rest from their work. The rhythm of shabbos was to be very different than on the first 6 days of the week; from sundown Friday until sundown on Saturday, the idea was to refrain from making certain things happen, giving deep permission for space in which other things can happen.

Early Christians began celebrating the Sabbath on Sunday, the first day of the week, to commemorate the day of Jesus' resurrection, and in 321 C.E., Sunday Sabbath received official recognition with Roman emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, declared in a day of rest throughout the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, this also resulted in a long period of governmentally enforced Sabbath-keeping, when church attendance became mandatory, leading in future generations, to rise of increasingly severe and lengthy Sabbath obligations thought to be demonstrations of deeper righteousness or piety. Restrictions for Sunday activities in Judeo-Christian traditions abounded. These were dreary, bleak days when almost everything was prohibited, maybe some of you can remember these – no games, no cards, no baseball, no special beverages, no music, no laughter. Mostly sitting inside, visiting with family... The rhythms of Sabbath seemed to grind things to a near stand-still. Whatever happened to ceasing from daily labors, in order to make time for love and friendship, prayer and praise, touch and laughter and singing and rest? "Walking with a friend, reciting a prayer, caring for children, sharing bread and wine with family and neighbors – these are intimate graces that need precious time and attention" writes Wayne Muller in his book *Sabbath; Finding Rest and Renewal in our Busy Lives*. (p. 30) How did we stray so far from these rhythms?

Let us affirm here today, that perhaps the most recognizable quality of creation, is its rhythmicity, something that we can see and hear and feel in the cadence of the text and the beauty of what evolves from God's creativity: Again, Muller writes,

The pulsing light and dark, expansion and contraction, the seasons and tides, the cycles of growth and dormancy, of life, death, and regeneration are unmistakable characteristics of all living things, from the smallest microbe to the largest galaxy. The fruit contains the seed and the seed contains the fruit. What we harvest in this season provides the seed for the next season.... And if we are too busy, if we do not rest, we miss this rhythm. One day we look up and it is winter, and where are the fall days, brisk and clear, leaves ablaze? How did we spend them, what were we doing?... Yes, we are strong and capable people, we can work without stopping, faster and faster, electric lights making artificial day so the whole machine can labor without ceasing. But remember: No living thing lives like this. There are greater rhythms that govern how life grows: circadian rhythms, seasons and hormonal cycles and sunsets and moonrises and great movements of seas and stars. We are part of the creation story, subject to all its laws and rhythms. (68-69)

The meanings of the Hebrew word "Sabbath" most likely originated with the verb "to cease," such that Sabbath means something like "cessation day, the day on which all work stops." (ISBE vol 4:247-248) The original Sabbath in Israel was not a day of worship, but a day of rest and in exilic practice, became an act announcing their faith in *this* God, and a rejection of all other gods, religions and world-views. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." The celebration of a day of rest was an announcement of trust in this God who is confident enough in what has been created that God rests. According to commentator Walter Brueggemann, "The practice of Sabbath was then and is now an assertion that life does not depend upon our feverish activity of self-securing, but that there can be a pause in which life is given to us simply as a gift." (Interp. series *Genesis* (John Knox, 1982):35)

On some level, the rest of God is also a promised rest of humankind, because humankind is in the image of God... This isn't a sleep allowing us to slip away from real time, but rather the freedom and well-being of a new kind of history. Keeping Sabbath week by week is a disciplined reminder of how creation was intended: Sabbath as rest for God exists for

the well-being of humankind – not the other way around - as Jesus reminded the Pharisees in Mark 2. As Jesus is Ruler over the Sabbath, his intention is about breaking into the old world of dehumanizing exploitations from work and travail, as well as breaking away from the tyranny of boring faith and predictable spirituality. Jesus seems to be saying to his Pharisaical critics, that when it comes to the usual, normal religious rituals, 'the same old same old' doesn't cut it anymore. Hard-hearted religion doesn't jive with the good news that opens hearts to God's presence, and spawns compassion and joy! (*Feasting on the Word* Yr. B, vol 3 W. Farley p. 96)

I think that we all need to get our Sabbath rhythm back; we need to get back in touch with these "greater rhythms that govern how life grows." In next week's sermon, we'll dig into how Sabbath can be an integral part in our everyday lives, as we prepare for a communal Sabbath in August, but for today, let's concentrate on that Sabbath beat: We need to place ourselves back in the pulse of the creation story, becoming subject to its laws and rhythms. It's not about being strong, capable, workaholic people, who can do things faster and faster; we need to live in rhythmic awareness, to jump in and then step out, to be engrossed and then detached, to work and then to rest. The commandment to remember the Sabbath is a reminder of how things really are; it's a reminder "to join in the rhythmic dance to which we unavoidably belong." (Muller, p. 69) Sabbath says, Be still. Stop. This is not a rush to get to the end; now is the time to cultivate a sense of eternity where we can truly rest. Amen.

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