

## **“A HOLINESS BREAK,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, September 18, 2022**

Congregation, fall is almost here. Summer nearly gone. Already the change of seasons seems to be taking place as the temperatures dip. A shift is also evident in the change of pace of our everyday lives. Everything seems to have speeded up a little—or a lot. Kids are back in school with all their uptick in activities, including sporting events, which we couldn't take for granted during the COVID spike. A lot of workers, like my wife, who having been working remotely from home, are getting ready to return to their actual offices after almost two years away. In casual conversation, folks talk about the household projects that are on their agenda for the autumn weeks ahead. Similarly, at church all kinds of activities are underway again or gearing up—like regular Sunday School and confirmation classes, the fall rummage sale, and planning for Trunk or Treat.

Now, there is a certain thrill in this quickening tempo. It can be almost fun to get caught up in the fresh trajectory and momentum of things. Yet there are certain perils and hazards too. In the fresh season that awaits us all we can end up getting seduced into too much busyness, leaving little time for ourselves and no time to be holy.

To be sure, scripture warns us against idle and aimless living. Particularly vivid on this score is the wisdom from the Book of Proverbs which pointedly queries: “How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?...poverty will come upon you like a vagabond and want like an armed man” (*Proverbs 6:9, 11*). The same book of wisdom further declares: “The sluggard does not plough in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing” (*Proverbs 20:4*). But we can make the mistake of confusing sheer busyness with a purposefulness that pleases the God who created us all and, as the Book of Genesis attests, worked hard for six days and then took a break for rest and contemplation (*Genesis 1:27-2:3*).

Yes, in any good life, there is a time and place for getting down to business. Yet, for us as Christian men and women, abiding by God's own example, there should also be a place and a time for setting ordinary, everyday business aside in order to focus on those things which are holier and help us to feel more whole and renewed. Through the psalmist, God says: “Be still and know that I am God” (*Psalms 46:10*). How can we know God or even be in touch with ourselves if we don't push a pause button on busyness and give ourselves necessary time to reflect and rejuvenate, both physically and spiritually?

It used to be that there was a time built into the weekly fabric of our lives for down-time and time-out. It was called Sunday—also known as the Sabbath which, as the Jewish seer Abraham Heschel reminds us, comes from an ancient word for God. Whatever happened to it?

Commanded by God at Mt. Sinai to honor the Sabbath and to keep it holy, the Jewish people certainly did so (*Exodus 20:8*). And many still very strictly do. Orthodox Jews, for instance, won't even drive a car on their Sabbath, nor make use of any appliance even to

prepare meals. Although our Christian community moved the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, it was long honored none the less for that change. Sunday was a big deal, taken seriously and held holy. Church-going, whether morning or night, centered the day. Even those who were not church-goers recognized Sunday as a day set apart, unlike any other day of the week and benefited from the calm of it all.

As a kid, growing up in a Detroit family that was in church every Sunday, I remember stores kept closed for the entire day except for “essential business.” Everyday commerce wasn’t seen as appropriate for the “Lord’s Day.” Besides not wanting to mar the day for themselves, Christians didn’t want to force other folks to work the Sabbath on their behalf. Beginning with church, which put everything else in context, Sunday was thus a time for quiet, unrushed, mostly unscheduled pursuits such as a mid-day family meal, visitation with family and friends, and perhaps reading or light recreation—nothing too organized.

Yet everything began to change by the late 1960s and early ‘70s. Respect for the Sabbath began to disintegrate as commerce moved in to commandeer the day. For the sake of convenience once-closed stores opened their doors. No longer was any distinction made in state law between essential and nonessential business for the day. On store floors, cordons, restricting access to certain departments, were taken down for good.

Unfortunately, our Christian churches did not hang together to try to maintain any semblance of unified respect for the Sabbath. Roman Catholic churches, for example, began offering Saturday and Sunday evening masses as an alternative to Sunday morning worship. Then and later, some Protestant churches followed suit, abandoning the Sabbath tradition to the dust.

Today, we are all poorer for what happened. As our church members can testify, folks are now pressured, if not compelled, to work on Sundays by employers who regard all the days as the same. Family togetherness on the Sabbath has also gone out the window as each generation has gotten caught up in competing interests, each with their own hectic schedule. Not even the hours of Sunday morning are sacrosanct anymore. Instead, churches like our own have to compete with soccer, lacrosse, and hockey leagues for the attention of young people and parents. If kids don’t show for their organized Sunday practices and games, they are disqualified from their teams. Unlike church, these sports activities are not big on forgiveness for imagined slackers. It’s church life that has to bend.

Of course, when the Sabbath first began to slip away the widespread assumption was that if folks worked or played too hard on Sundays they could always worship or recoup on their own time on some other day of the week. But things haven’t worked out that way. With no set, socially sanctioned time to take a break, people don’t take one—or feel terribly guilty if they do. In our digital-driven world that never seems to sleep, more and more, men, women, and children are entrapped in 24/7 high-stress, non-stop lifestyles which may be one more reason why so much over-the-top meanness and chaos besets our

shared public life today. The diminishment of the Sabbath in American life turns out to be a big loss for us all.

In the Gospel of Mark, as shared this morning, Jesus stands accused by hyper-critical and hypocritical Pharisees of allowing his own apostles to abuse the Sabbath by plucking raw grain to feed themselves (*Mark 2:23-28*). But Jesus informs the Pharisees that this no abuse at all since God created the sabbath to enhance our well-being, not cause hardship. Indeed, as he explains, “the Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath.” One can hardly cherish the Sabbath on a starving stomach. This goes for his apostles too. What Jesus underscores here is that faithful Sabbath observance doesn’t have to be rigid to honor God’s purposes. But our embrace of the Sabbath should always be sure and sincere.

No one honored the Sabbath more than Jesus when he affirmed it as a day “made for man” and woman. As someone who clearly valued rest and times of retreat for himself and his apostles, Jesus knew we needed both too (*Luke 5:15*). First of all, rested people are better equipped to deal with the challenges of daily life in a sensible, faithful way. In our sabbath-keeping we are less likely to be irritable and out-of-sorts and less disposed to take others, including God, for granted. Secondly, we allow ourselves time to take stock of where we are, where we are going, and how our lives are aligned—or possibly misaligned—with God’s purposes for us. Yes, congregation, it takes time to simply count our blessings. And thinking about God is a prerequisite to thanking him. We impair our quality of life when, jettisoning the Sabbath, we schedule our lives with so many mundane activities seven days a week and don’t honor the day God has sanctified for contemplation.

I cherish all that the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel has to say about the Sabbath. Meaningful too for me are the words of the Protestant minister Wayne Muller. In a book entitled *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*, Muller writes: “Sabbath rest invites us to step back, and see that [God’s creation] is good. Jews believe that on the Sabbath we are given an extra soul—the *Neshemah Yeterah*, or Sabbath soul—which enables us to more fully appreciate and enjoy the blessings of life and the fruits of our labors. With this extra soul...we are more able to pause, and see...the wholeness in it all. We will naturally apprehend the good in how things are, taste the underlying strength, beauty, and wisdom that lives even in difficult days, take delight in the gift and blessing of being alive.”

Congregation, it’s not just kids who need time out. Adults do too. Yes, we all need a break. The Sabbath commandment truly reflects God’s love and care for us. We shouldn’t regard the notion of the Sabbath as an onerous burden and imposition as all too many apparently do today.

In America today we are, in the words of the Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, “so rich in things and poor in soul.” We need to take time to be holy and to savor the wonder and splendor of life.

The big question for most of us is whether we can reclaim the Sabbath. To observe the Sabbath—to set aside Sunday for rest and contemplation—is almost counter-cultural. It goes against the grain of our times. Our individual efforts are not likely to be met with much positive reinforcement from others. But as Christ’s disciples we should have courage and fortitude to take a stand for ourselves and to set an example for others. We can do so by continuing to make worship part of our Sundays and then more selectively focusing the rest of our day on whatever activities bring us renewal and refreshment, build up our relationships with others, including God, and deepen us as men and women of faithful disposition.

I don’t want to feed any economic recession. However, we can do better than shopping our time away on Sundays. Do something different and more important. Meditate on a bible passage or a devotional reading. Give yourself over to personal prayers and one-on-one conversation with God. Start writing in a spiritual journal. Share time with your family and close friends. Bake a cake for a neighbor. Pen cards to those who are sick. Enjoy down-time with your family. Take a long walk in the woods. These are all creative ways that we can honor our Creator and his Sabbath commandment. In embracing anew our Sunday Sabbath as a time to be holy and as a “holiness break,” we become more whole, renewed, and fulfilled as men and women.

Yes, God made the Sabbath for us. Let’s make the most of it and find more joy and delight in life because of the way we respect and honor it as God’s gift. **Amen.**