

systems and structures we live under aren't that effective. But we're not called to be lazy or to totally disengage from society. We're called to spend one day of the week in rest, and joy and peace. A peace that passes all understanding – and will seem odd to our neighbours.

Look at the average young family today – they can't afford to not have two incomes coming in – and so both parents pretty much have to work. But working creates a burden and expense too. Now there's daycare costs, two vehicles are needed, extra expenses incurred because there's no one at home looking after the chores and making meals, etc. So, the vicious cycle continues. But what you going to do? You can't fight city hall! This is the system we've inherited and none of us knows how to fix it. We feel powerless to change what we can clearly see isn't working.

But one way to live counterculturally in this madness is to take sabbath seriously. Sabbath, in the way of Jesus, should distinguish us from those trapped on the wheel of economic and social dysfunction. Because even though we can't easily remake society, we can show society a different way of being. A way that says, each week we are going to turn off our work and spend the day going to church, getting exercise, spending time with others, and living in joy and contentment because of Jesus.

And that's a very compelling way to live. People will notice the different rhythm you live by. Not only on Sunday, but the way that you live differently all week long, anticipating this day when you fill your day differently.

I heard a funny story this week about Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley. But she didn't just have two boys, she had ten. And you'd think in a household of ten busy children it would be virtually impossible for her to observe sabbath. There was always something to be cooked, sewn, fixed, tears to be wiped and a house to be kept.

But in the busy Wesley household, it was well known that when Mom put her apron up over her head and sat in her chair she was not to be disturbed – no matter how long it took. This was her sign to the family that she was in

God's presence doing the important work of resting in God's presence. She was praying.

Her family got the hint and as a result John and Charles Wesley are two of the most famous Christians in history – one the great founder of a Methodism and the other, one of the greatest hymn writers in history. Probably because Susanna took time to put her apron over her head and to rest with God in prayer.

This is sabbath. Oh I know, some of you grew up with a different understanding of what sabbath ought to be. It was a day where you couldn't play or get your homework done. It was dreary and dull. I think our ancestors got this one wrong. They got many things right, but they weren't practicing sabbath in the way of Jesus.

Sabbath is the rest we need, not simply a break from our work, but a sense that Jesus is the one who has come to bear our greatest burdens, to deal with our greatest failures, and to restore us to life so abundantly that it wells up into eternal life.

And so, one day a week we rest. A sign to all the world that we live under a different system, with a different Lord, for a different purpose.

In a moment we will hear a song that Andrea has prepared for us. I chose it because of one line in particular. It says, "What gift of grace is Jesus my redeemer. There is no more for heaven now to give. He is my joy, my righteousness, and freedom. My steadfast love, my deep and boundless peace."

This is what sabbath is all about. All that we hope for in life and death has already been accomplished. Christ has given us the gift of joy, righteousness, freedom, love and peace.

And God, in his wisdom has set aside a day – a moment in time each week - *selah* – for us to pause and reflect – a day to live into that good news – that sabbath rest belongs to you.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Right on Time: Power in the Pauses"
January 21st, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6
By Rev. Mike Putnam

Here's a question for you: what is it that makes for a great speech or sermon? And what makes for an ordinary one?

I've heard it said that what makes the difference is the art of pausing. The difference between a powerful sentence and a sentence that is just noise, the difference between a joke that kills and a joke that lands flat on the floor is the pauses.

You know, that's why every Saturday night you'll find me here, standing in this pulpit before an empty sanctuary – Ed McCaig in the sound booth – and me reading and re-reading my sermon with pen in hand.

The sermon has been written for days – I've worked and reworked every paragraph, sentence and word. But if I just stood up and read what I have prepared on Sunday morning you would probably say "I didn't get very much from that message today".

So every Saturday night I come to church, turn on the lights, turn up the heat, stand with pen in hand and practice not so much the words, but the pauses.

You know the most frustrating person to deal with is someone who never stops talking. You can't get a word in edgewise. Maybe it's carelessness, or nervousness, or self-centeredness, but someone who just keeps talking is hard to handle.

The absence of pauses means our words blur together into an unceasing dull drone. And what a ceaseless talker sounds like a ceaseless doer looks like. Someone who never stops, is always on the go, never pauses – is about as irritating as a person who runs on and on in their speech.

There's something attractive about people who know when to stop (talking or working). There's something compelling about people who are good at hitting pause from

time to time.

When we head south there's a popular fast-food chain I love to go to. But I've learned that Chick-Fil-A, normally lined up to the street almost every day of the week, is dead silent on Sunday. It's owned by a Christian. He doesn't allow his chain to operate on Sundays. One of America's most popular fast-food chains pauses.

Which is really something when you think about it. It counters the lie of corporate America. Because so many people believe that if you stop producing it means you stop mattering. So many of us determine our value by what we do. So many of us assume that we are 'of worth' because we get it done day after day.

But then we come to this inconvenient day in the Christian week called the Sabbath - A 24-hour period, set aside and instituted by God where we are to pause. It's a time for rest, worship and renewal. It's a time that is profoundly unproductive.

Sabbath is a powerful counter statement to our good old protestant work ethic. What does it mean that God has mandated a time of rest each week?

Well, for Israel in the first century it meant they had to put up with a lot of flak. Like Chick-Fil-A on Sunday in America, Israel was closed on Saturday. The whole nation – closed for business. And a lot of people thought that meant they were lazy. What's wrong with these people? Just lazing around while the rest of us put in a good day's work? "Must be nice to have that kind of time to just waste" people surely said.

Well, today in our series on time, we're pausing to think a little about this idea of sabbath. Why does God mandate the nation Israel to set aside time each week to do nothing? What does it mean that the God of the universe has designed creation in such a

way that every seventh day is supposed to be a kind of write off? And how do we, as 21st century followers of Jesus obey God's decree to do no work on the first day of the week?

Well, here's some off-the-top implications we need to get our heads around. If God decreed that sabbath was essential, then stopping to rest must not be an admission of failure. In fact, stopping to rest must be an admission of our humanity (I'm not a machine). And sabbath, (resting for God) must be a posture of faithfulness (I am not enough for everyone and everything – I am not God – so I must rest).

There's a Hebrew word – Selah. We don't have an exact translation of this word in the English language. But it means to pause and reflect. It's a word that requires us to slow down and consider what you've just done, heard, or are planning to do. That's what Sabbath is for. It's a pause with a purpose. It's a time for listening for God's voice – to wait on the Lord (as we talked about last week).

And so, sabbath is a sanctuary in time, each week, that is not for having but for being, not for owning but for giving, not for controlling but for sharing, not for subduing but for being in one accord.

It's a rare occasion in our society where we don't get together to declare our opinions and show forth our capabilities, but it's a day where we sing in unison, where we sit around tables and break bread together, it's a day for walks in nature, family game nights, for movies with big bowls of popcorn. It's a day for getting nothing done, but instead doing the essential work of letting God look after things for a while.

And that's what Jesus says. One Sabbath Jesus and his disciples are wandering through a field, and they're hungry and so they pick some heads of grain and eat them. I like to picture this scene as a joyful one – that's probably what drew the Pharisees attention. They're probably laughing and

being boys. Pushing and shoving one another, cracking jokes and throwing grain at one another. They're having a really good time.

And the pharisees – who always seem to be in the right place at the right time pop up and say, "Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

But you see, at this time there was more than 30 categories of activities that had been created that were forbidden on the Sabbath. It wasn't enough to just say that this was a day set aside for the Lord – no, as humans are apt to do, they codified it in a series of hard to manage laws relating to what was unacceptable on this 24-hour period. A set of laws that disadvantaged the poor and women and left those privileged few in a position of pride for expertly doing what no one else seemed to be able to do.

And Jesus says you've got it all wrong. You misunderstand the intent of God's law. You have missed the point. He says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

And that's the key to understanding the Christian sabbath. Sabbath is a gift of time. It's God's way of saying, you aren't what you produce. You aren't what you do. You were made for so much more. You were made to rest and delight in a relationship with me.

Pete Scazzero, a Christian author and pastor has said that followers of Jesus should think of Sabbath in terms of four categories. Sabbath is a day a week where we are to stop work, enjoy rest, practice delight, and contemplate God. Is that what Sabbath is for you?

And when we think of Sabbath in this way, we see that it's not a break from life but the pinnacle of it. It's a preview of your future, experienced in the present. It's a day when the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes real. There is nothing you can do to contribute to your salvation, so take a day off! Let go and let God!

And so, Christian Sabbath requires

us to get our head straight about three things. And we can see these three things in our text this morning. First, Sabbath is for mercy. Second, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, and third Sabbath is what distinguishes us from others.

First, Sabbath is for mercy. And we can see this right in the text. First, the disciples are wandering through a grain field, and they're hungry. The answer? Too bad, so sad, you didn't properly prepare your lunch ahead of time as was required to fulfill the man-made regulations around sabbath observance, so you're out of luck? No, enjoy a little grain on the way – fill your belly. And don't be dreary as you do it!

And then right after this little event, Jesus encounters a man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue. Just what the Pharisees have been waiting for – a public healing on the Sabbath. Clearly forbidden by their rules! But Jesus says to them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill." It says, "He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts..."

Because they have missed the point. Sabbath is to be a blessing – a gift from our Father in heaven – not a burden to be laden with rules and regulations.

So the Sabbath is for mercy – but not necessarily mercy we perform. It's not one more day where we're supposed to get organized and do good. No, it's a day where we centre down on the good news that Jesus has come and is restoring creation before our very own eyes – God's greatest act of mercy.

Jesus shows us mercy on the Sabbath. You remember that Saturday he did nothing. ...in a tomb. The sabbath between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.... That Sabbath was Jesus' greatest act of mercy in the history of the world. The day he bore your sins so you wouldn't have to. Sabbath is for mercy.

Second, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. That's what Jesus says, "The Sabbath

was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

What does that mean? Well, first of all, it means that Jesus is making a very clear statement of his divinity. "The Son of Man" is an apocalyptic title attributed to God's son from the book of Daniel – and Jesus is using it to speak about himself. The Sabbath is God's Day and Jesus is claiming authority over it.

Jesus is repointing the Sabbath to himself, just as he will do when he repoints the Passover meal to himself. Now, Sabbath observance isn't about a law to be kept, but a day to bring us to Him. Jesus is showing us that our observance of this day of rest is not only a memorial to God's creation of this planet home, but it is now also a memorial to the work of Jesus to save us and restore this planet home.

So, when we set aside a day of rest, we're recognizing that our salvation requires nothing from us. It's a great work of God for us, by the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ. We contribute nothing. We are not saving ourselves. Our Sabbath observance points us to that profound gospel truth that gives us rest.

Third, Sabbath is what distinguishes us from others. That's what Sabbath did for the Israelites – Israel was closed for business on Saturday. That's what they were known for – for better or for worse.

But Sabbath is what we should be known for too. And sometimes that will make us different in way perceived to be negative. It was Jesus' take on Sabbath that led the Pharisees to despise him and want to plot to kill him! Some will never understand the power of a pause in the way of Jesus. But I don't think that will be our demise. I think our observance of Sabbath can actually be missional and attractational.

Because I think most people today know that our world, driven by endless work and striving isn't working very well. The