

Ancient Christian Practices: Keeping Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28

March 14, 2010

This sermon is the third in a series of sermons on Ancient Christian Practices. Today I take up “keeping Sabbath.” The practices – things like fasting, prayer, hospitality, discernment, keeping Sabbath, generous giving and others – are hardly unique to Christians. Religions across the globe and across history have had their own versions of these practices. What makes Christian practice distinct is the special stamp Jesus put on them – that the practices are not hide-bound rules but ways of loving more fully and deeply each day. Jesus seems to have annoyed the rule makers in his own day. He welcomed the outcast, healed the enemy, prayed during business hours, considered the lilies more than the bankers, saved the best wine for last, worked on Sundays when the need arose, arrived late at funerals, told stories that weren’t in the bible, ate with sinners, and withdrew to be alone with his God just when people thought they needed him most. Yet even at his most annoying, Jesus was never *unhelpful*. His *rule-stretching* always served to show, as in today’s gospel from Mark, that rules were meant to promote and proclaim God’s love every day, not to limit God’s love to a few hours on a particular day. We hear Jesus observing today that even the holy day, the rest day, the Sabbath, is a day to feed the hungry. I am sure the hungry were grateful that for Jesus, the Sabbath, “rest day,” did not mean that they would starve.

So I would like to talk about Sabbath-keeping in a different vein this morning. Instead of asking whether we do – or should – keep Sabbath – the holy day, the “rest day” – even the “church day,” I would like to ask what the Sabbath is for. Or, to put it another way, how could Sabbath-keeping be most *helpful* to those of us who need more than a few hours of church on Sunday morning to find God?

Have you ever watched a basketball game that is close as the seconds wind down on the time clock? What does a coach often do? He calls a time out! You’ve seen it in person at the game or on tv. The coach – dressed in an expensive suit reflecting a truly astonishing salary –

jumps up from the bench and strides dramatically out on the edge of the court and makes a **T** with his/her hands. It's great theatre! The referee blows the whistle and waves the action off the court like this [GESTURE] or this [GESTURE]. The team gathers around the coach on the sideline. The coach has a white board in his/her lap and a marker in hand and you can just see over the players' shoulders that the coach is drawing X's and O's and arrows where the X's and O's are supposed to go. The game is on the line! The clock is winding down! *It's time for a new play!* Or maybe even – for the time remaining – for *a new game plan!*

So, hear me out. I am suggesting to you that today our lives need a new game plan! I'm also suggesting to you that the time clock is winding down. I don't know about you, but I feel a sense of urgency to find the peace God offers! Do you? Have you said to yourself recently in a reflective moment – *Man, it's nuts out there!* Have you ever found yourself in a situation – maybe personal, maybe at work, maybe in the community – when you just wanted to step out and go, **Whoa, "T " -- TIME OUT!!!!????**

What's **TIME OUT** for unless it's time for a new game plan? Or maybe back to a game plan that we've gotten away from. Take Jesus. How much of the good news lived and preached by Jesus is a kind of **TIME OUT?** Time out from hate, time out from weary and pointless rule-keeping, time out from stuck relationships, time out from despair, time out from unforgiveness, time out from blame. **TIME OUT**, calls Jesus. Let's draw ourselves a new game plan, one that puts God back on the court and the power of love back in the game!

TIME OUT! How many places in our lives right now do we need a **T**?

There's a wonderful ancient story about a monk named Macarius in a Christian monastery in Egypt called Scetis – O, perhaps three or four hundred years after the life of Jesus – about sixteen hundred years ago now. Apparently a young monk in the monastery had committed a serious sin, what it was we don't know, and council was called to consider kicking him out of the monastery. Macarius refused to go to the council, but he was summoned by the abbot and forced to come. In those days, you didn't say No to your abbot. So Macarius got up and took a leaky jug and filled it with water and carried the jug with him into the council,

leaking after him. The others on the council said, *What is this, what are you doing?* But old Macarius said to them, “My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.” Hmmm. **TIME OUT**. The others saw his point, recessed the council and forgave their brother.

I’ve never been quite able to create an appointed and regular Sabbath time in my life. Even Sunday is a working day for me, as much as I love worship and your company! Perhaps I am undisciplined. Perhaps the busyness and craziness of the world suits me in some strange way. But I have no less need for a loving, powerful, present God in my life and I see no less need in the world around me. So perhaps there is another kind of Sabbath. One that instead of withdrawing from the world to be with God, calls **TIME OUT** to bring God back into the game plan.

Suppose instead of wishing you had called a **T** somewhere in your life, suppose you had?

Suppose someone had called a **T** to bullying in the South Hadley High School before that girl hung herself? Or a **T** to bullying before that 12 year old Springfield boy hung himself in a closet a few months before?

How many “supposes” are there in our lives – in our community – in our nation? How many opportunities overlooked to bring God back into “the situation”?

Keeping Sabbath is a way of remembering who God is and what God does. God intervenes when we make room for God do so. God loves. God reconciles. God forgives. God moves “stuff.” God makes the stuck come unstuck and the unfree come free. Sabbath invites God back in and rewrites our game plan.

The next time you feel the urge to call a **T**, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Ask God to be God through you. Ask for the power of healing between you and another. Ask for the power to

forgive. Ask for the power to see yourself without fear and others without blame. Ask for the courage to speak. Ask for the wisdom to listen. Ask for the love of God to come in all situations without exception!

My partner Susan sent me a prayer yesterday written by a parent for her daughter. I don't know the history behind the prayer. I wonder whether, like many parents, this mother has known some struggle and some fear about her relationship with her daughter. Instead of going ballistic or going to a parenting group or rifling through parenting magazines, though, this mother has called a **T** and brought God back into the plan. It's a longish prayer, so I will read you just part of it. It moves my heart. Parenting, because it is so personal and so special, is also personally challenging and often painful. The prayer goes this way: *Dear God, there are no words for the depth of my love for this child. I pray for her care and her protection. I surrender her into your hands. Please, dear God, send your angels to bless and surround her always. May she be protected from the darkness of our times. May she always see You at the center of her life. May her heart grow strong to love You and serve You. I surrender, dear God, my parenthood to You. Make me the parent You want me to be. Amen*

Can you hear this mother calling God back into the plan?

Do not hesitate to call a **TIME OUT** and ask God back in. It's what the Sabbath is for: to let God's power and love flow into you and back out into the world through you!

Amen