

Devotion – Twenty First Week after Pentecost

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

When we come to church on Sundays to worship, we are celebrating “Sabbath.” But what does that word really mean? It comes from the Hebrew word “*shabbat*,” meaning “to stop.” If you recall, at the end of the creation in Genesis, God rests on the 7th day. God stops creating because his work is finished, and he has declared his creation very good. Genesis 2:3 says that “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested (*shabbat*) from all the work that he had done in creation.”

When Moses receives the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, God tells him that not only the people, but all the animals, are to rest on the seventh day. Like sleep, this rest is a healing rest. It allows creation to recover from a week of labor before the next week begins. This was a critical part of Jewish faith, since Pharaoh had worked the Israelites almost to death nonstop, seven days a week. The Jewish religion begins Shabbat at sundown on Friday evening – once normal work has been completed for the week. Shabbat usually starts right before sunset with the lighting of the Shabbat candles – usually done by the woman of the household. Then Shabbat is first celebrated with a Friday night meal. In traditional homes, the house is cleaned, the best dishes and table linens are used, and the family wears its best clothes. Traditionally, meals held in celebration of Shabbat should be fit for a queen!

In the Christian faith, Shabbat was moved to Sunday to honor the resurrection of the Lord. Sabbath is considered a “little Easter.” And traditionally when I was growing up, everyone cleaned the house on Saturday for Sabbath, put on their best clothes to go to church, and afterwards came home to a nice meal in the dining room with the tablecloth. The minister was usually invited to someone’s home to share this special Sabbath meal. I don’t know about you, but our meal was usually fried chicken or roast beef!

My grandmother forbid anyone in the family from working in the fields, or doing anything resembling work on Sunday. After a huge meal, the family, with a number of my aunts and uncles and cousins, would gather outside in lawn chairs if the weather was nice and just “visit.” Those of us children would generally escape down to the river and play in the water. Sometimes we would play softball out in one of the pastures, and that was allowed as long as we didn’t get too “rowdy.” Neighbors and other kinfolk might stop by and “sit a spell,” and there was always enough food under a clean tablecloth on the dining room table for snacking on leftover chicken, vegetables, and biscuits. It was a lazy afternoon. About dark my family would drive home the 30 miles, sometimes with leftovers, and ease into Sunday night television – the Ed Sullivan show most likely. Nothing was ever done in a hurry, no one saw the need to go into the office or crank up the tractor, no one played golf or tennis or went out to dinner. It was family time, and that time was sacred.

These days I see lots of “unSabbath” activity – soccer and baseball games scheduled on Sunday morning, lack of worship entirely, and activities like shopping that we used to do on Saturday. And everyone is in a hurry. John Ortberg says this about hurrying: “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Imagine for a moment that someone gave you this prescription, with the warning that your life depends on it. Consider the possibility that perhaps your life *does* depend on it. Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. Hurry can destroy our souls. Hurry can keep us from living well. As Carl Jung wrote, ‘Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil.’”

Amen to that. I hope this Sunday you’re able to have a Sabbath rest, and that you can refrain from hurrying throughout the week – a lesson that I in particular have trouble remembering!

Jeanne