

Most of us are well aware that ‘the Sabbath’ ought to be a special day. For much of our lives (and yes, for some of mine too) Sabbath meant Sunday, and Sunday meant Sabbath – a day when, but for church, not much was ‘allowed.’

Stores were closed. Recreation was limited. In some households (not in my experience) TV or Radio was also limited – it was a day to ‘rest,’ and there were rules about how you ‘rested.’

Ah, the good old days.

While I (vaguely) remember a time when Sunday was ‘special,’ by the time Lea and I were married, Sunday was just like every other day. You could attend church if you were so inclined, but any number of other choices stretched out before you on ‘the Sabbath.’ Stores were open – movies were shown – sporting events, hockey, and baseball tournaments – the options were limitless.

There were always a few voices crying out in the wilderness: ‘we’re too busy...’ ‘we’re losing touch with the Holy...’ The church was suffering, and the church thought it knew what was to blame – a lack of ‘sabbath keeping.’

When I was newly ordained, I stumbled into a conversation about the very recent (2006) change in Nova Scotia that allowed wide-spread Sunday shopping. It was a very hot topic, and my indifference stood out. “What’s the big deal?” (I asked) ...turns out it was a very big deal. The notion of a special day for ‘holy things’ is a very hot topic for many people.

Yes – our tradition tells us that the Sabbath ought to be special. Hallowed. Sacred. Set apart for worship and reflection. We’ve created a calendar that reflects that desire. We’ve shaped ideas around ‘work days and weekends.’ But the failure of this idea - of the Sabbath as a day of rest - is clear to see. For the church also decreed that rest looked like worship. The Sabbath as a Holy Day shaped our understanding of worship and rest in ways that are incomprehensible to most folks. Worship became duty, and rest became punishment, ***since the focus was on things that we could not or should not do...***

Never mind that Jesus tried to alter our notions of Sabbath-keeping more than 2000 years ago with words and especially with his actions. We were invited to ‘follow Jesus’ in his approach to Sabbath, but old habits die hard, and our Sabbath keeping has been tied up in legalistic knots for as long as the church has existed.

Rest is good. Rest is essential, for without being well rested, we can’t DO anything well. The sacred nature of a Sabbath rest is affirmed in the very first chapter of Genesis – where at the end of a time of fabulous and frantic DOING, God took a break. Satisfied with all that had been done, God honoured a period of not doing: a day of holy rest. This is the start of a good idea. All work and no rest, makes even God a little ‘less than.’

But then came an opportunity to weave the principle of Sabbath rest into the fabric of a newly liberated nation. And things got complicated.

Through much of Exodus, and by a couple of pointed reminders in Leviticus and Numbers, the declaration of Sabbath as a special day is gradually shaped.

The first mention (Exodus 20:8-11) is pretty simple. God rested. So should you. Later there is talk of rest for animals and “homeborn slaves and resident aliens.” (Exodus 23:12).

After the disaster with the Golden Calf, there is another ‘renewal’ of this covenant – that emphasizes rest even during times of ‘ploughing and harvest...’ (Exodus 34:21) Then, the bomb drops.

Those failing to keep the Sabbath are to be put to death! (Exodus 35:2) Never mind the different approaches to the wording of the law.

It is clear that the principle of “Sabbath rest” is very important to those who call themselves ‘God’s People.’

All of this precedes the final presentation of the law that we read this morning. The call to remember God’s deliverance as a reason for resting is the last (and perhaps most important) part of the development of our definition of sabbath.

It turns out that we are not ‘commanded’ to rest just for the sake of rest. Our Sabbath ought to be a reminder of true liberty. Sabbath ought to reveal who we really are – created in the Divine image and free to work well AND rest completely. Slaves to nothing – not even to Sabbath rules.

That was Jesus’ point so often. For all of the alleged sabbath breaking that he did – the healing and eating and walking and living – Jesus was living out the very heart of the commandment. His words and actions revealed Sabbath as liberation.

Since the gift of the Exodus, God’s people have been invited to build one day into their week – (and one year in every seven) – to recognize this gift of God. The gift that reminds us that while work is good, so is rest. The gift that honours our need to be renewed. Jesus did his best to remind us that the Sabbath was made for us, not the other way around (Mark 2:27). He was suggesting that we had become slaves to our own sabbath rules – that we had (once again) missed the point.

Our approach to Sabbath keeping is always going to be challenging. Old habits are hard to break – the legacy of these ancient rules still clings to our social and cultural conventions. But there is a remedy in Jesus.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

Jesus’ statement acknowledges burdens of all kinds – including the burdens of tradition and habit; burdens that encompass our entire lives. And without distinction – without regard for day of the week, or liturgical festival – Jesus offers rest.

In Jesus, we are invited to take sabbath when it comes – whenever it comes. And those times of blessed rest will lead to opportunities for joyful witness. And that was the point from the beginning. Amen