

The Much Needed Sabbath

July 28, 1991

Text: "...God rested from all his work which he had done in creation."
(Gen. 2:3b)

As a young boy there were many mysteries to be solved, yet nary a clue toward a solution. The Bat Man television series raised one such mystery with the demise of Cat Woman. Do you think, after twenty years, she is still falling down the bottomless pit? It is hard to say. Neighborhood boys and I used to wrangle with that question, among many others, while sitting around the back yard on a lazy summer day.

One of the big questions we dealt with was of a religious nature. Actually, as such questions go, one would lead to another and before long we would end our time together with more unanswered questions than we bargained for. One day somebody asked what God did on the day of rest after creation was completed. Somebody else said God slept. That would make sense being God worked twenty-four hours a day for six days making the whole world and the universe and everything in it. One kid who knew everything pointed out that God never slept. It said so in the Psalms. Did God go bowling? Maybe that's where thunder comes from. Maybe God played cards. It would have to have been solitaire. No matter how much detail the Bible gives about the workings of creation, it doesn't tell us much about how God spent time off.

As a matter of fact, the mystery of how to spend the time of Sabbath has enshrouded humankind. Robert Graves wrote in his poem "The Boy Out of Church,"

*"I do not love the Sabbath,
The soapsuds and the starch,
The troops of solemn people
Who to Salvation march."*

Jesus had to remind confused Pharisees that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. Over the centuries the pendulum has swung back and forth as to what is proper behavior on this day of rest. Some generations, such as the Puritans, allowed the Sabbath to become a day of tyranny much like the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Mark Twain once wrote a letter to William Dean Howells in which he said, "*George Washington Cable has taught me to abhor and detest the Sabbath-day and hunt up new and troublesome ways to dishonor it.*" Other generations, such as ours, have allowed the Sabbath to become just another day in the

working week. All in all, I would hope we could arrive to a point where we are smart enough to realize what a wonderful gift God has given to us.

I believe the Sabbath is a time for us to learn how to "be" again. I noted in my Lenten Devotions this past year a quote from counselor John Bradshaw who quite pointedly states that we have a lot of trouble defining ourselves as human beings, because we don't know how to merely exist without constantly doing. We are, to coin Bradshaw's phrase, *"Human doings instead of human beings"* and we are so good at it.

I recently talked to a friend of mine who went out to the national meeting in Seattle coupled with his vacation. From Seattle he and his family traveled down the west coast to Los Angeles where he conducted some interviews of National Association founders, saw his cousin, traveled across the desert southwest, saw every conceivable sight, made it to Wichita and drove straight from there back to Chicago. After arriving in Chicago at midnight a week ago Wednesday he embarked on a journey to the Amana Colonies in Iowa with their Jr. High youth group. When I saw him last Monday I asked him how was his vacation. Should we be surprised to hear his reply, *"It was exhausting."* Were there only six days created in the week Genesis 2:3 would have stated, *"..when God was finished with all the work of creation, God was exhausted."*

How can we utilize our vacation time or our weekly Sabbath time to learn how to just "be" again? Theophan the Recluse, a renowned Russian Orthodox spiritual guide once noted, *"...it is inner work which gives to all our external activities their purpose and their effectiveness."* By inner work Theophan meant guarding the mind and heart against all that would separate us from God. The Sabbath, in essence, becomes a day of preparation. Our vacations become a time to build up spiritually that which has been torn down. We need to prepare or reorient our hearts and minds toward right relationship with God and expel the distractions of this world which bombard us daily. Only with proper preparation can we be ready to begin a new week of "doing" again.

The difference, in my mind, of one who spends the Sabbath preparing as opposed to one frivolously wasting their time is what kind of "doing" or creating we engage ourselves in after we've taken our rest. Will our hearts and minds and spirits become God centered or self centered. The God centered spirit will teach us how to just plain "be." We will know how to be still, be quiet (when appropriate), be humble, be there for a friend, be spiritual, be ready, be present to God's will, and simply be whatever it is God wants for us to be.

Most of you know that I attend our two youth camps each summer at Camp Lucerne. It is a beautiful and quiet setting which induces one toward some serious self reorientation; hopefully to God. Every year we allow the kids some valuable alone time with which to think and ponder their life's experience and relationship with God. It is disturbing to watch the kids for the first day or two because they fidget and fuss and don't know how to spend time alone for any reason other than sleep. Much of their lives focus on "structured" time offered by adults. School, sports, plays, extra curricular activity, and free time in the mall neglect one basic need we all require which is to have a good quantity of time alone and discover our place in creation. A poster in my office quotes George Herbert who says, *"By all means use some time alone...and see what thy soul doth wear."* By the third day at camp our kids begin getting into their new found alone time and begin to have some wonderful experiences and insights. For many, over the years, this time becomes their most memorable camp experience.

The key to our success in establishing a positive Sabbath experience is to be as deliberate as God was on the first day of rest. We have to learn to be intentional with our time. If you have a calendar and keep a tight daily schedule with many demands upon your time, be deliberate about marking your Sabbath time. It can be an hour a day or one day a week, but it should be consistent. Rule one is never give the time away. If someone calls you for an appointment during your Sabbath time, tell them you already have something important scheduled and can they make it another time please. Rule number two is try to be as inaccessible as possible in order to make it a real alone time. I know this isn't easy for parents or active people, but we all can become more effective in our daily living if we learn how to "be" in God's presence.

One of the greatest messages we can learn from Christ is his example of taking a much needed rest from time to time. Young preachers and Christians like me often focus on the active, doing, and on the go, type Christianity exemplified very well in the Gospel story and Paul's work later on. Somehow we tend to skim over those precious moments in which we find Jesus or one of the Apostles getting away from the crowds and ministering to themselves through prayer and rest. Of course we need a balance and we need to remind one another when to work and when to play.

Last week I saw an old Andy Griffith show in which a well known preacher from New York came to town and preached a sermon about how shameful it is we're losing our ability to relax and find some peace in our lives. He recalled days of old when on a Sunday evening in a small town one could relax to the town band playing in the bandstand on a peaceful

summer night down near the village square. Well, the folks of Mayberry took the sermon a little too seriously (which I don't worry about happening here) and decided to try the band again. They got real busy and in one afternoon attempted to put the band together, hold a practice, repair old uniforms, and fix the old bandstand. In the end the whole project failed and they went home exhausted and discouraged, having lost sight of the meaning of the morning's sermon. (Something I'm sure would never happen at First Church.) The lesson learned in that particular T.V. show is don't make too much of the Sabbath.

I have nothing against recreation nor our freedom to enjoy ourselves, but we cannot let our recreation own us and steal us away from our Sabbath time. James Matthew Barrie wrote, *"Has it ever struck you that the trouts bite best on the Sabbath? God's critters tempting decent men."* If recreation helps us take some time alone, then good. A person sailing, hiking, canoeing, fishing, etc. can use that time toward spiritual renewal, unless the event itself begins to consume the person. My wife and I used to own a travel trailer which later began to own us. For three weeks use out of the year we made monthly payments, bought insurance, and maintained it around the clock. After a while, the car we towed it with began having trouble and we either had to buy a new and bigger automobile or go camping in our driveway or get rid of the trailer. We now go camping in a nice tent and enjoy the freedom very much. Our vacations belong to us again and not to our trailer.

The Sabbath, Jesus reminded the Pharisees, was made for us. We own it. It does not own us. Let us not make too much of it nor too little of it. Like everything else God has created for us, let us use the Sabbath toward the healing of our souls and the glorification of God. Amen.