



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 9, 2017

“Invitation to Rest”

(Deut. 5:15)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and commanded you to observe the Sabbath” (Deut. 5:15).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Gracious God, our heavenly Father, Your mercy attends us all our days. Be our strength and support amid the wearisome changes of this world, and at life's end grant us Your promised rest and the full joys of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

I know I've told this story at least once, but I think it bears repeating. My instructor in keeping the Sabbath was not on the faculty of Concordia Seminary. Rather, his name was Tom Smith, a surly and gruff old man who had worked as the janitor of Grace Lutheran Chapel. Tom's "Keeping the Sabbath" seminar took place one Friday morning shortly after I graduated from the seminary. Usually I try to take Fridays off because I work a good chunk on Saturdays and Sundays. But on this particular Friday, I was trying to catch up on what I hadn't accomplished earlier. Tom came in to vacuum, and his opening line was simple and blunt. "What the heck are you doing here?" That's the scrubbed up version. I stammered. "I'm working." "Is your sermon done?" "Yes." "Well then, let me tell you something" Tom said. "Nobody needs you today. If they do, they'll call you. Nobody wants to see you today. They're busy. They'll see you plenty on Sunday. So go home: cut your grass, wash your car, play with your kids, but get out of here."

The seminar was over. I did what he said, and have tried to abide by it ever since. Pastors too, for their own health and sanity need to give it a rest and pay attention to matters other than work.

"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work."

The command to rest and keep the Sabbath was given at Mt. Sinai. The children of Israel had just been rescued from slavery in Egypt, and are told to keep the Sabbath. "Remember" God tells them, that once you were slaves in

Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore keep the Sabbath. That is, don't voluntarily become brick making machines again. Don't become slaves again. So observing the Sabbath for this nation of liberated slaves was like a weekly Independence Day celebration. It was also unprecedented in the ancient world. For most of the ancient history, elites worked as little as possible, and peasants worked constantly, every day, all year round.

But the practice of Sabbath rest began to spread well beyond God's chosen people. By the first century, the Sabbath had caught on and was embraced by peoples across the Roman Empire. The Jewish historian Josephus, in the first century wrote, "There is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread."

But today, we seem to be going backwards on the Sabbath rest. We live in a culture that glorifies busyness. So when we say on Monday morning that we had a good weekend, often that means we got a lot done around the house.

William Powers tells the story of an immigrant to the United States who was just learning English. When asked "How are you?" from watching others, this immigrant would smile and say, "Busy! Very, very busy!" You see, he thought it was the expected response, the normal way of answering "How are you?"

And we are busy. It's not just your imagination. Sociologists studying our culture are finding that work hours and stress are up and sleep and family time are down for all classes of employed Americans. Wives working outside the home return to find a second shift of work waiting for them at home. Husbands add overtime or second jobs to their schedules. Single parents are stretched so thin and in so many directions that at times they simply cannot cope. Simultaneously, all are bombarded with messages that urge them to spend more (and so, ultimately, to work more), to keep their homes cleaner, and to improve themselves as

parents, athletes, investors. And there is guilt, guilt all over the place because people cannot do it all when they think we should.

Moreover, there's a spiritual component too. Many of you recall the day when our culture supported the idea of a Sabbath, when on Sunday stores, gas stations, restaurants were all closed. All of that is gone now, and it will likely never return. There is nothing out there in American culture that will remind us of who we are as God's people. In fact, there are efforts to sanitize our society from any references to God.

I'm thinking of that 6th grade kid we had in confirmation this year. Ron Wille was going over the basic tenets of the Christian faith when he mentioned that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead three days later. And this young man had never before heard the news. "What do you mean he rose from the dead?" he asked. He wasn't being sassy. It became clear he had just never heard it before! Somehow, through twelve years of life in Watertown, he had never before been confronted with the message of Easter. How secular we've become, even in Watertown!

Secularism is not the denial of God. It's the insistence that God stay in his assigned places and times. Which means, we shouldn't mention God at work, or in the public square, at school, in shops. "Your religion is fine so long as you keep it to yourselves." That's secularism. So we need the Sabbath, not just for the rest from work, but also for feeding the faith. No child in Watertown should ever remember the first time he heard the news that Jesus died and rose again from the dead.

We need the Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it. And I submit that you do have control over your own lives. You are not slaves. You can say no. You can take time to worship and relax, and you should, for your own health and sanity and for that of your family's.

Now if I know my people, some of you are thinking, "Well that's all very nice and quaint, pastor, but that's not

the real world. In the real world, you have a boss to whom you must answer. In the real world, if you're not willing to work when they ask you, you lose your work."

Let me give you my perspective on this. In the real world I know, nobody on their death bed says, "Pastor, I wish I would have spent more time in the office." Rather, there are very real regrets and very real guilt. In the real world I know, marriages fail miserably when one spouse doesn't do much of anything but work or think about work. In the real world, children grow up resenting dads who are never around. Families become fractured, and later, reunions are tense and forced, and older adults are alone because there's more than just geographical distance that separates them from their children. In the real world, children need quantity time, not just a little quality time. In the real world I know, the stress and pressure that builds up inside of you because of work must be relieved one way or another, and if it's not relieved by rest, it will come out in unhealthy ways—temper explosions, addictions, affairs, depression, child abuse, spousal abuse, heart disease. In the world I know, children and adults are becoming more and more biblically illiterate. Their faith is dying because it's rarely fed; the branch has separated from the vine.

It has to be disappointing to God. I picture him looking over the edges of heaven to see what we're up to on the Sabbath. He sees parking lots in front of the big box stores that are as full on Sundays as any other days, while the church parking lots that have a lot of empty spaces. He sees kids playing in the soccer leagues, and moms cheering them on. He sees dads going in to the office to get a jump on their week, or mowing the lawn at home. The Lord looks down all this feverish activity, and I can almost hear him say it, "Ach, himmel."

Seriously, the whole purpose of this tradition, this commandment, is not simply to add another rule to your life. The purpose was not to restrict activity for the sake of restriction. It is to nurture and restore and heal and save your life. That's what Jesus cared about – not religious legalism,

but your life and welfare. The same love that generated this command is the love that drove him to the cross. That death was for your welfare, your health, your forgiveness, your salvation. So also the Sabbath is for your welfare, your health, your forgiveness, your salvation. He measures you then, not by what you produce, but who you are – his baptized and forgiven children.

So this Sabbath rest is ultimately about grace. As you know, life has a way of gouging holes out of us. The grind of work. Interpersonal problems. Financial stress. Sickness. Grief. Loneliness. Life has a way of gouging holes out of us. On the Sabbath, with His Word and Sacraments, Christ goes into those holes and fills them with grace. It's a timeout from the daily contest. The boxing bell rings and you go to your corner where somebody dabs mercy on your beat up life.

So then, for your own health and happiness, receive this old gift of Sabbath. It's more relevant today than ever. You need to rest from work. And you need also his Word, which is able to make you wise unto salvation. You need forgiveness and refreshment. And the Lord has plenty of all that to give on the Sabbath.

“Come to me” Jesus once said, “All you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Sabbath rest. Thanks be to God. Amen.

