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The Rev. Emily Richards

Sabbath Keeping

If last weekend was the unofficial start to summer for our nation, then today is the unofficial start for our parish. Once the folk group plays its first chords, and the grills start smoking, and we gaze upon the lush green trees, our sanctuary for this service, we've entered into a new season. Feeling more relaxed, we're already thinking ahead to those days at the shore or at the pool or in the shade of the garden. Summer is the one time of the year when we give ourselves permission to slow down and unclutter our calendars from the busyness that consumes us. I read that in China the polite answer to "How are you?" is "I am very busy, thank you." Our American responses are not that different. "Crazy busy" is what I often hear. If you are very busy, then you must be OK. If your list only gets longer and your calendar is filled with work obligations, children's activities, family and church events every minute, every hour and every day of the week, then you must be fine. "Successful and effective people are busy people. Religious people are busy people. For most of us busyness is our way of life. It is something that we value highly as a culture and as a religious community. Doing more feels holy," writes Barbara Brown Taylor.

In the account from Genesis we hear that in six days God made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all the creatures that roam on the earth and swim in the sea, and then God refrained from working on the seventh day. God blessed the seventh day; and hallowed it. The first holy thing in all creation was not a people or a place, but a day. A day that had nothing to do with working or producing. But rest. Sabbath. The importance of this day is echoed throughout Hebrew Scriptures, most prominently in the Ten Commandments. Right up there with loving our God and loving one another, God's people are commanded to remember the Sabbath and to keep it. Ignoring those Google calendar alerts that tell us where we should be and what we should be doing, the practice of Sabbath-keeping reminds us that our goodness and worth are not dependent upon anything we do. Being made in the image of God we are invited to rest

just as our Creator rested. The great theologian Karl Barth wrote, "A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity."

In a week I will begin my sabbatical – a way we clergy are invited to practice Sabbath keeping- to rest and renew our minds and bodies, rekindling our call to serve. I have been asked a lot over the past couple of weeks if I'm excited and ready for my sabbatical. If you were to take a peek in my office noticing the brightly colored sticky notes peppered all over my desk with things left to do on each note, then you'd know the answer to that question. In seventeen years of ministry I've never had this amount of time for this kind of rest, this kind of freedom from my vocational responsibilities. And if I'm completely honest, it's a little scary. Who am I without the collar around my neck? Will you miss me? Do you really need me? How long will it take for me to drive Daniel and Maggie crazy because I have no daily to do list? My vocation as your priest gives my life great meaning and purpose. Who am I without it?

Recently I met with Bishop Gutierrez in preparation for my time away and I was telling him how I was struggling to let go. He responded to me with a challenge: "I want you to see your sabbatical not simply as an opportunity to let go, but to surrender. "I don't surrender," I said to him. "Your bishop is telling you to surrender," he said smiling back at me. Surrender to the fear and the worry. Surrender to your need to be busy caring for your people. Surrender to your need for rest. Surrender to God.

Sue Gordon sent me a meme this week describing ordained ministry from a fellow clergywoman. It goes like this: "Going to seminary is, I think, a lot like going to culinary school - you learn the basic foundations, some cool party tricks, and by the end you can prepare a gourmet meal. Pastoring, however, is waking up every day to a new episode of Chopped where the ingredients are completely random and you're expected to do something with whatever you're handed, while everyone watches and provides a running commentary, and occasionally something explodes." - The Reverend Sara Juist I love being in the chaotic, messy and deliciously fun kitchen with all of you. But I need to take off my apron, put down my cooking tools and get out of the heat for a little while. To step back. Take a break. And, yes, to surrender.

I realize that this time is a precious gift which most people are never given in their vocational lives. I am grateful to all of you; and your support as I practice Sabbath-keeping in a way I never have before. My hope and prayer for all of you while I'm away is that as you continue to do the work of the church faithfully, you also find moments to practice your own Sabbath-keeping. To open yourselves to the freedom that comes when you turn aside from all the busyness of your lives and find rest in God's glorious creation among God's beloved people, just as your Creator rested on the seventh day.

A contemporary Jewish Shabbat prayer entitled, "Welcoming Sabbath" is an invitation to us all as we enter in this new season:

Our noisy day has now descended with the sun beyond our sight.

In the silence of our praying place we close the door upon the hectic joys and fears, the accomplishments and anguish of the week we have left behind.

What was but moments ago the substance of our life has become a memory; what we did must now be woven into what we are.

On this day we shall not do, but be.

We are to walk the path of our humanity, no longer can we ride unseeing through a world we do not touch and only vaguely sense.

No longer can we tear the world apart to make our fire.

On this day heat and warmth and light must come from deep within ourselves. Amen.

Special acknowledgment of the Rev. Barbara Brown's Taylor's chapter entitled "The Practice of Saying No" in *An Altar in the World* which inspired this sermon.