

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 21, 2011
Sermon Series Part 1

RENEWABLE ENERGY: KEEPING SABBATH IN OUR TIME

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn” ~ Isaiah 51: 1

It could be considered an auspicious beginning. During my time off campus this past month, I was able to steal away for a few days to the Sierras near Lake Tahoe for some quiet and space to read and prepare for a conversation we'll have together over the next few Sundays by virtue of this sermon series on *Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life*.

Given the opportunity to use a dear friend's home in the mountains, I woke the first morning to wonderful light and crisp, clean pine air. In the kitchen I prepared the kettle for a cup of tea, filling it with water, placing it on the gas stovetop. I turned to my laptop briefly to check e-mail while the water heated, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed, suspiciously, flames and an odd smell. Did I mention that the kettle was an electric cordless one? No stovetop required. Stunned, I grabbed the kettle off the gas range, now the rubber base melting as I lifted it up, moving it toward the sink, rubber like string cheese behind me, stretched across the kitchen counter. Have you smelled burning rubber lately? Not good. I stood at the sink as it cooled down and said out loud to no one except myself: “I think that is the dumbest thing I've done in a really long time.” Needless to say, I spent a good deal of the morning cleaning up the mess, grateful yet that I had not burned down my friend's mountain home. I sent her an e-mail with the confession that I owed her a new electric kettle and would explain later. The reply that came: Did you put it on the stove? An auspicious beginning indeed I remembered thinking at the time. This is not a good way for this preacher to start her sermon series preparation.

Rather than a quiet peaceful morning sipping a cup of tea, I discovered how unsettled the whole ordeal made me, and it took me several hours to recover. I remember - considering the fact that I had begun reading the two suggested companion books for this morning: *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* and *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* - I remember asking, how did I do that? Am I that distracted, tired, scattered or restless to pay attention long enough to notice and focus on one simple task like making a cup of tea? Has multitasking become such a part of life - the norm - that I'm no longer able to concentrate on just one thing and see it through? Or do I just chalk it up to habit? It got me thinking.

But before we go much further, let me give some additional context for this sermon series. Some of you were here the last time I preached in early June, and I ask your indulgence for repeating an illustration from that particular sermon because I think it is foundational to our conversation over the next few weeks.

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It is from a favorite writer, teacher and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, whose contributions, along with others, have indeed influenced both the theme and companion readings for this sermon series. I heard Barbara preach and speak at a conference I attended in May in Minneapolis, where she challenged us to be cautious about separating the idea of the church, religion, the sacred and how we talk about “the world” as preachers and teachers. As she put it: “watch your language.” In other words, it is not religion or God or Church vs. the world. Maybe her words here will help.

Many years ago, a wise old priest invited me to come speak at his church in Alabama. “What do you want me to talk about?” I asked him. “Come tell us what is saving your life right now,” he answered. It was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on. All I had to do was figure out how I stayed as close to that reality as I could, and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners figure out those same things for themselves. What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.

So what in particular does the Sabbath – “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” as it reads in the 4th Commandment - have to do with saving our lives? After all, certainly here at Stanford, in the Silicon Valley of omnipresent technology, and in our time, we live in a culture where the ability to do many things at high speed is seen as not only adaptive and necessary, but also the mark of a successful human being.

Judith Shulevitz book (*The Sabbath World*) is not only thorough in her historical treatment of the Jewish and Christian Sabbath, but also refreshingly honest as she reminds us how difficult it is to observe and keep some notion of this rewarding day, this pause, in our complicated and modern world. So why remember the Sabbath, she asks, in the end? Because, says Shulevitz, the Sabbath comes to us out of the past – out of the bodies of our mothers and fathers, out of churches on our streets, out of our own dreams – to train us to pay attention to it. Consider the mystery, she says, surrounding God’s first Sabbath. Why did God stop anyway? Shulevitz writes that one 18th century Rabbi offered this explanation: “God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only when we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating in the first place. Or, as she suggests, if this is the thought to which our critical or pessimistic impulses lead us – why it wasn’t worth creating, why it isn’t up to snuff and should be created anew. We could let the world wind us up and set us to

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working, like dolls that go until they fall over because they have no way of stopping. That, she contends, would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.”

Interestingly, the word *remember* appears in the text from Isaiah that Richard read for us moments ago. Remember the rock from which you are hewn, the quarry from which you were dug it says. On this rock I will build declared Jesus in the gospel of Matthew today – do you remember who I am and what I have taught you? Remembering or rediscovering the past as these passages and the writings of Judith Shulevitz suggest can indeed provide energy, a renewable energy of sorts, for our present and future lives, transforming as the imagery in Isaiah illustrates, waste places and wilderness where the spirituality of Eden could mean that to live in the garden of God is to live in tune with the energy of a verdant landscape. It's to let go of the sweaty work of justifying ourselves and relax, buoyed by the unforced rhythms of the landscape, reveling in the freedom and ease of its gratuitous gift of abounding life – that is, opportunity for new growth. Is this partly what it means to keep Sabbath in our time? Have we stopped long enough to consider our own lives and the people in it? The earth under our feet? The communities in which we live? Those that need us to stop and notice their plight, to recognize them as human as well?

Nicholas Carr conveyed in *The Shallows* that correspondence he receives suggests that people, especially younger generations, seem to be looking for ways to loosen technology's grip on their lives and thoughts, detailing an e-mail from a college student who is unable to focus on anything in a deep or detailed manner. Though drawn back into the consuming nature of technology, (and I should clarify that I'm not technology adverse by any means) he knows that the happiest and most fulfilled times of his life had all involved a prolonged separation from the Internet.

In her book, *An Altar in the World* (which is on our companion reading list for next Sunday), Barbara Brown Taylor cites an article the NY Times magazine ran a few years ago called *Bring Back the Sabbath*, written, ironically, by Judith Shulevitz, our companion reading author. She opened the piece by citing the work of Sandor Ferenczi, a disciple of Freud's who worked in Budapest in the early 1990's. Ferenczi noticed how many people came to see him complaining about the sudden onset of headaches, stomachaches and attacks of depression they experienced every Sunday or in the case of his Jewish clients, every Saturday. After he had ruled out purely physical causes, he concluded that his patients were suffering from the Sabbath. Ferenczi called it “Sunday neurosis” attributing it to the loss of control people experienced on the Sabbath. When the shops shut down, so did the machinery of self-censorship he said. As the routines of the workweek gave way to family get togethers, worship and rest, Sunday neurotics feared their wider impulses might get away from them. With the eternal murmur of self reproach temporarily silenced within them, they worried they might run amok. So they produced bellyaches and the blues to protect them from the full freedom of the Sabbath.

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The late Henri Nouwen, writer and priest, says that the great mystery of fecundity – new growth – is that it becomes visible when we have given up our attempts to control life and take the risk to let life reveal its own inner movements. Whenever we trust and surrender ourselves to the God of love, fruits will grow. Why did God stop anyway?

I would agree with Sandor Ferenczi, Barbara Brown Taylor and others that any of us who have practiced some notion of Sabbath even for one afternoon – whatever day it happens to be – may also have suffered from Sabbath sickness. Your welcome rest begins to feel something like a bad cold. You get antsy. That was nice. Now I'm ready to get back to work. "Most people," Brown Taylor says – and that would include most of us here I think – "want to talk about why it is impossible for them to practice Sabbath, which is an interesting spiritual exercise in itself. Make two lists on one piece of paper she advises. On one side, list all of the things you know give you life that you never take time to do. On the other side, make a list of all the reasons why you think it is impossible for you to do those things. Keep the piece of paper where you can see it. Then she recommends not shushing your heart when it howls for the list it wants."

By now some of you may think I'm terribly unrealistic. Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how much work I've got to do? Or how stressful and scary it is to be out of work altogether? What world are you living in? Haven't stress, being busy, and overachievement become status symbols of sorts?

The point of my starting this series with a conversation about the Sabbath is that I think it needs revisiting, reimagining - desperately and creatively now more than ever. It is foundational. Nevertheless, I am not naïve, nor are you to recognize how painful, difficult, not to mention all consuming it is to live in this world, as we know it. The Web, smartphones, I-Pad and Apps are here to stay. The anxiety, not to mention anger, created by the news every day could make any of us depressed or work ten times harder to escape it.

But that is the point and the challenge – discovering the sacred does not just happen in a church or religious building, singing hymns, reciting prayers or engaging in ritual, which is precisely what the prophet Isaiah was getting at. It's in the landscape of our life, as we know it. To live in the garden of God is something very very different. Our worth has already been established even when we are not working or producing. Remember to stop is the point. This is very hard for us to accept – it is downright countercultural. So how about starting small if an entire day is too much? What do we suppose would happen if we turned off our computer, smartphone, or television for even a couple of hours? Or stayed home not because we were sick. Or rode our bike, or walked instead of drove the car. Took a hike or a nap. Stop yourself before you say "I'm so busy." It has become a standard greeting everywhere. More importantly, let's not only do this alone – if we're to

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see changes in the way we understand even ourselves, God and the world around us, we need a community of partners to help us and support us. What we discover as sacred in the process might even shock us. Some have suggested that our lack of rest and reflection is not just a personal affliction. It colors the way we build and sustain community, it dictates the way we respond to suffering, and it shapes the ways in which we seek peace and healing in the world. We have lost the rhythm between work and rest. “Sabbath is the great equalizer” says Brown Taylor, “the great reminder that we do not live on this earth but in it, and that everything we do under the warming tent of this planet’s atmosphere affects all who are woven into it’s web with us.”

Paddling a kayak one glorious afternoon on a little lake near the mountain house I almost burned down was instructive. At one point, I ceased paddling and, because the currents were such the kayak just stopped right there in the middle of the lake. I sat for some time and did nothing, resting on the calm water taking huge, deep breaths. It was then I felt very palpably how all of us are so susceptible to the status that the currents of productivity, ambition and achievement – not to mention survival, offer. In the eyes of the world, there is no payoff for sitting on a proverbial porch...or in a kayak in the middle of a lake. Keeping Sabbath in our time might seem like a really preposterous, unrealistic and outdated idea. To the contrary, I think it’s an urgent and relevant one. And, we could all use a little resilience and maybe this is one way to develop that. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember. And, as history will concur, it’s only against such powerful currents that countercultural movements take shape. We have to start somewhere.

Care to start one with me?