

Observing the Sabbath

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“But the seventh day is a Sabbath to *Yahweh*, your God. You shall not do any work— neither you, nor your son nor your daughter, nor workers, nor your ox nor your donkey, nor any of your livestock, your animals, nor even the foreigners in your towns, the foreigners who live among you. Thus your workers— both men and women— will rest as you do.” — Deuteronomy 5:14.

One of my Seminary professors, the Rev. Mr. Cliff Davis, grew up in Massachusetts in the 1940s and 50s. He got an Associates Degree from Paul Smith’s College here in upstate New York when a two year degree was all that school offered.

While there he met and married a local woman, then went off to the University of Colorado in Denver Where he picked up a degree in Business Management. At that point Cliff heard a call to ministry and went to Bangor Theological Seminary— thirty years before I wound up there— for that state accredited 90 credit Master of Divinity I talk about. Once ordained, he served churches in New Hampshire.

Having served those churches he decided his real calling within ministry was to be a seminary librarian. And so he returned to Bangor first in the role of acting librarian and then librarian when he acquired the academic credential necessary to fill that slot at the graduate level— a Master of Library Science from the University of Maine.

This should be obvious. Having become a seminary librarian there was one thing Cliff no longer did: serve a local church.

When people asked Cliff, as they sometimes did, why he no longer served a local church he had a stock response. With a twinkle in his eye he would say, “Why would I serve a local church? After all, it’s against my religion to work on Sundays.” (Slight pause.)

These are words from the *Torah* in the work commonly called Deuteronomy: “But the seventh day is a Sabbath to *Yahweh*, your God. You shall not do any work— neither you, nor your son nor your daughter, nor workers, nor your ox nor your donkey, nor any of your livestock, your animals, nor even the foreigners in your towns, the foreigners who live among you. Thus your workers— both men and women— will rest as you do.” (Slight pause.)

The first five books of the Bible are referred to as the *Torah*. In English that word is often rendered as the Law. That, at best, offers a poor understanding of what the word *Torah* means. *Torah* is better understood as Teachings.

Indeed, as was noted when the passage from Deuteronomy was introduced and contrary to populist belief, the words of the Decalogue are not commands with the same sense one might assign in English. There is, after all, no command tense in Hebrew.

It also needs to be said when the commandments are referenced in Scripture, especially in the New Testament, most of the time the Ten are *not* being addressed. Let me repeat that: in the New Testament when the commandments are referenced it is not the Ten being addressed. What is being addressed are the *mitzvah*. The teachings named most often refer to the *mitzvah*, the 613 *mitzvah*, the 613 teachings in Scripture.

Further, when examined with care, it should be evident the words we heard today are teachings— teachings about how relationships are acted out. These words are about relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self. Here's another way to put it: these words are about covenant— covenant with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self.

Let me put that another way. These specific words concern observing Sabbath. A Sabbath is about our relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self.

All right, let me put that yet another way again. These words are about being empowered to do the ministry to which God calls us because we honor our relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self. (Slight pause.)

That leaves three questions open: what is covenant about, really? What is ministry about, really? And how are these reflected in keeping Sabbath? (Slight pause.)

I can assure you of this: covenant is about growth. In order to be in covenant, in order to maintain covenant, growth— dare I say it— change is necessary.

In order to be in relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self, we need to grow, change. In order to do ministry we need to be in relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self... which means change.

I hope something is, therefore, evident. A hallmark of the ministry to which we are called, to which we are all called by God is full engagement in growth— *full engagement in growth*— growth in relationship with God, with one another, with the environment in which we live, with self.

So, how is covenant growth nurtured by Sabbath? These are the words Mark uses describe the position of Jesus concerning Sabbath (quote:) “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.”

Hence, I hope this is also evident. Growth needs to start with self. Therefore, each of us, we together, need to first take care of self in order to empower growth.

I want to suggest taking care of self is what Sabbath is really about— about people fully realizing themselves, who they have been, who they are, who they might become, how they might grow. This can be and is done by taking time— Sabbath is the label used here to address this kind of time— time taken to understand relationship with self and God.

Paradoxically and hence, Sabbath *is* work. It is work on self so one can nurture growth in self and thereby growth for and with others.

You see, once someone understands their relationship with God one becomes more aware of self— who they have been, who they are, who they might become, their place in their own environment. Then, at that point, they can begin to reach out to others, reach out in covenant love.

And that work of reaching out is, my friends, called ministry. The danger is, of course, that one will become satisfied with self or simply tied and give up, stop engaging in ministry, stop growing. Let me direct your attention back to that word— covenant— it means growth. (Slight pause.)

In a few moments we shall recognize the ministry of Cheryl Aranka Willard— Cheri— our Parish

Coordinator— Parish Coordinator— an interesting title that. The title makes the job sound so officious, official, makes the job sound like it's bound up in rules, makes the job sound like growth is not a possibility, sound like it could never be a ministry.

I want to be clear about what Cheri really does for this church. She does ministry. She is constantly engaged in growing and in helping others grow. You shall hear something about what she does in a bit when some folks offer testimony.

And this brings me to a key point. If covenant, if ministry is about growth— growth of the individual which nurtures growth of community, then by definition ministry happens because of who you are. Please note: ministry happens because of who you are, not because of what you do. What you do is only a result of who you are, a result of being engaged in covenant growth.

That, of course, has implications for who we, the community of faith together. I believe that we are a people— both individuals and a community— called by God to growth, to change. So what do you think? Are we called to growth and to change? There is no doubt about this: we are called to ministry. So do you think growth and change is a requirement of that? Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “The fixation of our society on the Ten Commandments borders on and probably is anti-Christian. Let me say that again: the fixation of our society on the Ten Commandments borders on and probably is anti-Christian. There really is no question about that. Interestingly, our society borders on and probably is in about the same place as society in Roman Palestine in New Testament times— engaged in Empire, immersed in fear. But when asked about the *mitzvah*, the so called commandments, Jesus said they no longer applied. Empire and fear no longer applied. Rather, that we need to love God and love neighbor, said Jesus. And on these hang all the teachings, the prophets. And what are these teachings about? These are about growth and relationships.”

BENEDICTION: Hear now this blessing: the work and the will of God is placed before us. Further, we are called to be faithful and seek to do God's will and work. In so doing, may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.