

Many of us in this room can remember a time when Sunday was sacred. It was different than the other days of the week. Organizations generally didn't schedule events on Sunday. There were no soccer games or piano recitals or road races. Back in those days, many families had Sunday rituals. Many would attend worship in the morning, but beyond that, it might be a day to go to Grammy's and Grandpa's house for a big spaghetti dinner.

I grew up Methodist and I know many Methodists and other religious folk took Sunday sabbath observance seriously. There may be some in this room who were taught that you don't play cards on Sunday, or that you couldn't go to the movies, or you weren't allowed to shop on Sunday.

I once invited a Rabbi to come to a church I was serving to talk about the Jewish perspective on Sabbath. He described a whole range of activities that some Jewish folk observe and others don't. Some won't drive a car on the Sabbath. Some don't bake or cook.

When I was in Jerusalem, years ago, I had lunch at a restaurant on the Sabbath. The fanciest thing they served was tuna sandwiches, because they could make them the day before. There's a prohibition against turning on or off anything that uses electricity: televisions, air conditioners, alarm clocks. That means you can't open the refrigerator door if the little light inside is going to come on.

Today, if you were to go to any clergy gathering, which I don't recommend, they don't tend to be particularly exciting events, you will inevitably hear much weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth around the fact that Sunday is no longer sacred. It is no longer a day “set apart” from the other days.

This is why I can relate to the leader of the synagogue in today's scripture reading. One day, while teaching in one of the synagogues, Jesus got into some big trouble. In this case, it wasn't what he did that got him into trouble. It was when he did it. He laid hands on a woman, curing her of a crippling condition, on the Sabbath.

When Jesus healed the woman, the leader of the synagogue became indignant. That was one of the activities prohibited on the Sabbath. Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as a good,

observant Jewish person. The question is why would he heal on the Sabbath? Why would a faithful Jewish rabbi engage in work when there was such a clear prohibition against it?

I think the answer has to do with what Jesus said to the woman. Remember, she had a spirit that crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over, and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Did you catch that? She wasn't just healed. She was "set free." She was held captive by her ailment and then released from its grasp. I believe the purpose of sabbath is to set us free.

According to the Genesis story, God created the world, and everything in it, in six days. On the seventh day, God rested. Then, because God finished the work and rested, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Thus a day of rest was literally built into creation. The intention is freedom from toil. The sabbath is for ceasing to profit from creation and to simply delight in it.

Fast-forward to the Old Testament book of Exodus. Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments. One of those commandments states: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. That word "holy" means set apart. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

When God commanded the people to take one day out of seven and make it a day of rest, it was to free them from the compulsion to gain and get ahead. I'm guessing God saw that, left to their own devices, human beings would work, work, work. They would overwork themselves, their slaves, their animals, and the land, constantly trying to extract more from them.

So, God commanded one day of rest. It was a day to be liberated from a heavily scheduled existence. It was meant to be a day to simply take a delight in creation, not to reap profits from it. Animals need rest. The earth needs time to replenish itself, so God built in time for renewal and restoration.

The Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote a beloved book on the subject of Sabbath. He wrote, "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, ringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the

soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.”

I think Heschel speaks to this idea of being set free. The world places it's demands on us. We all have our responsibilities and obligations. We even have our own compulsions that hold us captive. But the world doesn't own us. Sabbath observance is a reminder that our souls belong to God.

Personally, I'm a believer that the observance of Sabbath can be liberating and healing for us as individuals, but also for what ails us as a society. I once heard this quip: Have you ever seen a mechanic working on a moving car? Think about it. In order for a car a car to be repaired and restored, it needs to stop and be still for a period. The same is true with us. The same is true with society.

So, how can we possibly embrace the observance of Sabbath in our modern world? I actually don't know the answer to that question. I think it's something that we all have to work out for ourselves. Our lives are so complex these days. People work odd schedules. If I had kids who played sports, I'd have a hard time requiring them to miss a game on Sunday morning.

I may have mentioned this before, I consider jogging to be a spiritual activity. I try to jog in places where I have some solitude. At some point, I forget about my to do list and the problems I'm trying to solve in my mind, and I start to have conversation with God. It becomes prayer time. That's why, for me, I consider jogging a Sabbath activity.

When I was in Jerusalem, I went for a morning jog on the Sabbath. I remember being thrilled at how little traffic and activity there was on the streets. Jerusalem doesn't close down entirely on the Sabbath, but it's noticeable. At one point, I jogged by this young boy sitting on a wall next to the sidewalk. He started shouting at me. I didn't understand a word he was saying, because he was shouting in Hebrew.

I'm a little slow to catch on sometimes, so it was after the run, as I reflected on being berated by that young man, I realized he was probably taught that you don't exercise on the Sabbath. So, I'm a believer that one person's observance of Sabbath does not need to be the same as another person's observance. But if you want to experience the benefits of Sabbath and take it more seriously than you presently do, here's just a couple of suggestions.

Even if you can't take an entire day and rest and not schedule anything, consider making dinner on Sunday evening your Sabbath meal. Whether you are a single person or part of a large family, it doesn't matter. Make it nonnegotiable that everyone in the family will be present for dinner on Sunday evening.

Create a ritual. When everyone in the household is present, light a candle. Check in with each other. Find out what's going on with each person. Say a prayer and then share your meal. I think that could be an easy way to carve out some Sabbath observance: a candle, a check-in, a prayer, and then dinner.

Another thing I've found helpful is to actually make an appointment for some sort of Sabbath observance: a walk on the beach, a nap, time to read, or sharing coffee with a friend. When I say make an appointment, I mean literally write it into your appointment book or put it on your digital calendar.

Treat it like you would treat an appointment with your doctor, only this is an appointment with God. When you look at your appointment book and see an appointment with your doctor, you never say, "I don't feel like going. I'm going to skip it." No, you make it a priority. You plan your other activities around it. That's the way it should be with an appointment with God.

I have a friend who goes on to her social media and announces that she's checking out for Sabbath. She announces, "You're not going to see any posts from me. You will not see any responses from me." I think that's her way of giving herself permission to set down her devices for a time.

Why was the woman set free on the Sabbath, a woman who had been held captive by her ailment for 18 years? Because Sabbath is all about freedom. God desires your liberation and mine. And when it comes to setting free those who are held captive, there's no bad time.