

May 9, 2010 – Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Acts 16:9-15, Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5, John 5:1-9)

There are some Sundays where I feel like the lectionary crashes over us like a mighty wave. There's so much to take in and we just need a moment to stop and catch our breath. This morning we've heard a lesson about Paul's mission to Macedonia from the book of Acts. We've journeyed through Psalm 67 with its focus on all the peoples and nations of the earth praising God. We've heard more in our Easter cycle of the book of Revelation with its description of a New Jerusalem and the light of God. And we've just heard a lesson from the Gospel according to John about Jesus healing a sick man on the Sabbath. It's a lot to take in. We could spend a whole hour just processing these readings.

But we can't linger that long, can we? We have places to go and things to do. It is Sunday after all. An ideal day to catch up on things left undone during the rest of the week. Yards need to be mowed, groceries bought, homework done. Maybe there's time for a nap after lunch before we head out to a Mother's Day celebration or a birthday party or wherever we have to go. In the midst of so many Sunday activities some of us look back with a sense of nostalgia at a time when it seemed like Sunday was more commonly considered a day of rest, a Sabbath day. Whatever happened to the Sabbath day?

Two of our scripture lessons this morning mention Sabbath. And both of them, I think, invite that question. Whatever happened to the Sabbath? And in the Gospel, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. The man he heals has been sick for 38 years. Now, this man hangs out along with many other lame, blind and paralyzed folk in one of the side porches of the temple in Jerusalem where there's this pool of healing water. On the Sabbath day, Jesus arrives at the temple and encounters this scene. All of these sick people are trying to get into the healing pool when it's miraculously bubbling up so they can be healed. But they're pushing and they're shoving and you get this sense that it's only the quick sick – it's only the sick who have someone to help them who can get to the water. On the Sabbath day no one offers to help the man who's been sick for 38 years. On the Sabbath day, no one's offering him any rest. What kind of Sabbath day is that? And if we read further in the passage when Jesus does heal the man and he picks up his mat, he gets in trouble with the religious authorities for doing a little work on the Sabbath. What kind of Sabbath day is it when someone is healed and no one celebrates? When a person is punished for receiving God's grace?

In the lesson from Acts, Paul and his companions have traveled to Macedonia to the city of Philippi. Paul's seen a vision of a man begging for help. And they go there to Philippi to spread the good news about Jesus. And on the Sabbath day, the narrator of the story says, "We went outside the gate by the river where we supposed there was a place of prayer. And we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there." Now, at first glance this might seem nice. Oh, yeah, a Sabbath by the river doing some praying outside the city gates. Maybe get out of town for a little bit. But what's really implied here is that there was no temple, no house church in Philippi. We supposed there was a place of prayer, the narrator says. They don't even really know if there is a place of prayer. The women who are gathered are gathered outside the city gates in seclusion, perhaps even in hiding. On the Sabbath day there's no place for the faithful to call home. On the Sabbath day there are women but no men gathered for worship and prayer.

And so Paul and his companions might have said to themselves, “What happened to the Sabbath?”

Keep asking that question of ourselves. What happened to the Sabbath? We should remember that Christians have never really had a very clear practice when it comes to following the fourth commandment, remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Some have considered strict Sabbath practices a form of superstitious idolatry. Saint Augustine of Hippo, one of our great and most influential theologians, thought Christians should remember the Sabbath by keeping in mind the final and complete rest promised at the end of time much as we heard described in Revelation this morning. Weekly practices of ceasing work were not as critical for Augustine. And for better or for worse, if Augustine said it, a lot of us believe it.

Additionally, there’s been some confusion about the difference between the Sabbath day and the Lord’s day. According to Jewish custom, the Sabbath runs from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and eventually many Christians in the early church, they would gather after sundown on Saturday and celebrate the Eucharist or early Sunday on the Lord’s day. So there was a difference between the two. But eventually the two got stuck together, combining Sunday worship with Sunday Sabbath. And this was a little confusing because for a lot of us, worship is not altogether a restful affair. It can seem like a lot of work to wake up early, get kids dressed and fed, prepare the worship space, teach a class, carry a cross, provide refreshments for coffee hour, preach a sermon.

So whatever happened to the Sabbath day of rest? Well, it’s just hard to say. Some of us remember a time when the wider culture seemed to encourage Sunday as a day of rest. Many of us remember the so-called Blue Laws that were in place keeping businesses from opening on Sunday. When I was growing up the Blue Laws were sort of fading from practice. You knew it was the Sabbath because you couldn’t buy beer before noon. Now even those gestures are pretty much gone. Sunday might be a day to stop working, but only if there’s nothing else going on, which for most of us is rare.

My own personal view is that we do not honor our commitment to God and ourselves when we refuse to set aside time to stop working, whether it’s on Sunday or some other day. Augustine may have made weekly Sabbath days optional, but I doubt he intended that to be an excuse for work to dominate our lives. Especially work that has nothing to do with keeping in mind the rest promised at the end of days. We need time to set aside, to stop ourselves, to remind ourselves that God is waiting to give us more than any amount of work can ever provide.

But the Gospels don’t record Jesus saying much about the Sabbath. But they do show Jesus transforming the Sabbath. Today’s lesson, the last verse in the passage reads, “Now that day was a Sabbath.” And the Gospel writer is setting up the next scene where the Jewish religion police go after the man who is healed for doing a little bit of work and picking up his mat. But I also hear this verse “Now that day was a Sabbath” as a summary of what has just happened in the healing miracle. When someone who is ill for 38 years receives health and wholeness again, now that day was a Sabbath. That day was a day of real rest and recovery. That day was a day of restoration and re-creation. We use that word recreation a lot as what we tend to do on the Sabbath. You ever think about it as re-creation? So much of what we call recreation is actually

quite draining and does not allow God to re-create us. But on the day when that ill man finally took up his mat and walked, that day was a re-creation Sabbath.

In the Acts lesson, when Lydia the cloth merchant has her heart opened by the Lord and has her whole household baptized and invites the believers to come and worship at her house, now that day was a Sabbath. What will it take for us to be able to say, “Now that day was a Sabbath.” All of us need to find times in our own lives to stop and rest, to pray and return to God for re-creation and restoration and inspiration. And whether it’s a whole day or just part of a day, it’s really important for our mental and physical and especially spiritual health that we make the time and that we make it holy.

Today’s scriptures also imply that the Sabbath is about more than just our personal rest. When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, he shows that the real Sabbath is one in which our rest extends to others, when our re-creation includes the sick and the vulnerable. We all need Sabbath time, real rest. We need it for ourselves. But I believe that we can also dedicate some of our Sabbath practice to the recovery of others. When we did our part to free those held captive by poverty, now that day was a Sabbath. When we did our part to invite someone to pray with us, now that day was a Sabbath. When we greeted the homeless with food and shelter, now that day was a Sabbath. When we gave the environment a rest by using less energy, now that day was a Sabbath. When we cried out against those who had de-humanized and hate immigrants, now that day was a Sabbath. When we lended a listening ear to a wounded veteran returning from the horrors of war, now that day was a Sabbath. When we laid down our anxious fears about money and trusted in God’s ability to provide, now that day was a Sabbath.

We may pick up those fears again. We may not always be able to help where we’re needed. We may have to work more than we would like. In some ways, the best Sabbath is the one that leaves you hungry for the next one. But we can make it our faithful practice, with God’s help, to set aside some time for resting in God and sharing that rest with the rest of the world. With God’s help and with encouragement from one another we can say, now that day was a Sabbath.