“Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” (Ex. 20).

Today we will talk about why it is important to go to church, to keep sabbath. But before we get to this I want to share a story about one person’s answer to the question, “What are your reasons for loving life?” Jacques Lusseyran (1924-1971) made this the subject of his biography in a book translated from French called: And There Was Light.

In short, light was what he loved most. He writes about his childhood experience of light, “I saw it everywhere I went and watched it by the hour… on the balcony there was light. Impetuous as I was, I used to lean patiently on the railing and watch the light flowing over the surface of the houses in front of me and through the tunnel of the street to [the] right and left.”

“This light was not like the flow of water, but something more fleeting and numberless, for its source was everywhere. I liked seeing that the light came from nowhere in particular… Radiance multiplied, reflected itself from one window to the next, from a fragment of wall to [a] cloud above. It entered into me, became part of me… This fascination did not stop when night fell. When I came in from outdoors in the evening, when supper was over, I found the fascination again in the dark. Darkness, for me, was still light, but in a new form and a new rhythm. It was light at a slower pace. In other words, nothing in the world, not even what I saw inside myself with closed eyelids, was outside this great miracle of light.”

Then at the age of eight an accident at school made him totally blind for the rest of his life. Almost immediately however, he realized that there was a source of light that was not the sun. It came from within and he was flooded by it. He realized that this light made it possible for him to feel the presence of others. He writes about smelling and tasting colors, and understanding the shape and tone of a wall without touching it. The people he encountered projected a unique color arising out of their personalities.

Lusseyran learned German and became a leader in the French resistance during the occupation of Paris in World War Two. Ultimately the Gestapo sent him away to Buchenwald where he was repeatedly tortured. In the concentration camp Lusseyran
saw men broken and killed, and others who became possessed by evil. Only 30 of the 2000 other French prisoners in his group survived. He writes that in order to make through torture there are three things to remember.

"The first of these is that joy does not come from outside[,] for whatever happens to us it is within. The second truth is that light does not come to us from without. Light is in us, even if we have no eyes." The third truth is the importance of friendship. Being close to others makes it possible for us to survive, to stay human.

The way that Lusseyran describes “light” feels very similar to my daily encounters with God. When I am not distracted by worries and ambitions I sense God’s presence in all things and especially in the people I meet. This doesn’t mean that God is somehow at my disposal as a kind of cosmic servant. But God is present in the world as the source of all things. The shortest answer to why I keep the sabbath, is that I need to listen, to set aside time for seeking God, for understanding how the Lord is directing me.

The theologian Karl Barth writes that God does not speak as one who is a stranger to us. He describes God as a kind of watcher on the threshold (of our awareness, of our life). He also calls God the frontier toward which we move as we get older. This moving toward God is sabbath work.

Keeping the sabbath holy is one of the Ten Commandments. It functions to set aside one seventh of our life for the purpose of seeking and experiencing the presence of God. In the process of creation God rests on the seventh day. We need to do this also. Practically speaking we observe sabbath by participating in church. The sabbath reminds me that my life is limited. It is like a tiny island in the vast ocean of time. Sabbath helps me to see things from the heights, to perceive the bigger picture of what this all means and what I am meant to do. Let’s briefly talk about three ways the sabbath functions. They can be summarized with three verbs: renounce, grow, commune.

1. Renounce. The sabbath sets a limit and gives us the chance to obey God. It is important that our work or other activities do not own us, that our achievements and failures do not define us. We are children of God who forget the most crucial truth about who we are. Sabbath gives us a pause, a rest, an interruption to reflect on God. It gives us a chance to consciously participate in the salvation that comes from God.

I usually don’t work out on the sabbath. I spend the afternoon with family, friends or reading. The point is not to be inactive but to do something different than the other days. We pause our work not for our own sake but for God. It is time set aside for celebration, joy and freedom. The word eucharist means thanksgiving. Sabbath is the
day for thanksgiving. No matter how deep we are in Lent, every Sunday is a feast of our Lord, an occasion to celebrate.

The theologian Karl Barth writes that this commandment explains all the other ones. The sabbath interrupts our immense fascination and preoccupation with our own self and redirects our attention to what God does for us. You may have noticed that in our liturgy we do not as often refer to God as Lord as we once did. This is done so that we do not mistake God as male, but what is lost is the sense that our relationship to God is as servants. God does not exist to fulfill our fantasies. We exist for God. We are on this earth for the sake of loving each other and creation according to God’s command.

In San Francisco when you go to church you might be missing out on brunch with all of your friends. You might say to yourself, “everyone takes a break from church during college.” We all know that it is inconvenient when you are on vacation to find a church, to get there and miss what everyone else is doing that day. And frankly sometimes we just don’t feel like church. Perhaps the clergy and congregation might include people who irritate us, or the music doesn’t touch us. During COVID it might be easy to say that we are taking a break from church until we can all gather in person.

But sabbath reminds us, or to put it more strongly, it forbids us from simply having faith in our own plans, aspirations, achievements and desires. It reminds us that we cannot save ourselves. And the sabbath gives us the opportunity to serve God, and in this way to know ourselves only through faith. Make no mistake, it is hard to renounce our ego. But when we do, we begin to hear at the heart of creation the “Yes” that God speaks to us. The future does not lie within our power, but in the Holy One who says “Yes” to your life. In this sense it is a way of practicing living and dying.

2. The second reason for the sabbath is to find direction, to grow spiritually. It is to receive our true self. When the sabbath is working it sets the pattern for what the following week will be. I tell our musicians Ben and Chris that often their music is just below my consciousness well into the week, surfacing at moments when I need to hear it again. Thomas Sheehan writes, “Beyond all our seeking for things that can be found we find ourselves directed to a ‘more’... We remain fundamentally an act of questioning to which there is no answer.”

Liturgy is the form of worship. Nathan Mitchell writes, “At liturgy, we do not invent or assert our own identity; we receive it. That is why Christian worship begins only after all participants agree to act as impersonators, traveling to a “strange land” under assumed identities, on another’s passport: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit.” The liturgy’s first words do not announce who we are, but inscribe us to Another.”

The reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) was fond of calling God’s word the sanctuary above all sanctuaries. He says, “what time a man handles, preaches, hears, reads or meditates on God’s Word, he and [that] work are thereby sanctified.” In worship on a conscious and a deeply unconscious level we seek and find direction for our life. I think this is what T. S. Eliot has in mind when he writes about, “Music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music...”

I do not quote the priest George Herbert because changes in the English language make us a beat behind when we read his poetry. But I do want to remind you of his poem on prayer. He says, “Prayer the church’s banquet, angel’s age, / God’s breath in man returning to his birth, / The soul in paraphrase, / heart in pilgrimage, / The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth...”

3. The final reason for the sabbath is to form the community that follows the way of Jesus. We say that we “go to church,” but really this is not right. We, or more accurately, through us, God forms the church when we come together. In our individualistic world we might miss that this is a unique communal experience. This is the reason that it is so important to really participate by volunteering to help (as an usher for instance). It is crucial that we fully participate by saying the responses, and especially by singing (even if we think we are terrible at it).

During the week you will meet and support the people you choose (or have) to help. But the sabbath invites an entirely different kind of experience of others. We didn’t invite the people who come to church, but somehow God brings us together. So we celebrate Sundays by making closer contact with this kind of other person. We open ourselves to new experiences. We listen and speak in a different way that is informed not by what is in it for us, but wondering how we might be of service to others.

This is why church is not an “escape.” What we are talking about is so much more than a personal spiritual quest. It is another example of why faith is a challenge and not a crutch to make us feel better.

There is a source of light that is not the sun. Renounce, Grow, Commune. Let every sabbath day of your life move you more completely into God’s light and love.

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This paragraph is a paraphrase from Fanny Howe, *The Winter Sun: Notes on a Vocation* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009) 90-1.


5 “When God speaks to man in His command, He does not speak to one who is completely strange to Him. Even the transgression of man cannot alter the fact that God is his Creator and has always been his Preserver, Companion and Ruler. Nor can man hear the command of God as though it were a completely alien command.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4 The Doctrine of Creation* tr. A.T. MacKay, T.H.L. Parker, H. Knight, H.A. Kennedy, J. Marks (NY: T&T Clark, 1961) 566, 570ff, 589ff.

6 This week the members of my Bible Study reminded me that on several occasions religious authorities argue that Jesus is violating the sabbath or that because he heals people on the sabbath he is somehow in opposition to God. When they accuse his disciples of not keeping the sabbath, Jesus replies, “The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath” (Mk. 2). This history may be part of the reason for a tendency to not value the sabbath in the way we should. The sabbath is made to enrich our spiritual life and it will not have this effect unless we observe it. We cannot expect to make progress in our spiritual life if we do not set aside time to participate in worship.

7 Everything in this sermon is inspired by Karl Barth’s treatment of the sabbath. In Paul Tillich’s three volume *Systematic Theology*, the sabbath does not appear at all in the index and the Ten Commandments are mentioned only once. Barth is passionate about how sabbath helps human beings to thrive. Ibid., 50ff.


12 George Herbert, Prayer (I):

“Prayer the church’s banquet, angel’s age,
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth
Engine against th’ Almighty, sinner’s tow’r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,
The land of spices; something understood.”

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44371/prayer-i