



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

The Peace We Need Is Given

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Exodus 20.8-11 and John 14.25-27

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I recently celebrated my 68th birthday. As I got to see my grandchildren on that occasion, it occurred to me that one of the many things grandparents and grandchildren share is their delight in birthdays, albeit for different reasons – grandchildren because they are growing up and love cake, ice cream and presents; grandparents because we made it for another year, and love cake and ice cream. My five year old grandson asked me a while back, “Papa, do all grownups turn back into children when they get old, like you.” I have rarely been more complimented. And yet as much as I enjoy being childlike, and even childish, with my grandchildren, there is a sobering side to getting older. Each birthday becomes an occasion to look back over one’s ever lengthening life. And this year I found myself thinking about other times in my life when the world felt as anxious and fearful as it does now.

I remember well the Cuban missile crisis and how I could sense fear in my parents, something parents are usually able to conceal from their children. I remember the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war when divisions in our country were severe and sometimes violent. I remember the Watergate crisis and understood the anxiety over whether our governmental institutions would not only endure but be able to respond soundly.

But I'm not sure I ever recall a time quite as fraught with anxiety as our current context. Worry over global climate change eats at me as I worry about the world my children and grandchildren will live in. Political division has always been part of our national character, with roots that go back to the time even before we were a nation, but it has been wildly intensified and made more sinister by the Internet. The profound concerns Neil Postman expressed in his prescient 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* – still worth reading – have grown exponentially. And all this means that the functionality and resiliency of our institutions – governmental, especially – are in question, if not doubt.

Observing the manic pace of life in our time, folks from Pope Francis – who warns of the dangers of what he calls 'rapidification' - to Thomas L. Friedman who, in his worthwhile book *Thank You for Being Late*, makes clear that while it may be fun to go from zero to sixty in five seconds once in a while, we humans are not made to live with hyper-pace or constant acceleration or deceleration. The unrelenting stress is just too great. Indeed, a recent *New York Times* article made clear that stress induced changes to our brains contribute significantly to the opioid and obesity epidemics.

How are we as Christians to respond to all this rapidification and acceleration, stress and anxiety? There are options available that are decidedly not suitable for Christians. Constant diversion with entertainment is one. Nor is the other extreme, joining those who just cannot look away, who have become addicted to the "the sky is falling" style media, who thereby absolutize its importance as if God is dead or unconcerned and as if all history is irrelevant. A friend said recently that part of our calling just now is to refuse to engage in what she termed

‘the radioactive reactivity’ of our times, where every new episode of outrage, scandal, rumor, and sensationalism is deemed to demand our response. The incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ tell us – and call us – otherwise.

This question of how to respond to the overwhelming anxiety of our times is a topic of debate among contemporary ministers and theologians. One answer that is getting a good deal of attention in this discussion is called “the Benedict option.” St. Benedict lived in the 6th century of the Common Era and is the author of the rule by which most monasteries and convents govern themselves. In seventy-three chapters, Benedict covered everything from how long guests should stay and be treated to who cooks and cleans to when and how prayers will be offered. The wisdom of his rule has been tried in monastic communities all over the world for centuries and been found to be a solid guide to being a Christian community in a wide variety of contexts.

Today, there are those from the more conservative wing of Christianity who are advocating that the church exercise the Benedict option, that it withdraw from the culture that is seen as hopelessly compromised by moral relativism, consumerism, unbridled market forces, deceitful politics, steadily increasing class divisions based on skewed income distribution, and institutional failure. It is argued that the best way to be Christian is to separate ourselves from a failing social order and corrupt politics in order to try to live a life pleasing to God. Up until the emergence of Jerry Falwell and his kin, this option was the preferred choice of fundamentalists seeking to preserve their holiness and purity. And

perhaps pursuing such a path would indeed relieve some of the stress and anxiety besetting us.

It's certainly a path that's been tried before. As early as the 4th century in Egypt, Christian ascetics were separating themselves from a world viewed as hopelessly corrupt and materialistic in order to save their own souls. They went out into the desert to live in solitary hermitages, and these desert mothers and fathers left behind profound writings on the spiritual life. But in our kind of Christianity, we find two problems with this approach. First, we believe that one has to be called to be a monk or nun, and not many of us are. And second, we take seriously John 3.16 – “God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son” – and therefore believe ourselves called to love the world and work with God towards its coming to resemble the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke at such length.

So, if retreating from the world, either individually or as a community of faith, are not options, what are we to do? How are we, as Christians, to live faithfully in these anxious, accelerating times?

Let me suggest that we turn to one of the more good humored theologians of our day. I refer to writer Anne Lamott. If you've not read her books, I encourage you to do so. Several may be found in our fine church library. Anne Lamott is a wise and witty – and Presbyterian - guide, and God knows we all need such. In a commencement address she once gave, Ms. Lamott said “Rest and laughter are the most spiritual and subversive acts of all. Laugh, rest, and slow down.” Rest as a spiritual discipline. What a concept! With their emphasis on the Sabbath, Jews have been trying to persuade the rest of us of that truth for just about

forever. Sabbath is the great equalizer because none of us can rest better than another. Rest doesn't just get us ready to work again. Rest doesn't just remind us that relationship with God and family and neighbor matter most. Rest doesn't just give us time for good food and drink, music and art, as crucial as these are. No, beneath all these, the gift Sabbath rest bestows is the reminder we most need, the knowledge that it doesn't all depend on us. We live and love and work by grace. And if we forget that, our spirits wither and our anxiety increases without end. Sabbath rest takes us into the truth of Ps. 34 where it says:

I sought the Lord and the Lord answered me,
And delivered me from all my anxieties.

Once upon a time a nice, Presbyterian, teenager of the male persuasion had a crush on a nice, Jewish, teen-aged girl. It was the first time either of them had been in love, and it was quite wonderful. The girl's family didn't mind that she was dating a Gentile; and the boy's family, well, you know how much teenage boys talk to their parents about dating. The only problem was that the girl's family was an observant Jewish family, which meant they kept the Sabbath. And that meant, as the girl carefully explained, there could be no going out on Friday nights. "No football games, no dances, no movies on Friday nights?" asked the boy who knew very little of Judaism, with some measure of incredulity.

"That's right," she said with the smile he found so irresistible.

"Does that mean I can't see you on Friday nights?" asked the boy.

“Oh, no” she said. “But it does mean that if you wish to see me, you must come to my house to celebrate the Sabbath.”

“Okay” he said, his desire to see her overcoming his ignorance. She went on to explain that he must take a shower before he came over (“I would have done that anyway!” he protested), and that he must wear nice clothes, like he would wear to his church. “Come over just a bit before sundown, and be ready to eat.”

And so, come a September Friday evening, the boy went to the girl’s house about seven o’clock. There he was greeted warmly by not only the girl, but by her mother and father, and her siblings. All were well dressed, and her mother had on an exquisitely beautiful lace shawl, draped over her head and shoulders. The house smelled wonderful, and the table was set with good china and silver, but all was rather dark, no lights on. “Come, come to the table, my boy” said the girl’s father. Everyone stood behind chairs at the lovely table in silence for some moments, and the setting sun could be seen through the west windows of the house.

And then, the girl’s mother started speaking in Hebrew, almost singing, but more like chanting. And as she sang, she lit the candles on the table. A sacred ambience descended onto that room and each person in it. When the mother had finished welcoming the holy day, everyone sat down to a wonderful dinner. The father poured each person, even the children, a glass of wine. It was the first wine the boy had ever tasted. The meal was delicious, especially the bread. The girl explained how no cooking was allowed once the Sabbath began at sundown,

and how her mother had cooked everything that afternoon. This family also used no electricity on the Sabbath. The father said with a wink that even the power plants needed rest once a week. The boy immediately grasped that there would be no television or recorded music after supper, and wondered how they would spend the evening. During dinner, each person, took a turn telling how their week had been, good days and bad days, and everyone listened carefully.

Having been properly brought up, the boy offered to help with the dishes, but the women of the house had that responsibility. So, he sat in the living room with the father who smoked a pipe, and asked the boy for help on the crossword puzzle he was working while also talking to him about school and what he liked to read. When the women returned, more candles were lit, and the family sang several songs while the mother played the piano. The boy was surprised at how lively the songs were, especially when it was explained to him that they were religious songs. He'd never heard music like that at his staid Presbyterian church!

After the music, a number of board games were brought out, and the boy was asked to pick one. He chose "Scrabble" which delighted everyone. The game was leisurely with lots of help was given to the younger ones. Then, the girl's father announced that it was time for the younger ones to go to bed, and that he and his wife were also going to retire, but that the boy was welcome to stay, but not too late, please. Years later, the boy learned the Sabbath was the most sacred time for a couple to make love. The boy found himself sitting on a couch with the girl. They talked for a long time. And that night, they kissed for the first time. The boy decided he liked this idea of the Sabbath very, very much.

Well, as you have no doubt guessed, I was that boy. And that was my introduction to Judaism in general, and Sabbath in particular. I spent several Friday nights with that family, and loved every one of them. How strange, I often thought back then, that I had learned so little about the Sabbath in my own religious tradition. In my church, it was more about what you didn't do than what you did – shopping was frowned on when I was young, for example, and I still get uneasy if I go to a store on Sunday. There was some keeping of the sabbath, but no celebrating of the Sabbath as I experienced with the Jews. And how strange I often think today that in a country where a vocal segment of the population wants the Ten Commandments posted in every classroom and every courtroom, Americans as a people pretty much ignore the commandment about the Sabbath. It is a very great loss that so many of us just skip this commandment.

It is a great loss because keeping the Sabbath is one of the very best antidotes for our anxiety. The commandment is clear that on the Sabbath we are to do no work. We are to rest from our labor, from being productive, from getting and spending, from trying to have more. In short, we are to refrain from what the world teaches us are our most important functions – to produce and to consume. The world does not wish us to think of ourselves as children of the Creator God which is what we most essentially are. Taking Sabbath time is intended by God to remind us of who we are and whose we are. Our first and foremost identity is as the children of God – not as republicans nor democrats, not as conservatives nor progressives, not as Russians or Mexicans or Laotians or Ghanaians or Americans. First, foremost, always, before all else, we are the beloved children

of God and disciples of Jesus the Christ. The Sabbath allows us time to bask in that identity so that it may sustain us all the other days of the week.

To the world, the Sabbath seems wholly a waste of time. In truth, to the Jews and to us, it is holy time spent with God. As Dorothy Bass puts it in *Practicing Our Faith*,

Americans need rest, and we need to be reminded that we do not cause the grain to grow and that our greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things. Moreover, the planet needs rest from human plucking and burning and buying and selling.

So, let me suggest we actually start keeping the Sabbath. You heard me. Let me suggest we all start keeping, observing, celebrating the Sabbath. Take a day, a 24 hour period, it may be Sunday, it may be some other 24 hour period of the week. And let me suggest that our Sabbath be a day, first of all, without media – no radio, no television, no cellphone, no Internet, no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram. This, I believe, is perhaps the most crucial foundation we can lay in our particular time and place. And during your Sabbath, enjoy time for worship and study, for cooking a good meal and eating well and leisurely with family and friends; take time for a nap, for a walk in nature, for being fully present to your children and grandchildren, for playing board or card games. Again, no cellphone, no radio, no television, no Internet. And watch what happens. I promise you, over time, you will be changed. You will be quieted. You will be

freed. You will be renewed. You will start getting reacquainted with your truest self, the one born in God. You will find yourself aware of the presence of God.

Ann Lamott says we also need laughter. I don't know that I've ever seen in all my years a more cynical time. Not only our politics, but our humor reflects it. Snide, sarcastic, full of put downs and one ups. There are sneers and jeers, but not much real, outright laughter. Anne Lamott is right. What we need is laughter, the kind that erupts among good friends who can see each other in the fullness of human folly, so certain are they of not only being accepted, but cherished. Deep laughter, like deep Sabbath rest, frees us from ego and attachment. Yes, the need for justice is acute, and we who care must labor long. But let there be real laughter - side aching, tear spilling, belly shaking laughter, especially on the Sabbath - that we might be made sane and whole for our work. Find what and who makes you laugh, and get yourself there. When my two best friends and I get together once a month, we disagree and argue about a lot of topics, but mostly we laugh hard and often at ourselves. And that's the best part.

I am pretty sure there's no laughter in hell. And I'm pretty sure those who don't laugh - especially at themselves - are in hell already. I think Jesus laughed a lot as he hung out with the disciples and his friends. After all, it's a pretty good one liner when he says, "how you gonna take a speck out of your friend's eye when you got a log in your own?"

Well, here I am almost done with the sermon, and perhaps some of you are thinking, "Good grief, he hasn't even mentioned the gospel lesson yet!", you know, where Jesus says,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Jesus speaks two important truths here. First, he makes it clear that we're not going to get peace – the freedom from fear and anxiety – from the world. The great Pilgrim writer John Bunyan put it this way,

If we have not quiet in our minds, outward comfort will do no more for us than a golden slipper on a gouty foot.

But more importantly, Jesus says he is giving us the gift of peace, the very gift we so desperately want and need in these anxious times. That's the promise and assurance. But most of the time, we're simply too busy to receive it. Maybe too serious, too. Jesus comes to the door of our lives bearing the gift of peace, and knocks, and we don't even look up from our phones. If we hear him at all, we yell, "Just leave it on the porch." But Jesus doesn't work that way. Jesus wants to come in and eat and laugh with us. The restful, laughter-touched Sabbath will make sure we're home to receive the gift of Christ's peace.

If we want to be able to say "my heart is not troubled, neither is it afraid," if we want to have our anxiety calmed, if we want to be restored for the demanding work of caring for God's creation, for broken people and for repairing our cherished institutions, the Sabbath is the discipline we most need. Perhaps you will think me foolish, but I actually and truly and deeply believe that to be true.

Because Sabbath, as John O'Donohue puts it, is “the place where all that is unlived in you may blossom into a future graced with love.” May we all live into that beautiful, life-giving truth.

Let those who have ears, here. Amen +