

June 2, 2024 Confirmation Sunday

Pastor Laurie Lynn Newman

Mark 2:23-3:6 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15

St. Andrew Lutheran

When have you have a deep sense of love and connection? Who were you with, and what were you doing?

I was eleven years old, living in rural East Tennessee, surrounded by the deep green shade of trees of the Cherokee National Forest. It was a warm summer day. I was resting in the soft grass on my back, looking at the clouds slowly passing by in giant puffs of white. My arms were stretched out, and Nero, our sweet puppy (mostly black Lab) lay beside me, with his chin on my arm and sighed. I experienced the powerful feeling that we belonged together, with the earth, with God. In the vast beauty, I was both so small and so grand. This experience comes to my mind when I think of what it means to “honor the Sabbath.”

When we pause, in the “Sabbath” sense, we get the wider perspective on things, namely, that we belong to God, who loves us, no matter what. And we are part of the whole, and holy. Writer Anne Lamott nailed it: “Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes. . . including you.” In sabbath, we unplug for a bit.

Sometimes, without even being aware of it, we carry the burden of feeling like we must achieve things. Then, and only then, will we be lovable. There is a cultural pressure to prove ourselves. Now, I’m all for each of us being the best we can be. My hope for myself, is that I will always be a life long learner. There are many things I want to improve: be a better mom, better mate, a better pastor, a better dancer! I want to continue to improve in ways that I can. But there is a big difference between achievement spurred by our own curiosity and gifts, and living as though we are lovable, based on what we manage to achieve.

Baptism, and Confirmation, are reminders of God’s grace. When we confirm baptism, we remember that we belong, not just to our parents, but --we belong to God, and to one another. God’s love and grace is with us from the beginning. We don’t earn it. We simply get to receive it, and to grow into it , more and more, day by day.

So, today, Henry and Nathanael, we celebrate with you, as you state your faith, and choose to affirm your baptism in Christ. You turn toward that Spirit of Love that was with you from the beginning, is with you now, and will continue on, as you live your lives forward. You are part of the whole, and holy.

In our complex world, it’s important that we make choices that nourish our understanding of being part of the whole, and loved by God. The scriptures today remind us that sabbath rest is a gift for us to unplug for a few minutes, to remember who we are, and that we belong to God.

This need for sabbath is baked into our humanity. We have the commandment from Deuteronomy; and the example by Jesus’ healing, on the sabbath. Today, we still need the sabbath gift—all the more so, because of the fast pace, high expectations of our culture. We experience impediments to rest, including our technologies. For all of the good it does, social media, and the internet sometimes overwhelms us. At one level, we can connect rapidly, and

broadly, but sometimes, paradoxically, it makes us feel lonelier, and the world, more broken.

Observing a pause in our lives, a Sabbath, is not just self-care: good mental and emotional maintenance. It is necessary to recall our very reason for being alive: that we are made in the image of God, to love and be loved. Without the regular discipline of pausing to simply “be,” we all too quickly fall into patterns that separate and isolate. We act as though we can and should have control of everything. We fear that if we lose control, or if we mess up, we won’t be loved. We live as functional atheists, without trust in God. We live without connection to others, and to the world, and to our deepest selves.

Another hazard of the fast pace and information glut -- is feeling anxiety. Anxiety arises from thinking about the future or the past and not being in the present moment. A good sabbath discipline is reserving one day a month as a free day, with nothing scheduled. Note that word, *discipline* (from the same root as *disciple*). Going deep in any spiritual practice requires limits. “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” The law, the limits, and boundaries are necessary for our safety and growth.

The ancient practice of Sabbath came to us through law in the Hebrew scripture. Sometimes, the law has been enforced with rigidity. Remember the movie “Footloose”—about the little town with no dancing and extreme judgment, and the judgmental, controlling minister? Some of us actually grew up in with legalistic attitudes about the things you can do, or not, on Sabbath day. Though sometimes communities enforce Sabbath as a repressive, legalistic burden, that misses the point. Hasidic Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi said this:

“There is a disease rampant—a chronic, low-grade depression that never knows how to smack its lips and say, “It’s good to be alive!” . . . All the nostalgia we experience is a yearning for the Sabbath—to come home to the good Mother—one’s being—a homecoming with the body to the body: to eating, resting, singing, loving—resting in the bosom of Abraham . . . The Sabbath is long and full when one knows how to be beyond doing.” Honoring Sabbath is not a painful duty that we need to squeeze into our busy lives—it’s good news and a joyful invitation to love.

We belong. The reason I began this sermon with the story of Sabbath with my dog is that in Sabbath-time, we are reminded that we belong to God and so does the rest of creation. In a moment, I’ll close with a poem by Wendell Berry. Following the poem, let us pause, in quiet, together. Don’t worry about the next hymn. Susan is going to play the introduction and give us plenty of time to find our pages. I invite you to close our eyes, breathe deeply, and to remember the Sabbath day and God’s love.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s
lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the
great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still
water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”
--Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Thing*