

The Covenant Pulpit



Exodus 20:8-11

February 3, 2008

Dr. Robert A. Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464
www.covenantnaples.com

Tattoo is a “hang-around-the-house-and-sleep-a-lot” kind of dog. But that stubby-legged, chubby little basset hound took off like a sleek greyhound. According to a Tacoma, Washington newspaper, when Tattoo’s owner went out for an evening’s drive, she thought her basset hound was in the car. Unfortunately, Tattoo was on the *outside*...with the end of the leash stuck in the car door. A motorcycle cop saw that little dog frantically trying to keep up, running an amazingly twenty-five miles an hour in short bursts. But mostly Tattoo was dragged, bouncing and rolling down the street.

Finally the officer pulled the car over. The basset hound was scraped up and stressed out. But, miraculously, Tattoo the wonder dog had survived his trip into the Twilight Zone.

Do you ever feel like Tattoo? Contemporary life grabs us all by the leash and pulls us along faster than we can run. The motorcycle cop said, “The little pooch was picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could, but he just couldn’t keep up.” Neither can most of us. Our calendars are stuffed. Meals are eaten on the run. Too many evenings are spent away from home. Weekends are busier than weekdays. In the age of the BlackBerry, laptops, and instant messaging, we have a thousand devices to save time. But time saved is filled up with even more things. We have trouble getting to sleep and trouble waking up. Many of us feel fatigued. Most of us feel stressed. And all of us feel stretched.

A television ad for Southwest Airlines asks the question: “Do you want to get away?” I think we all want to get away. Certainly Jesus’ disciples did. They had been ministering at breakneck speed from dawn to dusk, trying to satisfy the insatiable needs of the crowds that were pressing in on Jesus. These guys were so busy preaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons that they didn’t even have time to grab a bite to eat. So Jesus said to his harried and hassled disciples in Mark 6:33, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and I will give you rest.” Two thousand years later Jesus is still calling us to come away with him to a quiet place and find rest for our weary souls. He, who called himself *the Lord of the Sabbath*, wants to give us a Sabbath rest. Here’s a great promise from the Bible:

Give God the *first* day and He will give you the *whole* week.

God has given us a Sabbath day as a precious gift. Most of us have never really opened this gift and made full use of it. It’s found in Exodus 20:8-10: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On

it you shall not do any work..." Most folks we see this as a severe commandment rather than a liberating blessing. In every age, Pharisees have turned the Sabbath into rules and regulations that cut the heart out of this day. In my first pastorate an old woman complained about her father, a dour Presbyterian from Scotland. He thought that the Sabbath was made holy by long hours of ponderous worship and sober reflection. Anything fun was forbidden. Her childhood Sundays were joyless. She asked her father if she could go for a walk one Sunday afternoon. He gruffly replied in thick Scottish brogue, "Ya may go for ah walk if ya dinna' enjoy it."

Let's take a fresh look at the Sabbath. The Hebrew word *Shabbāt* comes from the verb *shavot*. It means *to cease*. Verse nine says, "Six days you shall labor and do *all* your work..." but on the seventh day you are to cease what you've been doing the other six. *Shavot* doesn't mean "slow down" but rather "completely stop what you've been doing." Verse eight says, "Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy..." The Hebrew word for holy is *qadosh* which literally means to set something apart for a special purpose. The *Shabbāt* is to be diametrically different than any other day. If the other six days are for work, then this is for rest.

Jesus captured the meaning of *Shabbāt* in Mark 6:33, "Come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place and I will give you rest." Jesus promises four things to harried and hassled disciples: 1) "*Come away...*" **This is a getaway.** 2) "*Come away with me by yourselves...*" **This is alone time with God.** 3) "*Come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place...*" **This is a retreat from all the distractions of a noisy world.** 4) "*Come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place and I will give you rest.*" **Only God can give us rest.**

Jesus disciples were trying to meet all the needs of the people who were pressing in on them. This world will take all you have, and still demand more. No matter how much you wear yourself out helping others, it will never be enough. Sometimes we just have to break away from a demanding world, and go away with Jesus to a quiet place because he is the only one who will give us rest. In Isaiah 58:14, God makes a promise to all those who will Sabbath with him: "...I will cause you to ride the heights of the land." Our Father is saying what Jesus said to his disciples, "If you will come away with me to a quiet place, I will put wings on your weary souls and you will soar like an eagle." May I share with you some Sabbath truths with you?

1. The heart of the Sabbath is a passion that holds nothing back. The Ten Commandments are really all about love, not duty. Look at the key phrase in Exodus 20:10, "...but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your

God." What does God want more than anything else? He wants our love. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength." In Exodus 22:29 he says, "...hold nothing back..."

Why does he want such passion from us? Because that's the way he loves us. Look at Exodus 20:2. Before God gives his Ten Commandments, he says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Before they ever kept a single commandment, he loved them. He loved them when they were still idol-worshipping slaves down in Egypt.

Do you remember that night when he liberated them? He sent the angel of death to strike down the first born sons of Egypt. But each Jewish family killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorposts of their huts. And the death angel passed over the huts of those Jewish slaves. In the doorpost blood of that first Passover night was a graphic picture of the Lamb of God who would later shed his blood to save us from eternal death. If Egyptians lamented the deaths of their first born sons, how much more did God grieve when his Only Begotten Son was crucified on a Roman cross!

After that Passover, God saw them through the Red Sea, miraculously fed them in the desert, gave them water from rocks, and defeated armies that came against them. God did all of that even while they were complaining that he hadn't done enough. He did all of that before they came to Mt. Sinai. Grace preceded the Law. We don't keep his commandments to get his love. We keep his commandments in response to his love. We love him because he first loved us. Passion responds to passion with passion.

Here's the Sabbath deal: it's all about lovers spending a getaway day in intimate fellowship. So many wives long for their husbands to give them quality time. So many children ache for their dads and moms to spend face time with them. So many empty nesters wait for that phone call or visit from their children and grandchildren. Before you climbed out of bed this morning, God was counting down the minutes in anticipation. He could hardly wait for you to come into his presence with your worship. It breaks his heart when you sneak a peek at your watch, counting the minutes until you can get onto other things. The Sabbath is first and foremost about a day of intimacy with the one who loves you more than you will ever imagine.

2. The Sabbath is a gift of God's passion for us. Isaiah 58:13&14 says, "...if you will call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's day honorable...then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast..." God is saying, "If you will bless me

on the Sabbath day, then I will pour out my blessings on you the rest of the week. Jesus said in Mark 2:27, "God made the Sabbath for man..." Here are some of those benefits for us:

Rest and recharging. Remember, the fourth commandment is really two in one: "Six days you shall labor..." and "On the seventh you shall rest." If you were to chart this commandment it would go something like this: **six days of labor...one day of rest...six days of labor.** The *Shabbāt* is framed by a work week on either side. It provides *recovery* from the labor of last week and *recharging* for the labor of next week. If success comes from the productivity of our work, then the productivity of our work comes from the effectiveness of our rest. This rest is God's gift to us.

Christians have long debated how to keep the Sabbath. I believe that there are at least two driving principles: 1) the word *Shabbāt* at least means to cease. We should cease doing what we do the other six days. God wants us to take a break. If you are a student, take a break from studying on Sunday. If you own a business, pull back for a day of rest. Whatever you labor at during the week, at, put it aside for a day. 2) Verse eleven says "God made it holy." God set it apart for something special. Make it a day given to the very best things in life: knowing God and making him known to others.

When I was in Seminary I decided to test this Sabbath concept. I was working part-time and carrying a full load: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and a bevy of theological courses that were grindingly-difficult. I had no time to spare. But I decided to test God's promises. I committed to doing absolutely no homework on the Lord's Day, even if I had a big test or paper due on Monday. God honored my commitment. Though I entered Seminary on academic probation I graduated with honors. My seminary experience proved a principle I had learned as a boy chopping wood for the fireplace. If you stop often to sharpen your ax you can chop for more wood in a day. The Sabbath is God's way of sharpening our edge. How about you? Are you taking full advantage of this Sabbath gift?

Relaxing in the Lord. Verse ten says that this is a "...Sabbath to the Lord your God..." It could be translated, a Sabbath *in* the Lord. It is all about resting in God. It's about trusting in him enough to relax in the fact that he will take care of all our needs. Sometimes we think, "If I don't keep on working (even on Sunday), I'll get too far behind in my work."

But imagine this Old Testament scene: A Jewish farmer has been laboring all year to produce a crop. It's harvest time. But it's also the Sabbath day.

As he gathers his scrolls and heads out of his house to go to the synagogue, he sees a great storm brewing on the distant horizon. His Canaanite neighbor is already out in the field, frantically trying to get in his crop before the storm arrives. This is a faith crisis moment. Will he rush out to his fields or keep his Sabbath date with God? Will he believe that God will take care of him if he honors this day? Will he trust God to hold off the storm, or move it around his field, or even feed his family if the storm takes his crops? Sabbath is all about resting in the Lord. Hebrews 4:3 we read, "In Christ we enter a Sabbath rest." To rest in God is the hardest thing we will ever do. This day is a gift to stretch our faith and help us learn how to relax in him.

A date day with the lover of our soul. Again, Exodus 20:10 says that it is "...a Sabbath *to* the Lord *your* God." The Sabbath is all about relationship. Every study shows that intimacy is enhanced by quality time spent together. Marriages fall apart because husbands and wives don't spend enough time together. Families suffer because dads and moms don't spend enough face time with their children. Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but more often it makes the heart wander. According to a University of Stanford study, the average American dad spent less than 15 minutes a day talking with his children. The Barna Research group says that the average evangelical Christian spends less than three minutes a day talking to God. Sometimes life gets so hectic that we forget God. When Oliver Cromwell led the armies of the British Parliament into a decisive battle against King Charles I, he was heard to pray, "Lord, in the heat of the battle I may forget you, but I beg that you not forget me." It's because we tend to take those we love for granted, that we need to get away with them on a regular basis to spark the passion again. What is true with our wives, our children, and our friends is surely true when it comes to the lover of our soul: God himself.

A chance to give a little extra to others. Focus for a moment on verse ten again: "On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates." God tells us that he wants us to use the Sabbath as a time to show compassion toward others. He tells us that we shouldn't make others work for us on this day. This was revolutionary in Moses' day. Slaves were made to work seven days a week. They were literally worked to death. But God cares about those who are downtrodden and oppressed. He even tells his people to let the barnyard animals take a rest. God even cares for the beasts of the earth. God even cares about "aliens within our gates." We should care deeply about those who have no legal rights as citizens. Our Lord is a God of compassion. He gave the Sabbath day as a way that we can show compassion toward our neighbors.

I believe that this is why Jesus got so incensed when the religious bigots of his day objected to his healing sick people on the Sabbath, or got offended if a hungry person picked some grain out of a field on the Lord's Day. They missed the compassionate heart of God when they begrudged "works of mercy" being done on the Sabbath. I remember a lady of the old South who told me about the Sunday's of her childhood. She told how they prepared for the Lord's Day the day before, taking their baths, laying out their clothes, and fixing the meals they would eat on Sunday. They wanted nothing to interfere with their focus on the Lord's Day. Early in the morning they would head off to church. After church their home would be filled widows, singles, church visitors whom they had invited to their home after church to share a meal and fellowship. They would laugh together, and often discuss what they had learned in Sunday School or from the sermon. After a short nap, the family would visit those in the hospital or the rest homes. Sometimes they would take a plate of food down to the town jail to feed some prisoner. In the evening they would invite some neighbor to church for a rousing song service and some fiery evangelistic preaching. Wouldn't it be great if we not only used this day for worship and fellowship, but also for ministering to those who are in need? You might ask, "Wouldn't all those works of mercy wear me out?" Quite the opposite! I think they would energize you and your family.

Are you beginning to get a vision for the Sabbath day? It really is a gift from God with endless possibilities. I don't want to get legalistic and tell you how to spend the day. But it does call for some serious pondering. Exodus 2:8 says, "Remember the Sabbath day..." Think about it. Meditate on it. Ask God how you can make this the day that pleases him most, and blesses others best. Remember, that promise in Isaiah 58: 13&14, "If you will call the Sabbath a delight...and if you will honor it by not going your own way...then you will find your joy in the Lord and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land." You can't out give God. If you don't hold back in giving him the first day of your week, he won't hold back in giving you so much more in the week to come.

The Sunday before last I was in a house church in India. Actually, the church met on a rooftop. The congregation was only a year old, led by a guy from the lowest cast in India. He rides his bicycle from place to place starting new churches. His salary is about two dollars a day. This little church is located in a neighborhood of Hindu fanatics who have pushed these folks around and threatened them repeatedly. Yet some 85 people crowded on that rooftop at nine o'clock in the morning. All of them were recent Hindu and Muslim converts. They were quite brave to invite us to

their service, because the Hindus are very suspicious of anyone who looks like a missionary. And we had “missionary” written all over us. You can’t imagine the angry glares we got from neighbors looking out their windows at us. I wonder what price our hosts will pay for their hospitality.

These Indian Christians, who could hardly rub two rupees together, had rented a crude tent to shade us from the sun. A rickety old table, covered with a patchwork of old napkins, held an worn communion set full of dirty glasses filled with grape juice mixed with tap water. I wondered how we would drink from a communion cup without getting sick. The service lasted for four hours. The joy on that rooftop was indescribable. They sang for more than an hour. Then there were testimonies from people whose lives had been radically changed. Finally I was asked to preach. “Take as long as you want,” said the pastor. I spoke for more than 45 minutes. When I finished the pastor looked at me and said, “Is that all? We are used to at least an hour or more.” After that we spent almost an hour celebrating communion (complete with a second sermon and more singing). I *did* drink from that dirty cup, trusting that the prayers setting it apart would purify the water. Then came the offering. I gave all the rupees I had, as did the three other Americans with me. It was probably the biggest offering they had ever received by many times over.

It was then that the most amazing thing happened. A Hindu lady came up onto the rooftop. She was weeping profusely. Between sobs she told the congregation about her two daughters who had AIDS. They were about to be thrown out of the clinic because she had no money to pay the bill. She then fell to her knees, her palms opened, beseeching the Christians for help. Immediately, the congregation gathered around her. The pastor reached into the offering bag, pulling out a big wad of rupees and put them in her hand. We offered to help, but he said, “No, we’ll take care of her.” He had just given away everything to this woman (probably including his salary for the week). Soon others in this congregation of poor people were fishing around for rupees to help this Hindu woman. Later I asked him, “What motivates you and your people to do this?” He replied with a smile, “We were once like her. But God loved us, and we are captivated by that love. And so we must love, love one another, and love our Hindu and Muslim neighbors.” What a Sabbath day! What a communion service! I long to see in my life, and in our church, what I saw in that rooftop in India.