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From the Pulpit

Sermon: “Give It a Rest!”

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ February 20, 2011

Genesis 1:31-2:3

Mark 2:23-28

My sister sent me a video clip yesterday. She recently took an early retirement and has become one of those people that often forwards me things from the Internet – you have one or 2 of these people in your life too, right? Every once in a while I'll take a moment to open her attachments and look at them; as I did with this video clip yesterday afternoon. I have to admit, it was... unusual.

The clip is from an acrobatic act presented in a circus or a Cirque du Soleil kind of setting. 2 young women – sisters – come out and begin to go through a synchronized set of acrobatic moves: impressive but nothing astounding for professional gymnasts. They are maybe 17 years old, slight of body but of normal height. After a few very limber backbends and walk-overs they focus their attention on a 2' x 2' x 2' Plexiglas cube – no taller than their knees. It's made of transparent plastic with air holes drilled in all the sides. One of them moves next to the box and does this elegant back bend that brings her hands and head down and back to where they are touching her heels. She's still a good foot or more taller than the box but then, somehow, she compresses her body and further folds herself together until her chin is resting on the floor *between* her feet! Next she gets her self *further* compressed until she is just a little smaller than this 2 foot cube and *then* slowly, like a crab walking sideways, she slips inside the box – amazing enough in itself.

But *then* from somewhere inside the box her hand reaches out and with a beckoning finger she invites her sister to join her; who then walks over to the box and, with similar but complementary contortions – *impossibly* – also fits *herself* into this 2 foot cube of Plexiglas *with her sister* until there is not an inch of space left inside the box! And they pull the door shut and sit there for a moment all folded and compressed *together* – 2 of them inside of 8 cubic feet – before just as smoothly extracting themselves and standing for a bow.

As I watched the video I saw in the circus act a visual metaphor of what our lives can sometimes become: compressed and contorted and jammed into a tiny box with no room for movement. And then, as if that weren't enough, *other people*– children, spouses, friends, classmates, bosses, coworkers... they *also* cram themselves into the box of our lives until there is absolutely no room left. And we live these bent over, doubled up lives crammed and jammed into a space far too small for people who are created in the image of the Almighty God.

No room left. For too many of us, when we look at our schedules and our lives – when we look at the busyness that burdens us and the demands that box us in and at the number of things we try to stuff into our lives... well, there's little room left for anything else. Do you ever feel like that? Does it ever seem like the margins are gone and the spaces have disappeared? Do you ever feel like the room and time and opportunity for some open places has just been all squeezed out of our lives which have been jam-packed with too many things to do and places to go and e-mails to read and demands to meet?

Even our vacations – and I have to confess I'm especially guilty of this one – even our "times away" can get so jam-packed full that we need a vacation from our vacations! I remember as a kid riding in the car with my family on summer trips from Maryland back to my parents' homes in Nebraska and Minnesota. Sometimes we traveled the back roads passing through small towns that were full of parks and scenic turn offs with any number of things to see and slow down for -- places where you could rest and get out and stretch your legs and enjoy the beauty of the countryside.

But for "*convenience*" sake – for the sake of speed and expediency we would also take the turnpikes across the open lands of the Midwest. And those were just roads of uninterrupted cornfields punctuated by sporadically located rest stops that charged you too much for food and offered too little in refreshment. On the Turnpike you can't just pull off anywhere you like: there were designated and controlled exits that kept you driving so fast on such boring roads that they used to warn drivers (do you remember this on commercials, those of you from the East Coast?) they used to warn drivers about "Turnpike trance". I'm just saying that I think life has become more of a high-speed Turnpike with no exits than a lovely road with scenic and restful byways.

Our text from Genesis today offers an exit ramp from the frantic flurry of our lives. That exit ramp is called Sabbath. It's not a word we use very often. For some it may make us think of one of our Jewish friends walking to synagogue, or of the now-antiquated Blue Laws that used to keep most businesses closed on Sunday. Some of you grew up in your homes with Sabbath rules that prohibited you from watching television, playing cards, or even just running around with your friends.

Neither of those ideas -- neither ritual nor rules -- captures what I want to say about Sabbath today nor are they at the essence of what the scriptures teach us about Sabbath. Sabbath is the rest that begins when work ends. More than a set of rules to keep, more than an impediment to fun, Sabbath is God's escape route from the 8 cubic feet we sometimes find our lives crammed in to. Sabbath is God's answer to our need for room in our lives.

In the first six days God creates the world and all that lives within it. But our text today says that on the *seventh* day, God rested. And let's just be clear: God didn't rest because God was tired. The Sabbath rest of the seventh day tells us not so much about God as about the rhythm of life as God created it. As those created in the image of God, God models for us what the rhythm of our life, week by week ought to look like. It should be an ebb and flow of rigor then rest, push then pause, work then worship. God rested to say that life is not a matter of forever striving after perfection, forever working to get ahead, forever frantically running after some elusive goal that keeps leaping ahead of us every time we reach the old one. The rest of God on the seventh day invites us to believe that life is not always about getting and grabbing and going in circles-- sometimes it's just gift.

Of course there are other views about why God rested on the seventh day. In a book of children's reflections on the Bible an 8-year-old named Mike thinks God required rest on the seventh day because "he wanted to have one big day set aside for sports." 10-year-old Peggy says

God required rest on the seventh day because "he needed a mental-health day." I wonder if Peggy's parents live in Silicon Valley? Sabbath means that God speaks to all the frantic flurry of our lives and says, "Give it a rest!"

One day in seven we are told by God to set aside a time when life in all its usual rush and routine is interrupted so that we can remember who— *and whose*—we are. Trying to live without Sabbath rest is like trying to drive a car without changing its oil—sooner or later life is going to seize up and burn out. I'd like to suggest that there are three R's to Sabbath keeping: renew, relinquish, and reorder.

Keeping Sabbath in our lives means that we make time to do those things that bring renewal to our lives -- exercise, nurturing our relationships, creating quiet places where our souls can grow larger, being creative, slowing down and saying no. What is that renews you? Listening to music, going for a walk, being with the ones you love? Sabbath is not so much an exercise in inactivity as it is intentionally involving ourselves in the things that will reconnect and renew us as children of God.

But some of the old traditions had wisdom behind them and so Sabbath also has to do with relinquishing. Relinquishing means Sabbath is also about letting go of our need to control and manipulate and just stand in the midst of mystery. It is to recognize the limitations of always seeking more possessions. It is to release ourselves from the tyranny of the perfectionism that imagines our worth is measured by our work. Sabbath invites us to relinquish the false gods and futile pursuits of our lives that cannot ultimately connect us to God and to rest in the truth that our worth is not found in what we do but in the fact that we are loved by God. To keep Sabbath is to relinquish the idea that we must somehow earn what God simply gives as gift.

And finally Sabbath allows life to be reordered. Sabbath is more than just doing nothing, it is an active intention to refocus our lives and remember who we are and *whose* we are. It is to reorder life in relationship to the Creator and even with creation itself. When we keep Sabbath -- allowing space for God in our lives -- we begin to change the order of the world that tries to tell us that we must constantly do more and work harder and run faster and jump higher and earn more to be okay. Sabbath reorders life because, on a regular basis, it allows us to pause and see the world again from God's perspective. And in seeing, we are transformed!

In the movie *Enchanted April*, 2 women decide to rent a villa on the Italian Riviera to try to escape the pain of their arid lives. In order to afford it, they invite 2 other women who are unknown to them. The 4 of them arrive at the villa and begin to settle into life together for one month. In many respects they are at odds with themselves and one another. But as they walk the fields, sit by the water, gaze upon the flowers, and generally live their holiday, a transformation begins to happen inside, and among them. In the end, each one who had arrived with a small and meager spirit, worn down by the gray routine of their lives and worn out by the lack of love in their homes back in England, is changed. An amazing and magical transformation takes place such that these four joyless women are infused with life and love and radiance.

I believe that Sabbath is that season -- that time and place, that villa -- where we leave the burdens and busyness of our everyday lives and are transformed into people of life and light and hope. So as we head out into our week and our world and our work God wants to say to that place in our lives that is overscheduled and over busy and overburdened: "Give it a rest!"