

“Keeping Sabbath”

Vital Congregations column in THE RELAY

By Douglas Ruffle, Coordinator of Congregational Development, GNJAC

The Lenten season offers an opportunity to reflect on our faith journey as we retrace the steps Jesus took toward Jerusalem and Calvary. One of the questions our churches need to reflect on is: How do we keep the Sabbath?

Keeping the Sabbath poses a challenge for the fast-paced world in which we live. Yet, it is central to our Judeo-Christian tradition. The fourth commandment reads,

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11 NRSV)

In one of my pastorates I lived in a town with a 40% Jewish population. On Saturday mornings, hundreds of the faithful walked to synagogues. Somehow these believers found a way to keep the Sabbath despite living in the frenetic pace of the New York metropolitan area. Their witness put me to shame as often I found myself working or shopping on the Lord’s day.

“Sabbath observance,” writes Norman Wirzba, “is not merely a leisurely add-on to balance out an otherwise busy or frantic week, but rather the key that opens life to its fullest and best potential.”¹

Wirzba follows an old rabbinic tradition that the divine work of creation was not fully complete until the day of rest on the seventh day. What the first six days lacked “was the *menuha*, the rest, tranquility, serenity, and peace of God.”² Thus, the crowning achievement of creation was not the creation of human beings but rather a deep sense of *shalom* that gives life the capacity for happiness and delight. Thus Sabbath is much more than stopping activity for one day of the week, but has to do with the celebration of all that is, all that God created. In this way, Sabbath observance is inextricably linked with the environment, the care for all of God’s creation.³

Keeping the Sabbath has to do with setting aside one day for rest. It has to do with community worship. It has to do with the way we think about and care for God’s creation. How will we keep Sabbath this Lenten season? How will we strive to observe keeping the fourth commandment? How we keep

¹ Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 30.

² Ibid, p. 33.

³ Ibid.

Sabbath says a lot about our priorities. In a world that too often seems to be lived at a frenetic pace, it makes good sense to deepen our understanding of what it means to keep the Sabbath—as individuals and as communities of faith.