

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 81:1-10; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

“Treasure in clay jars”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

It seems like a silly question, but “What do you usually do on Sunday?” Let me ask it differently: “What does the word “Sabbath” – not the word “Sunday” – mean to you?”

In today’s world the biblical command, “*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,*” seems to have less and less meaning. We also live with a newer idea called “leisure time” that competes with an understanding of “Sabbath time.” Surrounded by constant advertising and relentless cultural pressure to “get away” and “enjoy life,” we no longer perhaps understand what is meant by the word “Sabbath.”

The ancient biblical message about “Sabbath time” can seem old-fashioned and even irrelevant to modern life. For many on Sunday, after a busy week of work responsibilities and social commitments, perhaps all we desire is some peace and quiet to recharge our flagging spirits – if only we can find the time because Sunday is rarely a day of rest!

So much of our life is bounded by time and space, neither of which we have created, but which we use in the busy and exhausting spaces of work and travel. In life’s busyness we can experience the very limits of our own physical and mental stamina. By the end of the week, six days of labor often leaves us with bodies numb and minds frazzled. The secret of the Sabbath is that it was created for humanity so that the tired, broken, and even cynical human spirit might be reunited with God’s Spirit always waiting to renew us.

In a small book titled, *The Sabbath*, the late Abraham Heschel, professor of Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City, reflected on modern life, writing, “[For] *six days a week the spirit is alone, disregarded, forsaken, forgotten. Working under strain, beset with worries, enmeshed in anxieties, humankind has no mind for ethereal beauty. But the spirit is waiting for humankind to join it.*”

Heschel was writing about life in a technological society in which time is understood as an economic reality and a commodity to be sold. Arguing that the Sabbath can still offer meaning, Heschel wrote, “*What we are depends on what the Sabbath is to us.*” So I return to my earlier question: What does the Sabbath mean to you? Is the Sabbath a strict command to obey, or is it God’s invitation into sacred time helping you rediscover God’s Spirit always waiting in and

around you? Is the Sabbath sacred time that helps you view your time, indeed your lifetime, as inherently sacred, as in – “*The Sabbath was created for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath*”?

In contrast to the modern idea of leisure time and leisure pursuits, which are often available only to those who can afford them, the Sabbath was given to humankind – to all people. In the biblical command to obey the Sabbath, Israel was to give a day of rest to even the weakest and most vulnerable members in society: alien residents, meaning foreigners and refugees, as well as male and female slaves who were living among Israel. This is a remarkable command, so different from the modern world in which economic justice is rarely linked with the restorative and freeing reality of sacred time.

Again, Abraham Heschel writes, “*We can only solve the problem of time through the sanctification of time.*” This suggests that the economic problem of time and its valuation and devaluation of people can only be solved through a sanctification of time in which all people discover they are valued and loved by God.

Sabbath time frees humanity to see the time in which we live and move as sacred. Time does not end when we die; time continues, it is eternal. Seeing time as sacred and eternal allows us to see the unity of all things in God. No matter our nationality, religion, gender, identity, or social status, the Sabbath was made for humankind in order that all people might know God’s shalom of peace, health, and a restoration of the human spirit in God’s time and eternity.

Jesus’ words, “*The Sabbath was created for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath,*” contrast with modern life which often sees humanity as created for commodities such as leisure time and leisure pursuits. In healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus was revealing that the Sabbath was made to restore God’s shalom of peace, health, and wholeness to a fragile humanity.

In gathering for worship, we rediscover God’s image within us that has been damaged, distorted, and broken on our journey in this world. Paul describes our human fragility as “*treasure in clay jars.*” We are fragile. We are afflicted, persecuted, and even struck down in ways that damage God’s image in us and in our neighbor. The sacredness of Sabbath time renews and frees us to see ourselves and our neighbor as eternally beloved people of God.

You are an earthen vessel carrying sacred treasure. Restored by Sabbath time, how might you use your time not only for yourself but also to share God’s shalom with others in this world?

*What we are depends on what the Sabbath is to us. Amen.*