

Today we come to the next sermon in our series based on Slow Church – cultivating community in the patient way of Jesus. A slow church is not one which is very slow to do anything or where the services are extremely long because they are so slow paced. No, slow church is a way of doing church that is locally sustained, sustainable and sustaining. It is a church which develops its own unique way of doing things and its own unique presence in its neighborhood. It is a church which is the local manifestation of the Body of Christ. As our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry might say, we are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement here in Los Osos. Being “slow church” means that although we don’t have a multi-page manual handed down from above, St. Benedict’s nonetheless takes our place in the community of the diocese of El Camino Real, as well as in the local community of Los Osos.

Today I’m talking about two chapters of Slow Church: Work and Sabbath. In the gospel reading we heard Jesus sending his disciples out to work, but I want to refer back to last week’s lesson from Genesis. Then, we heard from the first account of Creation how God worked to create the world and then on the seventh day, God rested. The second story of creation describes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Many people mistakenly read it as saying that work comes from sin. But **God** works. God works to create the world, and God put humankind in the Garden of Eden, to work it and take care of it. (Gen 2:15)

Work is one of the things that gives meaning to our lives. Many of us work outside the home whether in paid or volunteer positions, for others of us the home is our primary place of work. From ancient times, the work has been understood as an important aspect of the spiritual life. St. Benedict stressed the importance of work in the balanced life of the monastery and Brother Laurence, a 17th century Carmelite monk wrote about loving God among the pots and pans and business of the kitchen.

Slow Church distinguishes between good work which is work that upholds the dignity of every human being, and bad work which is work that degrades. We have become more and more aware in recent years of the heart breaking exploitation of thousands of people in the modern slave trade. In January of this year 474 people were arrested across California for human trafficking, and 27 adults together with 28 children were liberated. Most of these had been coerced into prostitution and pornography. Perhaps closer to home are the fieldworkers who are some of the most oppressed workers, working long hours with low wages and little job security.¹

Helping people to find meaningful work is one of the ways we can live out our baptismal promise to “Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” We do this through the Abundance Shop. Not only are we a job training site for Transitions Mental Health clients, we provide a place where others can work. Yesterday morning while I was the cashier, we had four people helping Karin with sorting, pricing and keeping things attractive. Four people doing meaningful volunteer work – if you include Karin and myself it was 6. Thanks to Karin and Francis, the store attracts people looking to work in a loving environment. Here’s a quick plug – we need more cashiers to keep the doors open. Please talk to Francis if you can help.

When we pass on the things that are not selling in the store, we are sharing our abundance with others and helping to provide work in their lives too. Shopping locally helps to keep money in the area and stimulates our local economy which helps to provide more jobs here. It keeps wealth circulating rather than concentrating through strategies of accumulation.

¹ <http://nfwm.org/education-center/farm-worker-issues/>

So there are two aspects of work which are important to us as the local church – helping one another to find the sacredness of our work, and also seeking economic justice so that all people can find work.

People flourish when they have meaningful work. But some of us have too much. Just as our society encourages us to have more and more stuff, to live in bigger and bigger houses and keep getting the latest gadget, so it encourages us to work harder and longer.

There is only one of the ten commandments that people boast about breaking. “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” And there is nothing to suggest that this is less important than not murdering or stealing.

In the first story of Creation God worked for six days and on the seventh day God rested. God took a Sabbath day. God took time to delight in all that was created. And so God’s people were expected to do the same. Sabbath is the pinnacle of Creation, the cherry on the top of the cake.

This Sabbath was also extended to the land and to the socio-economic system. Land was given a Sabbath and allowed to lie fallow; in Jubilee years debts were forgiven and land returned to those who had surrendered it to pay debts. This was and is astonishingly counter-cultural.

We come close to worshipping work. 86% of American men and 67 % of women work more than 40 hours a week. The Japanese have a word *karoshi* which means death by overwork, yet Americans work 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 hours per year more than the British and 499 more than the French.²

We are also an acquisitive society. In a capitalist system, money will always be concentrated in the hands of a few unless it is redistributed. In the Jubilee years of the Old Testament, once every fifty years land was

² Slow Church, p.140

to be returned to those from whom it had been taken. A radical redistribution of the means of production. Those who had accumulated would have to return the fruits of their advantage. We see something similar happening today in the philanthropy of the 1% - the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation gives away billions of dollars each year to make the world a better place. But they are not returning the means of production. Their gifts do nothing to dismantle the system of capitalism which made them so wealthy in the first place.

While capitalism demands hard work and acquisitiveness, Sabbath not only means stopping work, it means letting go of striving and consuming to spend a day rejoicing in the gifts of God.

There are many rules in the Old Testament for what to do or not do on the Sabbath and our Puritan forebears were very strict about the Sabbath as a day of seriousness. But Jesus often bucked the Sabbath laws. He told those who criticized him, “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.” (Mk. 2: 27) When we celebrate Sabbath, we are demonstrating our trust in God’s providence, our trust that we can stop working, we can stop trying to make things better, just for a while, and that God will continue to do God’s part.

As you know, my Sabbath is Monday. On Mondays I try to take a long walk, go to Farmers Market, have a nap, read a book or watch a movie. Stuff that I enjoy with Jill, and which feeds my soul. But often I find myself caught up in the to-do list because it’s also the time we have together to run errands and have medical appointments. Sometimes we need to take longer periods of Sabbath – to retreat to a holy place that supports us as we let go of the worries and busyness of our lives to rejoice in God.

The great church father, Athanasius, said “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” Sabbath practice helps us to be fully alive. It is a time for rest and a time given to God. “It affirms work by keeping work in its proper bounds and reorienting it towards the glory of God. It

is also a way of reining in our consumptive desires and cultivating a spirit of gratitude.”³

One of the important aspects of Sabbath is that it reminds us of what is enough. Advertisers continually encourage us to go on accumulating. But how much is enough? When the Israelites received manna during their time in the wilderness, they were only to collect enough for the day. Anything they collected that they didn’t need for food went bad. Our own lives tell us that more of a good thing is not always better. Even when you’re thirsty, the third glass of water is not as satisfying as the first. Sabbath reminds us that we don’t need to go on working and striving all the time.

When we do, when we feel compelled to keep going every moment, then we are out of balance. Work cannot be truly sacred when it is consuming all that we have and are. It becomes instead a false idol, a god whom we serve before the God of the Sabbath.

And so I have wondered, what kind of Sabbath observances do we have as individuals, and what kind of Sabbath observance do we have as a church? How do we pause together to reflect on God’s call to us and to celebrate abundance?

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Holy One of blessing, we remember before you all those who suffer as a result of not having meaningful work or adequate ways to support themselves and their families. Guide the people of this country that we may use our resources to help all find suitable and fulfilling employment. Free us from the sins of acquisitiveness and failure to keep the Sabbath. Please help us to find new ways to keep your day holy and to rejoice in your providence; through our Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

³ Slow Church p.149

