

“Supreme” Christianity: I – “Stop in the Name of Love”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
September 10, 2017

Isaiah 58:13-14

Matthew 26:36-46

“Stop, in the name of love!” Well, friends, I want to apologize to you in advance this morning, because now that you have that tune in your head it’s going to be there all day long! Today marks the beginning of a three-sermon series I’m offering which is loosely based on songs that were sung by Diana Ross and the Supremes and this is one of their greatest!

Let me tell you why I chose it – because life is flying by so fast, and it feels as if we’re all on a treadmill going a hundred miles an hour trying to keep up – and I really, truly believe that in so many ways, the Lord is pleading with us to “Stop, in the name of love!”

I saw a Peanuts cartoon this week that featured Lucy standing there looking all forlorn, and the caption said: “I’ve never seen a summer go by so fast in all my life!” I have to agree with poor old Lucy – this summer flew by, actually the whole year has flown by. I think we are so much busier than ever, and when we are, time seems to fly by.

I look at some of your schedules, especially now that school has started again, and my head spins. Those of you with children get up early to get yourself ready for the day, then get your kids up and get them clothed and fed before they head off to school (making sure of course they have everything they’re supposed to have with them – backpacks, musical instruments, sports clothes, permission slips, lunches and on and on). Then you jump in the car and head off to work yourself, where you work until lunch, then jump in your car to run errands on your lunch hour, go back to work, finish up in time to get home, cook dinner, make sure the kids do their homework, get cleaned up, get in bed on time, before you finally collapse into bed yourself. That doesn’t include, of course, things like cleaning, grocery shopping, taking kids to Scouts and soccer and dance lessons – well, you get the idea. It’s a never-ending treadmill that can lead to exhaustion.

And even if you don’t have kids, or are single like me, there’s always a treadmill to run on – we seem to jam pack our days with things, and we barely stop to breathe.

And the same goes for you retirees. I can’t tell you the number of times someone who is retired has said to me, “I’m so busy! I don’t know how I had time to work!” Right?

And then, we come to church, and hear about how we're called to honor the Sabbath. And, as one writer put it so astutely, "We know we need Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it." (Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, p. 76)

She continues, "God did not declare that we keep one day out of seven holy just to lay an extra burden on us. God knows that we need that time. We need to be able to stop and focus on our real purpose for living. In our day to day lives we tend to lose sight of that so we need to be reminded every week." (Ibid.)

She is so right. It is so easy in the hustle and bustle and busyness of our lives to forget our real purpose for living. It is so easy in the hustle and bustle and busyness of our lives to forget about God and God's great gifts. And it becomes so easy to get swept up in, and try to meet, the world's ways of assigning worth and importance to people instead of God's ways.

Friends, Sabbath is a gift from God, a gift to us from a God who loves us enough to tell us that we are worth more than running ourselves ragged day in and day out. A God who rested on the seventh day after creating all that is in six days. A God who has the answer to our deepest need – which is hope. As one devotional that I read put it, "God understands our exhaustion and frustration. He feels our pain and sadness. He's waiting to extend grace when we call upon him." (*3 Minute Devotions for Women*, Day 1)

So we truly do need to "stop, in the name of love," honor the Sabbath and call upon him for so many reasons, but here are just a few.

First - to spend intentional time with God. Coming here on the Sabbath day gives us the perfect opportunity to focus solely on God, and his blessings in our lives. We sing his praises, lift prayers of adoration and concern, meditate on his Word, look at the cross and remember his great gift of Jesus, look at the beautiful stained glass window and remember how much he loves us. Sure, I know you can praise God on the golf course or on a boat, but here in this place the sole focus is Him – from start to finish. We're saying as we come to worship, "It's about you God. It's about worshiping you and thanking you and trusting you and turning to you. I'm giving this time solely to you. Everything else can wait."

Secondly, when we honor Sabbath and come here to worship we are renewed, restored and reconciled. All of us probably can identify with those disciples who fell asleep when Jesus asked them to stay awake – they were weary – and we know what that's all about. And not just physical weariness, but emotional and spiritual weariness. So we come to worship, honor the Sabbath, and find our spirits lifted, our souls healed, our fears allayed. Again, a quote from that devotional – "Our Sabbath time with God is like water on a sponge. It fills us and expands our ability to keep going. It strengthens us for the day and the days to come." (Ibid.)

I love that image. Sabbath time is like water on a sponge, filling us and expanding our ability to go out into a new week and keep going.

It does something else as well. Writer Dorothy Bass says that Sabbath “Worship is a festival, a spring of souls, a day of freedom not only from work but also from condemnation.” (Ibid.) I love that, and she is so right. We live in a tough world, a competitive world, a world so ready to tear us down or judge us. So we come here on the Sabbath day, and we are reminded that we are beloved children of God, beloved just because of who we are, not what we have or haven’t done in this world. We are reminded, that, though we have sinned and fallen short, God forgives us and sets us on our feet again to face a new week renewed and refreshed.

A third benefit of honoring and observing the Sabbath, which I know all of you will agree is true, is being connected with others. That is one of the strengths of this church – the connection between people. You can see it from the moment people walk in the church. Very few people make a bee line to a pew and sit down. There’s a lot of wandering around for handshakes and hugs, a lot of checking in on each other, a lot of making plans for where you’ll go for breakfast or lunch together after church! Am I right? You are gifts from God in each other’s lives! Just think how much richer your life is because of the other people with whom you worship in this place. And just think what you would be missing if you stayed home.

Isn’t it wonderful to be a part of a community where you’re loved and valued, where you’re cared for when you struggle, where you’re missed when you’re not here and someone is likely to call and check on you? Isn’t it wonderful, in the midst of this too-often cold and impersonal world, to come here to worship in a place where people know your name and care about you? I’ve got to think that God had that in mind when he commanded us to honor the Sabbath – that we would find love and community with others doing it too!

And think too of what we do together in this Sabbath time with God and each other. The beauty of our singing together, the power of our praying together, the amazing things that happen when we get together and do outreach, like – are you ready for this? – giving \$11,000 last week alone for hurricane relief!

When you stop in the name of love and are intentional about observing the Sabbath, God blesses you, and you bless others, and you go out of here stronger than when you came in, stronger to face life again! I don’t know about you, but on those rare occasions when I’m not in church on a Sunday morning, I feel empty, something’s missing, and my week seems to start out off-kilter.

On those Sundays when I do happen to have a day off, and I’m driving to worship in another church, I’m always amazed how full the parking lots are at supermarkets and gyms. Actually, it makes me sad, because I wonder when do those people get centered, when do they ever stop to realize that there is more to life, that there is a God who loves them and wants more for them than to be constantly running and doing. Where and when do they get their spirits recharged? Where and when are they reminded that they are not on their journey alone? What happens to them when a crisis strikes – how do they get through it?

Oh, they don't know what they're missing – if only they took the time for Sabbath rest and renewal, for worshiping something and Someone bigger than themselves, Someone who loves them and cherishes them, Someone who walks with them on their journeys.

I am so glad you all are here honoring the Sabbath, worshiping God and caring for yourself. I know it might not have been easy for you to be here. I know that there are probably a thousand different things you have to do, things that are waiting for you when you leave here – so I am really glad you are here. Our worship together is better because you are here today. Please never underestimate how important you are in this place.

My friends, we have a gift for every single one of you today, and they are going to be passed out during announcement time. It's a little "stop" sign for you to carry in your pocket or your purse. We hope it will be a reminder to you that when you're tempted to stay on the treadmill of doing and doing and doing, and not take time for Sabbath - to worship and be with God – you will instead "Stop, in the name of love" and spend time with the Lord.

We hope that when you reach in your pocket or your purse or wherever you choose to keep it, and you touch it, that you'll stop and have a Sabbath moment – take some deep breaths, whisper a little prayer, stare at a sunset, call a friend, or just look around you and see the gifts God has poured into your life.

I know that stopping won't always be easy. I know that honoring the Sabbath won't always be easy. That little children's story reminded us so well of how hard commitments can be sometimes. Horton suffered a lot to keep his commitment to that egg – it was painful physically, it was painful when his friends made fun of him, it was scary at times, but it was the right thing to do.

Dear friends, as children of God and disciples of Christ, it is the right thing to do to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. For as we do, we draw closer to God, we are renewed, restored and inspired, and we are connected in a special way to our brothers and sisters in Christ in this place.

Let me finish this morning with a beautiful quote by a man named Dave Barnhart that goes like this: "Keeping the Sabbath is like tithing our time to God. We give to God the first moments of the day or the first day of our week. Because we are made in the image of God, we imitate God's rest after a busy week of doing and creating. Doing so reminds us that all time is God's time. **We make time for a little slice of eternity, and give that time as an offering to God in the same way we that we put money into the offering plate.**" (Dave Barnhart, Ministry Matters, "Sabbath")

Friends, take time to be holy. Honor the Sabbath. Stop, in the name of love. May it be so. Amen.