

Happy Sabbath

By Gary Patterson

It is unfortunate that we have largely lost the original meaning of the word Sabbath. While it is true that we understand it actually means rest, yet both in ancient Israel and for us as well, it becomes the name of a day, rather than a description of one's behavior. Perhaps if we translated the 4th commandment to read, "Remember the rest day and set it apart from the other six days in which you do your usual things" we would break free from all the excess baggage we carry with the word Sabbath.

It is in recent years that I have heard the simple greeting "Happy Sabbath" being used in our churches. It is difficult to put an exact time frame on it, but I believe I heard it first as "Feliz Sabado" in Hispanic congregations around the early 1990s. And then it seemed to spread rapidly into North American English speaking churches as well as "Happy Sabbath." But maybe it goes way beyond that, even to Hebrew heritage in the phrase "Sabbat Shalom." But regardless of its origin, it is a concept which stands in contrast to much of the way we have thought about and related to the Sabbath – think rest day – in the past.

Due in part to a change in our understanding of the word "pleasure" since the days of the translation of the KJV which states "not doing your own pleasure", we have come up with the idea that if anything is fun, it is forbidden on the Sabbath. What we fail to understand is that the Old English usage of the word was choice, not enjoyment or fun. The NIV helps us a bit in its presentation of the Sabbath promise given in Isaiah 58:13-14:

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob."

Here it is. The rest day is to be not only a change from the humdrum routine of the work-a-day world, it is to be what is called a "delight." In it we are to find "joy" in serving and remembering the Lord. And while it is easy for us to deride and sneer at much of the baggage the Jews in Jesus' day had attached to it – making it an unbearable burden – if we are honest, in many ways we have done the same thing.

In my early days, it was forbidden to ride a bicycle on Sabbath – too much fun. And although it was considered to be proper, and even wholesome, to go on a hike in the mountains, it was not ok to go swimming in one of the beautiful lakes you might come across. Who was it that decided these things, and on what basis? In my days of attending Auburn Adventist Academy in the mid-1990s the hour bell rang across campus sixty minutes before sundown. You had better have taken your shower before that time, because shortly thereafter the shower doors were closed and locked to prevent any miscreant from violating the Sabbath by taking a shower – a concept that seems beyond strange in today’s world where a daily shower is often considered a regular part of morning hygiene in preparation for the day ahead.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at the 100th anniversary celebration of a church established near Battle Creek, Michigan in the late 1800s. Those were the “good old days” we were celebrating, and as we searched the church records of those early believers, we found an interesting discussion regarding proper Sabbath keeping. The issue centered on whether it was a violation of the Sabbath to let the horses run while pulling the carriages on the way to church. Now Michigan has some very cold days in winter, and a running horse was known to be warmer than one merely walking. So, it was agreed that it would not be a violation to allow horses to run on very cold winter days. But on other warmer days it was not proper.

While this might well be a valid discussion in the context of animal kindness, to make it a Sabbath keeping matter seems to stretch credulity. Yet this example of our bent to establish rigid behavioral rules for Sabbath observance seems to reflect the same misguided attempts employed by the Sanhedrin in biblical times.

As much as I favor the idea of church community and corporate worship, it is significant to note that nothing in the fourth commandment refers to going to church on the Sabbath. Rather it is about a change of pace and activities in which we are regularly engaged during the week, thus giving us time for family and community to celebrate the creativity and salvation afforded us by a loving and delivering God. Such activity should lead to what Isaiah says about calling the Sabbath a delight.

How does that play out? Actually, quite differently in various locations, cultures, families and ages. In a work environment calling for hard physical labor, lower impact activity may serve well as the “rest” called for on Sabbath. But for one whose work is desk oriented or mentally

demanding, the Sabbath “rest” may call for outdoor activity that restores the body both physically and mentally.

During the summer of 1968, I was leading a group of 37 young people from the northwestern United States on a three-week tour of Europe in connection with the World Youth Congress in Zurich. Our first Sabbath on tour took us to Denmark where we worshiped with the church on the campus of Skodsborg Hospital and school. It was a delightful experience and we were treated royally. But in the announcements at the end of the church service, the Principal of the school shocked all of our group as he invited us to a Croque Tournament on the front lawn after lunch.

Coming as we did from an area where such game type activities were forbidden as Sabbath behavior, we were astonished. Who it is that decides these differing standards, I do not know. But it was a good lesson in avoiding a judgmental attitude as we observed a different culture and location behaving in a manner strange to us.

In the context of calling the Sabbath – read “rest day” – a delight, we need to take a serious look at how we are doing this, particularly with our children and young people. In an era when we frequently decry the loss of a new generation, rather than looking for what is wrong with them, perhaps we need to look at what we are doing or not doing that causes them to lose interest in the church and Sabbath. It is time to be done with the notion that if it is fun, it is forbidden. It is time for open discussion and exploration as to how we can follow the biblical instruction to call the rest day a delight and a joy. And then we need to set about diligently to make it happen in our homes and in our churches.

On a beautiful early spring day in 1980, I was serving as pastor of the Walla Walla University Church. We were engaged in a series of sermons based on the Seven Last Words of Christ on the cross. I had invited a guest speaker for the Sabbath of March 22, Dr. John Killinger, widely known author of many books on preaching and worship, who also had served as my major professor in my doctoral study program at Vanderbilt University. His topic was “The Voice of Human Need – I Thirst.” Well known in Protestant circles, his appointment with us attracted many pastors and members of other churches in the area, and following the worship service the church hosted a dinner for Dr. Killinger and our many guests, allowing time for them to engage in personal dialog with him and with one another.

Later that afternoon my wife and I took him on a tour of the Walla Walla Valley countryside. Productive semi-arid climate that it is, the fields were lush green in spring with miles upon miles of winter wheat fields. The orchards were in full bloom. The vineyards were showing the first sprouts with promise of sweet grapes. The famous Walla Walla Sweet Summer Onions were standing stately in their perfect rows. The Asparagus was thrusting its boney fingers out of the ground, and the fresh, cool, dry air of spring blew through the open windows of the car as we drove along the country roads.

And as we did so, we passed by many students and members of the church out for a walk, or a bike ride. Some were pushing strollers with the children on board. Others were slow cruising even as we were doing. Recognizing who it was, they would wave and stop to talk, greeting one another with love and friendship and calling out “Hello Pastor. Thank you for the wonderful worship service today.” Given that this was not an unusual occurrence on a Sabbath afternoon, I did not think too much about it until the following day.

During his visit to the Valley, Dr. Killinger had also been invited to speak at the leading Protestant church in the city. The pastor had invited him, prior to the service, to address the governing board of the church, following which he entered into dialog with them regarding their interests and concerns. One of the members addressed the matter of how fellowship in the church could be enhanced, particularly in the context of attracting young people.

I was unprepared for what happened next. Dr. Killinger offered some suggestions as to how a church needs to move with the times and address the interests and concerns of its youth. But what he then said astonished me. He told the beauty of our drive through the countryside the day before, and then said, “Maybe you should ask Dr. Patterson about his Sabbath tradition. That seems to be the secret of reaching the community.” While I was pleased with this recognition of what the Sabbath can mean for us, only I wished that it were as true as he thought it was. “Happy Sabbath”? Would to God that we could make every Sabbath that kind of an appealing “Rest Day.”

In 2005, it was my privilege to serve as Interim Senior Pastor of the Southern Adventist University Church in Tennessee during their search for a new Senior Pastor. Lodging arrangements were made for us in University condo housing up on a hill just a block or two from the church. It was my custom to walk down to the church in the early morning prior to the first

service at 8:30. It was on one of these fresh fall mornings that as I walked, the words of a new Sabbath hymn flooded my mind, reflecting the beauty of this rest day:

Sabbath Morning – May be sung to “Oasis” #460 in the SDA Hymnal

When dawns the glorious morning of Sabbath reverie,
The hand of the Creator reveals His love to me.
The sunshine, and showers, refreshing earth and sea,
Display in power, this Holy hour, creation’s memory.
Created in God’s image, His children long to be
Restored again to goodness, to life and liberty.
Through gracious forgiveness, He recreates in me,
New life within, to save from sin, redemption full and free.
Restore these holy hours the joy of Sabbath rest;
A refuge in the journey of life where sin has stressed.
A type of eternal rest from sin and woe.
With thankfulness, Your name we bless this boundless grace to know.

RESPONSIVE READING

LEADER: Lead me Lord to know your love, not selfishly in hording greed.

CONGREGATION: Show me someone I can cheer, Not just in word but generous deed.

LEADER: Lead me Lord, lead me Lord, lead me in Your love.

CONGREGATION: Lead me by Your gentle hand, to Your throne above.