A Sermon preached by William A Powel at St. Paul’s, Cleveland Heights – August 25, 2019

Good morning. I’m Bill Powel, a member of this parish, Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese of Ohio, and Chancellor to Bishop Hollingsworth, who sends his gratitude to St. Paul’s.

When we lived in Chicago, we had three girls at the time (two in preschool and an infant), and we made a church a priority because in a big city, St. Chrysostom’s had become an important part of our lives. But it was a production for Sandra and me to make it happen on Sundays. Getting everyone dressed, down the elevator, into the car, and finding street parking was a challenge. One time, I sent Sandra ahead with our oldest, Lindsey, and Cameron, the baby, because middle daughter Read didn’t want to put on her shoes. After failing to reason with a three-year old who was running away and hiding, I finally sat her down in my lap and starting jamming those shoes on her feet, saying (through clenched teeth): “Young lady, you are going to Church, darn it (or words to that effect).” As she was yelling “NO” and trying to wrestle free, it dawned on me—that perhaps I didn’t have the right attitude about going to Church! And why was it so important, anyway? Why do we observe the Sabbath?

In today’s reading from Luke, Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. It was a big deal at the time, but let’s put it into context. We all know that in the beginning, God created the world in 6 days and then he rested. So, when Moses brought down the Ten Commandments, he said:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to 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. On it you shall not do any work…. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” [Exodus 20:8-11].
Therefore, under the Mosaic tradition, a Sabbath day began to be observed as a day of rest, worship, and celebration on the seventh day, later known in the calendar as Saturday.

Early Christians also observed Sabbath on Saturday, but Western Christianity later started celebrating the Eucharist on the “first day” or Sunday, because the resurrection of Jesus took place on the third day after his crucifixion on Good Friday. In 321 AD, Roman Emperor Constantine, a convert to Christianity, decreed that citizens "shall rest upon the venerable day of the sun.” Regardless of the day of the week, both faith traditions considered the Sabbath to be a gift, a day of rest from labor, and of spiritual renewal—as a way to make time for God.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Sabbath as Resistance*, describes the Sabbath as “Divine Rest” – (1) to show us that God is not a workaholic; (2) that God is not anxious about how creation will function on the 7th day without him or her; and (3) that “the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work.” [p. 6]. He also notes that the Ten Commandments begin with God saying: “I brought you out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery…. ” [Exodus 20:2], making the point that the slaves didn’t have a day off when they worked for Pharaoh, and that the origin of the Sabbath is both the culmination of Creation and the culmination of the Exodus from Egypt when the slaves of Israel were emancipated. [p. 6]. In our prayers today, we will mark the 400th anniversary of the first African slaves arriving in the colony of Virginia.

In that same Jamestown colony, laws that institutionalized the Sabbath started in 1610, when the following church attendance policy was approved:

"Every man and woman shall repair in the morning to the divine service and sermons preached upon the Sabbath day, and in the afternoon to divine service… upon pain for the
first fault to lose their … [food] allowance for the … week …; for the second, to lose 
[their] … allowance and also be whipt; and for the third to suffer death."

This was truly “Three strikes and you’re out.”

Fortunately, state legislatures would later pass less stringent laws (“blue laws”) to 
prohibit activities that would conflict with people attending church. Why? Because the common 
wisdom was that if you made it difficult for people to shop, hunt, go to a car dealer, or buy 
liquor, they would have nothing else to do but attend church on Sundays.

Clearly, those blue laws failed to change behaviors, and most of them have been 
repealed, but in Virginia, it’s still illegal to hunt deer, turkey, dove and duck on Sundays (with an 
exception for bears, raccoons, and foxes.) In Ohio, the law banned car sales on Sundays for 
years and liquor still isn’t sold before Noon. Sunday is now pretty much like any other day of 
week.

In her book Mudhouse Sabbath, Lauren Winner, a convert from Judaism to Christianity, 
and now an Episcopal priest, writes that Jews and Christians travel by different paths to the God 
of Israel. Jews adhere to a Saturday Sabbath [Preface, p. ix], not because they are more 
righteous, but rather because, she writes, “Practice is to Judaism, what belief is to Christianity.” 
[Id.] She doesn’t suggest that Jews don’t have beliefs, but the idea is that although one’s faith 
might come and go, the practice shouldn’t waver. Repeating the practice is the best way to 
ensure that a doubter’s faith will return.

In Jesus’ time, the Sabbath was an important practice. Jesus performs a miracle, but 
that’s not the headline—he did it in the synagogue AND on the Sabbath. When he saw a woman 
“bent over and unable to stand up straight,” the offending “work” was the laying on of hands to
heal her. The leader of the synagogue told the crowd, “you can come and be cured the other 6 days of the week, but you can’t do it on a Sabbath day.” Jesus responds that even animals deserve to be unbound, and that the woman -- “a daughter of Abraham” (who is part of the family) -- should be treated the same way no matter what day it is.

Jesus acknowledges the Sabbath rules, and then says that rules are meant to be broken when healing others. And the crowd goes wild! (actually, the text says that the crowd “rejoices,” but in my mind’s eye, it went wild.) They saw that helping others was more important than the rules of the synagogue and the Sabbath. Maybe the Sabbath is about allowing time and space for God to break through—by showing compassion for others.

Sunday blue laws are no longer a factor, so why do we show up here on Sundays? For me, it’s about recharging my batteries, renewing myself for the week ahead, and (from the words of the Rite I Communion service) “presenting our selves, our souls, and our bodies.”

If the Sabbath is “divine rest”—then it seems to me that St. Paul’s has it all going here today in our three worship services: the 7:45 is a time of quiet reflection in an intimate setting; our 9:00 with the Forest City String Band is a joyful expression of music and our connectedness to creation when we gather outdoors. The 10:15 service combines beautiful organ music and the dulcet tones of the choir in the magnificent nave. These varied services offer different expressions and celebrations of the Sabbath.

Perhaps I was drawn to the law because I’m a rule-follower. Or perhaps as a lawyer, I follow the rules. In the case of my daughter, Read, I let the lawyer part of me get in the way. God didn’t need my dressed up daughter, and God doesn’t need our dressed-up selves to come to Church. We come as we are.
Sabbath rules are no longer relevant, but I am drawn to the idea of Divine Rest – of making time for God to break through into our lives—whether here on Sundays, in our prayers, or in our daily life—to show us how we can follow Jesus’ command to be mindful of and be responsive to the needs of others.

AMEN