

Exodus 20:8-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

John 15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Jesus the True Vine

¹⁵ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Proclamation of the Word

Remember for a moment if you can, the place where you worshiped most perhaps as a child, or for others, the place where you first found faith. Your home church sanctuary. In your mind's eye go there. (PAUSE)

Picture what happened in that sanctuary. (PAUSE)

Remember the smells, the sounds, what it felt like. (PAUSE)

Remember the people that were there with you. (PAUSE)

I remember my home sanctuary. From age 2 my family belonged to the First Presbyterian Church. When I return to that place in my mind, the first memory I had was of sitting close to my mother with her arm around me. She smelled like White Shoulders perfume, soap, and hairspray (it was the 70s and the hair was big). Sometimes I even fell asleep on her lap. There was no Wee Worship or Children's Story. Sunday morning worship tasted like butterscotch candies, the kind that come in really loud cellophane wrappers. I remember it might be the one time a week that we sat this close so we could "Be still and know that I am God."

I don't remember all the words, but I do remember the Prayer of Confession, the same one we prayed here today. And the choir would tune up singing Psalm 51 "Create in me, a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." The Scripture I know by heart were those routine hymns and responses we sung or the responsive readings from the hymnal or bulletin. We were just not that disciplined to read our Bible at home. What I know of the Bible I learned mostly on Sunday. I loved Rev. Doyle's voice and the way he said "God," but I don't remember any sermon exactly. Much of worship was mysterious.

The sanctuary was dim and cozy. I remember feeling so small in that huge sanctuary, and thinking how very big God must be. I felt safe, secure, happy, sometimes bored. I knew this was a special place where we went to meet God. Then when I was a teen struggling with teen stuff and grief, I remember the sanctuary was the place where tears might begin out of nowhere at the words of a hymn. I knew it was a place where we brought our hearts- our troubles, our joys. I felt at home.

But what I remember most about my home Sanctuary was the people. Did you remember people? As we got older we kids sat with our friends in the balcony--- mostly paying attention. And as youth we had adopted grandparents, sort of like our Prayer Partners. Mr. Glenn and Ms. Ollie Lee Thomas were mine. Every Sunday I got a hug and a half of piece of Juicy Fruit from Mr. Glenn. I always spoke to Ms. Ollie Lee. Every Sunday I'd ask how she was and her reply, "'Pretty good for a little old lady.'" Sometimes our family would fuss with each other on the way to church, but we would leave a little more at peace, reconciled to one another- in touch with God's love. We were usually late for worship and always the last to leave since my mother had to visit with everyone. Worship was the place where we belonged to one another and to God.

Remember.... I invite you to remember a place of worship where you met God. I wonder, what was the first thing to pop in your mind? If you are willing, turn to someone and share that. (PAUSE- 30 seconds)

Sanctuaries are varied. We can worship God in the forest surrounded by a timbered choir. We can worship in a tent set up as a temporary sanctuary. Some like to worship in auditoriums and stadiums with bands tuned up so loud you'd think you were at a concert.

Over time as I matured as a Christian, I learned that worship was the place where we were "put back together." We are re-membered- connected to God, one another, and to ourselves, our deepest longings and needs. In some ways, we are made whole again through the prayers, the songs, the Scripture, the Sacraments. The world, life, has a way of breaking us apart. Like Humpty Dumpty, we need to be put back together. Sanctuaries are special and holy places.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Remember...

...so you can remember the God who loves us and calls us to live together in love. My friend Mark Tidsworth says that as a follower of Jesus he needs weekly worship to remind him of who he is and whose he is. The rest of the week he is told to be selfish, greedy, and that it all depends on him. But the God who made us created us for his praise and to love in return. God gave us the gift of Sabbath- a day of freedom, rest, and joy. Worship is re-orientation.

I return again and again to the book *Practicing our Faith* by Dorothy Bass. In writing about Sabbath she reminds us, **"to act as if the world cannot get along without our work for one day in seven is a startling display of pride that denies the sufficiency of our generous Maker."**ⁱ I wonder if we really practiced Sabbath, how many of our current troubles would be alleviated.

Christians have practiced the Sabbath on Sunday unlike the 7th Day Adventist who celebrates Sabbath Friday night through Saturday sundown like our Jewish neighbors. And for us, that means gathering for worship as the Body of Christ, his church. Now we can worship God anywhere, anytime, anyplace, but we can never be Christians alone. We gather as His flock in worship.

Think about it this way. I go to an exercise class weekly. There is a knowledgeable leader who has practiced and prepared the lead our group. The building and space are ready for me to show up- lights are on, and the room is cooled. The leader has made a playlist of music (I go to Jazzercise). The equipment is there. But truth be told, I sometimes don't feel like going. I have plenty of other things I could do. But I have made a commitment. I have always left feeling better than when I walked in. I can exercise other times, by myself, but I find that the best way is to schedule it and allow myself to be lead by others in a group of people. Otherwise, it goes by the wayside.

Weekly worship is a commitment in the same way. Lots of people have been preparing, not only for the execution of worship, but the spirit of worship. We have prayed over those who would gather here that God would speak to minds and hearts. We have rehearsed music, organized ushers, sound techs, and like today, asked the children to help pass out the bookmarks. Another example, Thursday Brad and I met to discuss the Children's Story. A Four minute Children's Story can take hours of preparation. And then there is the worshiper, who hopefully has prayed to be open to God's leading and Spirit, perhaps read the Scripture before coming to church, and prepared his offering to dedicate to God with a thankful heart.

I remember serving with Jim Richardson, the former pastor, who would always pray, "God we thank you for Sundays because they remind us of you..." Sunday is called the Lord's Day. Worship is the Service for the Lord's Day- every Sunday a little Easter.

Weekly worship is important, but maybe not to everyone. We have more money, more leisure, more of everything these days, but worship attendance is declining at alarming rates in every type of church.

There are tons of reasons, I imagine. Statistically, in times of prosperity, involvement in faith communities wanes. Right now, there is no recession and we have a winning team. We are prospering. Or maybe we feel connected digitally, so we don't need to show up and see our friends in the faith. Or maybe we do not trust any institutions, including the church. Or maybe we are so blasted exhausted by our 24/7 schedules that we cannot attend one more thing. Or maybe we bought into the lie that we have no need of God and that we truly are self-sufficient.

Jesus always gets to the heart of the matter. He reminds us that we live in the love God with one another or we die, basically. God is not just our Maker, Jesus is the source of life- abundant life. As it reads in the Message, Jesus says,

⁴ "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

⁵⁻⁸ "I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. (John 15:4-8)

Apart from God we cannot be fruitful or fully alive. Jesus says make your home in my love. And then love one another. The promise comes first- I love you, says Jesus. You did not choose me, but I chose you. The grace and gift comes first.

The vine is true. The Farmer is good, but we can choose to abide or live in Him or not. The Farmer creates the conditions and tills the soil. The sun shines, the rain comes down, and fruit emerges. Our faith practices are ways we abide in Jesus. They are the conditions, like soil and rain, that naturally produce fruit. We can work on the conditions. The fruit will come. That fruit is love. The self-centered branch is useless and cut off so that the whole plant is more fruitful. God's love, presence, and pruning are gifts, but we choose where we abide.

Earlier I asked you to remember a Sanctuary- a place you worshiped as a new or young Christian. Jesus' words remind us that we cannot stay infants in Christ, we must grow up, mature in faith. So we continually need to be nourished and pruned. Comforted and challenge by God's word...and we do it in the fellowship of faith- in community. A good parent not only comforts, but convicts and confronts us to help us grow!

Some of you may grow grapes. We had wild grapes on our land- muscadines and Scuppernongs. Without any help from us they made grapes. And we made muscadine jelly in the summer. But my dad, who was somewhat of a weekend farmer, decided to build an arbor and help support one of the

vines that grew in a large tree. He started to prune it and trim it for optimum production. Knowing my dad, he called Mr. Nunnery our Clemson Extension Agent to learn what to do.

The vines did what they were made to do- create grapes, but the ones closest to the central vine were the strongest, best grapes. In the same way we were made to glorify God and enjoy God- to live in God's love, and then to pass it on to others. This is what we were made for. The central vine is Jesus. God is our first love.

“Abide in my Love and my words,” Jesus says. We cannot grow, let alone thrive without love. The worship service itself is designed around the Word/Scripture and Sacraments. It includes many parts of the other seven Fort Hill Faith Practices. But practices are not an end in themselves. They provide the conditions in which we can grow as disciples of Jesus. Weekly worship helps us abide in God's love and love one another. The fruit will come.

So if you want to become a more loving version of yourself, I invite you to be a part of this community. Love is our purpose. They will know us by our love.

For the love of God is where we are most at HOME- at peace and whole.

Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy. In doing so we are remembered- put back together again, connected to God's love, one another, and even become better at loving ourselves.

ⁱ Dorothy Bass, *Practicing our Faith; A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey Bass: San Francisco, 1997), 86.