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**St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Arlington, VA**  
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“Restoring Some Margins to your Life”

At the heart of the biblical story is that God, the creator of all that exists, after he had created the world, rested. God worked, labored for six days and then on the seventh day—God did no work at all—this was the day of Sabbath, the day of rest.

This pattern of work and rest is the fundamental pattern that shapes the creation—God’s creation in which we live. This pattern, so the biblical story reminds us, applies not only to God, but also to us whom God created in God’s image and likeness.

This pattern of work and rest continues to be observed today by orthodox Jews who on the Sabbath day rest from all work.

Christians, after struggling for centuries to figure out how much of the laws of Moses we were required to observe, decided somewhere back that the Sabbath was optional.

Christians understood correctly that if they were truly set free from law in Jesus Christ that the obligations of the law, which were binding for those who observed the law almost as a contractual obligation, could not be binding for them. If we truly, as Christians, we were to have freedom from the law then these things were not required of us in the same way as they were for the Jewish people living according to the Torah.

But this misses the fundamental point of the whole creation story—productive work requires productive rest. The two go hand in hand. For the human being to flourish we need a balance of work and rest—of work and Sabbath.

In our gospel story today Jesus is moving at a frenetic pace from morning to night. The narrative Mark tells is punctuated by the words “and immediately”—words that connect one thing Jesus did to the next. Because it sounds like a young child first learning to write—stringing sentences together by “and then, and then, and then.” Most translators do not always translate this literally. On one page of the Greek New Testament text of the Gospel of Mark in the first chapter, one finds “and immediately” 15 or more times.

Jesus is busy—he has much to do. He heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and soon the whole city is gathered about the door—the crowds are full of people with demands for Jesus—they want to be healed and set free from the demonic spiritual forces that enslave them. Jesus heals many of them and with authority takes control over the demons so that they cannot even speak.

We get the sense from the story that while Jesus is willing to heal those who come to him, wants to do more. He wants to teach—wherever he goes—that God’s kingdom has

come near—Gods’ reign—God’s rule is now here. This is good news to those who have been forgotten by the religious establishment in far off Jerusalem. To the country folks of Galilee this truly is good news.

Jesus wants to teach—but, everywhere he goes the crowd gets bigger and bigger. The crowds, including his disciples, are enthralled by Jesus, but do not fully understand what he is teaching them. They seem to be having a good time in what might be described as a circus atmosphere, but they do not understand the risk and the danger that lies ahead.

In the midst of all this activity Jesus slips away quietly to pray. The disciples do not see him leave, so when they decide they need to find Jesus, they do not know where he is. When they interrupt him Jesus tells them it is time to move onto other towns where he wants to teach, for that is what he says he came out to do.

Jesus knows that it is important to stop and pray—even in the most frenetic, frenzied and busy times. Jesus knows enough to stop and to take time to pray and time to rest.

It is interesting that today we seem to have forgotten the true meaning of recreation. The word re-creation suggests that we need to play and have fun apart from work to recreate, to be made new. When we do too much, we wear ourselves out and there is nothing left for us to give to others, our family and friends, or to God. Without recreation, without rest—without the Sabbath we wither and perish, like a plant without water.

When we do rest for many of us it is not a productive rest, but a time of sheer exhaustion.

Dr. Richard Swenson has written a book, I keep hearing about and so I have decided I have to read it. The book is entitled Margins: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives. A margin is “an amount allowed beyond what is needed.” Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion. Swenson compares our lives to a sheet of paper so full that all the margins—all the empty space of reserve—are full.

As I wrote this sermon I left room in the margins so that should another idea come to me, once I had written this, that I would have room to add it to my page. It is a good thing that I did, because I did need to add a few sentences after I had written it. And I had room, space, to do so.

Dr. Swenson says that to be healthy we all need margins in at least four areas of our lives: emotional energy, physical energy, time, and finances. Conditions of modern living have served to erase these margins, rather than sustain them.

With our margins full there is no room for anything else when it comes up because we have left no room, no margins in our lives.

Many people ask what they can do to be more spiritual—to strengthen their spirituality. There is one answer: to stop doing so much. To make time and space, some margin left for God—all God gets when God tries to call us is a busy signal.

To improve your spiritual life you have to make margins in your life—spaces and times in which you can be open and available to God. You cannot expect to have any kind of spirituality if you do not put anything into it. There is nothing I can say from the pulpit that will make you more spiritual. As much as you might like it, there is nothing I can say from the pulpit that will make you more spiritual, if you, yourself, do not put any time into it—and if you leave no space in your life to develop a relationship with God.

It is quite important I think to note that the lack of margin in our lives has a direct effect on the health of our Christian community here at St. Peter's. Sunday is the one time, the church as set aside for worshipping God together with other Christians—Sunday was a day left as a margin for God—that's why our ancestors, as much as we cannot understand it today—did not engage in shopping or partying on Sunday. It was a space—a time of Sabbath—a time of recreation and rest.

Sadly today for Christians, Sunday is the one day left—it is the only margin left in our lives to sleep late, read the newspaper—or watch tennis.

I hear all the time how folks are so pressed that they can't come to church on Sunday because they need time with their families—or they have so many things that things that they have to finish—things they could not fit into the previous week.

The percentage of folks who attend church regularly seems steadily to drop—not because folks don't belong to a church—we Episcopalians are a growing church here in Virginia— but because folks come to church once every three weeks.

Worship, like Sabbath, has become today something that is seen to be optional—something that we do if we have time—if we can fit it into our lives, rather than making worship central to our lives and fitting the other things around it.

Worship itself is an important margin that must be maintained today if we are to flourish because here we offer ourselves to God—to be open to God and to listen.

I hope that these words will challenge you to examine your own lives. The Lord knows that I have no room to talk—the margins in my life are all pretty full.

The task of preaching, as it is often said, is not just to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable—and sometimes the preacher has to preach to himself.

Remember the example of Jesus, how in the midst of a frenzied pace, he went off by himself to pray—and work to leave space—some margins in your life. God desires above all for you to flourish.