

OK we have a lot of talk about gender issues these days. You may not know this, but many non-living things have a gender.

ZIPLOCK BAGS are (ask – ‘what?’) male, because they hold everything in, but you can see right through them.

COPIERS are Female, because once turned off, it takes a while to warm them up again. It’s an effective reproductive device if the right buttons are pushed, but can wreak havoc if the wrong buttons are pushed. Just saying.....

A TIRE is male, because it goes bald and it’s often over-inflated.

SPONGES are FEMALE, because they’re soft, squeezable, and retain water.

OK, down to business. Jesus COMMANDS His disciples to rest. In withdrawing from activity – in disengaging from our everyday routine and the cares and concerns of daily life – we show our faith in the fact that GOD is in charge. We demonstrate that the future of the world is not left up to us. This is the theological point of the whole deal. We are not gods, we are human beings, not human DOINGS, and we need times of rest and restoration. The commandment about the Sabbath is the longest of the commandments. It takes nearly a third of the entire Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. In his book on the Sabbath, Rabbi Abraham Joseph Heschel, says that the Sabbath is the only one of God’s creations called holy. Everything else is called ‘GOOD.’ Only the Sabbath is called ‘HOLY.’ Which means that the sanctification of time preceded the sanctification of persons. DID WE HEAR THAT? The sanctification of TIME precedes the sanctification of persons! We are not sanctified until we take the time to realize who – and whose we are – that we are beloved sons and daughters of a loving and merciful God. This is our deepest identity – and it takes rest, time with God – to understand and accept this.

Heschel says the Sabbath is the first and truest medium of God’s PRESENCE in creation. Observing the Sabbath has always kept God’s people from being absorbed by the alien cultures where they resided. This is true of us as well! We have ignored the Sabbath, making it just another busy day, and often work on it, having absorbed the alien culture around us. We are just like people who do not believe in God and believe it’s all up to them. The Sabbath commandment came long before the rest of the commandments. Even as slaves in Egypt, the Israelites observed the Sabbath. There is a saying that more than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews. We could say the same about our Mass attendance. More than Catholics have kept Sunday Mass, Sunday Mass has kept us Catholic. When people quit coming to Mass, usually their faith rather quickly disappears. There is nothing to sustain it.

For 6 days a week, the ancient Israelites knew that they belonged to Pharaoh. But on the Sabbath, they were free men and women who knew they belonged only to God. The Sabbath was not a day simply for recovering their strength. It was not JUST free time. It was FREEDOM TIME. It was time to recover their identity, to remember who they were and WHOSE they were.

We need to hear this in our culture! WE ARE NOT SLAVES! But many Americans are slaves to work, to success, to advancing their career, to money. But I’ve known a lot of people with a lot of money – and I think “So what’s the big deal?” They live as though they are slaves! They rarely take time off, often don’t take their full amount of vacation, and bring work home. What’s the point? You can have a big house – but never

actually stop to enjoy it – or use it to gather friends or family. I’ve seen houses with fabulous kitchens – and no one cooks in them. Living rooms where no one sits, dining rooms where no one ever shares a meal. They might as well live in a shack.

The Sabbath was a mandated GIFT, a gift we are supposed to ENJOY! But we skip it – or we work through it – and we don’t even like to deal with it! We like to control our own time. Even though God created us for the freedom of this day, we voluntarily become slaves once again. Go figure. Sabbath is not useless time. It is time we use. It is time we stop --- in order to remember. That’s all that Sabbath first meant in Hebrew, to stop! And when we stop, we remember what life is truly about. And it’s not about money. It’s about people. It’s about love, community, compassion, tenderness, celebration, kindness, sharing. Sabbath reminds us that we are creatures and not the Creator, and that we have a destiny, a purpose, and a direction for our lives.

There is a biblical word for our refusal to stop. It is idolatry. It is our refusal not to be God. We even sin against Sunday, turning it into just another day of sports, practices, computers and I-phones, and forget all about God, the one who gave us our lives and all that we have.

Tilden Edwards says that it is important to find some way of specifically signaling withdrawal, when we go on Sabbath. The first priority should be Mass! He then suggests we dress differently (we use to talk about our ‘Sunday best’), put out the good linen and china and spend extra time enjoying the meal, turn off the TV, leave the computer off, put the cell phones away, do something specific which signals to us, and to the world, that we are on Sabbath. (Adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, sermon from Duke Chapel, quoted in Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2006, p. 22)

Second, its’ SUMMERTIME! And the living is easy! Or at least a little easier! In our country, that means a time of vacation, rest, and renewal, but not necessarily for all of us. The word is out. Americans take less time off and enjoy fewer days of vacation than just about any industrialized nation in the West. Americans average just over 2 weeks of summer vacation. That makes us vacation misers when compared with say, the Germans (whom we always think of as such hard workers), who enjoy an average of 6 weeks of vacation, or the French, who have over 5 weeks of vacation. The Italians take the entire month of August off. Try to find a native Roman wondering the streets of Rome in August. Americans are working more and producing more, to be sure, but we are working longer in order to do it. Also, the French, Germans and Italians have a lot more holidays throughout the year on top of all of this summer vacation! Surprisingly, the average productivity of the Germans or the French is not much less than that of Americans, especially considering how many more hours Americans work. I don’t know about the Italians productivity – but their food is the best in the world! I think they spend more time eating than anyone else! When we were students we used to joke that the Italians would never go to war again – because it would interrupt dinner! Now that’s just my opinion. My humble opinion. My humble but correct opinion!!!

Which brings us, as you knew it eventually would, back to this Sunday’s gospel. Jesus and His disciples had been busy. When His disciples gather to report on “all that they had done and taught” (Mk 6:30), They probably expect Jesus to be really impressed. But He simply said to them, “Let’s blow this popsicle stand and go someplace for a couple of beers.” Or something like that! (6:31). Mark says that Jesus proposed this vacation because “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” (6:31). I hear people all the time bragging about the fact that they eat their lunch at their desk. Big deal! It just says they don’t know how to balance their lives – or maybe they have no friends! Or they are slaves – not to Pharaoh, but to their work, or their paycheck.

Which brings me to our third point. We SAY in the creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” which is to say that we believe that it is not up to us to make the world come out right. God not only created, but is yet creating and creative. Our God is not dead, nor inactive, or ineffective.

SO, WE CAN TAKE TIME OFF!!! REALLY!!! And the world just won't stop. It will go right on without us – at least until Monday! We can relish times of inactivity, reflection, a leisurely meal with family and friends, and the good grace of doing nothing. Sunday Mass gives us a taste of this. Here, while we do much activity – praying, singing, listening, meditating – little of it is useful, productive, or essential, as the world defines these matters. We are here relaxing, resting, simply enjoying being with one another and with God. Christians believe that these Sunday gatherings are a foretaste of eternity – when we shall have nothing better to do but to rest from our labors, to relax and to enjoy being in the presence of God and others, not just one day a week, but always. Our destiny, in God's hands, is rest – Sabbath rest forever.

That rest is a great tribute to God. Our ultimate destiny is not in our hands. It is not the result of our vigorous, hard work, or even our good work. The significance of our lives is in what God is doing in us, not in what we do.

We all know people who brag about the fact that they have never taken all of their vacation time. They consider their lack of time away from work a great virtue. Vacations? Those are for wimps who don't enjoy their work and who are always whining about how tired they are, not for good, sturdy stock like them.

But to fail to take vacation is a vice, not a virtue. It shows that we have little life outside of work, that we think that the company/church's entire fortune rests solely on our sturdy, restless shoulders. It isn't that we are so strong, so committed to our work that we don't need vacations. Rather, it is that we are vain, full of self-righteous pride, and self-absorbed. Ask their families about them. Their families resent their workaholism, despite whatever financial perks it may bring.

We stress the commands of Jesus to love the poor, to feed the hungry, to bind up other's wounds, and to bear one another's burdens. We don't want to miss out on the command to rest. To stop. Catholic Social Teaching says that all workers have a RIGHT to 2 weeks of vacation! BECAUSE WE ARE NOT SLAVES!

Thank God, the world is not in our hands; the future is not ours to determine. We can do God's work as it is entrusted to us. We can work and pray and do our best to be light and salt to the world. And then we take Sabbath, resting secure in the faith that the most important work is God's.

SO, if you have not yet taken a vacation, gotten away from it all, experienced a change of scenery, or wandered into the woods or along the beach or at Lake Jordan, I hope that you do it soon. It's a command of Jesus that is easy to follow! TAKE A VACATION! TAKE A REST! CHILL OUT FOR GOD'S SAKE! -- AND FOR YOUR SAKE AND YOUR FAMILY'S!

I hereby COMMAND YOU – HAVE SOME FUN! FOR GOD'S SAKE! LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN! (adapted from Willimon, IBID., p. 20=21)