

Sabbatical
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UUMSB

This is my last Sunday in worship with you until the end of my sabbatical in November. A sabbatical is an opportunity for renewal through spiritual reflection, growth, and development—and rest. It has the same word root as sabbath, a day of rest. I have tried to keep my plans simple. I am going to work my way through a stack of books that will aid me in my ministry, do some writing on a worship project I have had in the hopper since 2008, and work with my husband Tadd to get our small farm rolling. We are going to be tilling, planting, and doing some work on our house. I am going to feed some of the spiritual wells that aid me in my ministry including time in nature, time in quiet, and I am going to deepen collegial relationships, traveling around the area to worship with other congregations, learning about other communities, gathering ideas and stories. I am also going to have unstructured time, which I don't usually have a lot of in my day to day. I am hoping for many evenings without a "do list" other than to see what seems fun.

Rebecca Parker suggests that keeping Sabbath time is a radical departure from not only the day to day of life, but broadly from our culture. She writes "I have come to understand that if I am to recover from violence, live in love, and contribute to healing and transformation, I need to engage in spiritual practices that preserve knowledge beyond what the dominant culture tells me about who I am."¹ What does the dominant culture tell us about how we should be spending our time? What are we supposed to be doing? Working, looking beautiful, smelling different, being entertained, driving a new car and on and on. Parker suggests that spending all our time in these ways can lead to spiritual numbness. If we were to be open to all of the beauty and the pain there is in the world at all times, we would be overwhelmed. But—if we hold these feelings at bay, we can be spiritually numb to our experience and the experience of others. Heschel wrote, "The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world."² Heschel encourages us in the practice of observing Sabbath, to move away from the "results and world of creation." Attention to time, the eternal, to rest, to being away from "shoulds" can help us as individuals and as a community to be spiritually open rather than numb, and to be fed so that we might do the work of building a beloved community and caring for one another and the world.

In college I took an anthropology class that was way over my head. But I remember learning about time out of time, and what is called liminal time, or being on both sides of a social or experiential boundary. Time out of time is space where the usual rules don't apply. Back in the early days of the United States, the Puritans banned the public celebration of Christmas, in part because traditions included revelry and people engaging in behaviors that were not part of

1 Parker, "Spiritual Practice for our Time" in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, 141-2.

2 Heschel, *ibid*

their normal way of being, creating liminal space. Celebrations included plays with cross dressing, aggressive begging and sometimes thievery from the wealthy, all of which set the social order on its head. Time out of time is important because it helps us to change and process change. When we are in a liminal time we explore new roles and ways of being in the world. It helps us see our lives and the lives of those around us with different perspective.

As we move into the next church year, we will go through rituals, holidays and traditions differently than we have in the last eight years that I have been the minister for this community. Ministerial sabbatical is an opportunity for a minister to learn, recharge, and change, and it is also an opportunity for the congregation to do the same. Some of you, through your help in covering tasks and that I normally do, may find opportunities to deepen your spiritual practice, or see congregational life in new ways. To be in relationship with a minister, who will return, but is not present, is in a sense, to be on a boundary. Our sabbatical time will help us all bring a fresh set of eyes to the work of the community.

In the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible, the people of Israel are on a journey. When Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to talk with God and receive the commandments, he is in liminal time-- it is holy space and a mountain, time passes, but not in a "normal" way, he is a human interacting with creative forces. In Exodus, chapter 33, Moses asks to see God's glory. God says that if they were to show Moses their own face that Moses would not survive. So God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and says, "I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."³ So, Moses gets to see God's back. Because he has seen this, when he comes back to his community with the commandments and to tell them all he learned about God, his face is shining so much that it is hard to look at him. His change in his understanding and faith are reflected in his appearance. When we come back from time out of time, sometimes our outside has changed. We might have a sunburn, or new clothes, or dirt under our fingernails. But more often, we are changed on the inside. We are changed in how we understand ourselves, how we understand our work, our future, and our community. When we allow ourselves to try on different roles, to go to new places, or to engage with new things, we are then better able to process change, and be renewed, in our daily life. Time out of time is food for the day to day. It helps us to step back and gain new perspective.

During our sabbatical time, our community will be well cared for by lay people and committees, by Sheena, our administrator, and by Rev. Kathy Duhon, UUMSB's minister emerita, who will provide pastoral support. Time that is set aside for liminal space, for ritual, for trying on new roles, for rest, can be transformative. The grace this morning is to realize that not only big moments like a sabbatical can carve out time for reflection and renewal. With attention to our relationship with time and expectation, each week, each day, we can remain open, compassionate, and ready for change.

Blessings to all of us on our journey. Amen.

³ Exodus 33:22-23.