



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Keeping Our Hearts Together at Arm's Length

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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at Arm's Length**
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Luke 13:10-17

One of my earliest memories of church is sitting with my grandfather and my parents, my aunts and grandmother in the choir; and the choir would stand, and the introit was always the same: “God is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silent before him.”

And then, this man in a big black robe would stand up, start talking, and never shut up! There was a big disconnect! What was said and what we did didn't seem to go together for this four or five-year-old.

I know better now, especially as I sit here talking in a very silent sanctuary. I saw a story of one church and what they did with no one able to attend the worship service; they took the pictures from the church directory, enlarged them, and taped the pictures to where everyone would be sitting in their pew, and then had the camera show the “people” in their pew!

It was a very visible reminder for their virtual connection, because we know how much we really need each other, being with each other. That is very much a part, I think, of keeping the Sabbath holy.

We want to say thanks to all of you who contacted us after last week's video with words of appreciation and gratitude for being able to have this time together.

“Thanks for helping us stay connected” so many of you said, or as one as person wrote, *“reminding us of how important it is to be with my church family”* or maybe this person spoke

for many of you, “...feeling kind of sad and lonesome and this helped me think of the people I usually sit with.”

‘Connection’ is the picture of the first Christians in the Acts of the Apostles that “they spent much time together,” and Paul speaks to this connection when he says to the church in Rome, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you...Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

Of course, we think of that time in our worship service when we are called to ‘pass the peace’, to welcome each other, to greet one another.

Even as we began to deal with the coronavirus and flu season, it was a nod and a smile or an elbow knock that was a liturgical statement of welcome and forgiveness, the joy of connecting with someone else.

And I know we miss this part of Sabbath, but we know that our God is greater than a handshake and a hello at keeping our hearts together.

Marva Dawn, in her book Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, is helpful here as she enlarges the word ‘connection’ and gives us a picture with the word ‘embrace’, keeping Sabbath, staying connected.

I know that ‘embrace’ is not so familiar when we think of Sabbath; ‘cease’ and ‘rest’, yes, those are Sabbath words. But ‘embrace’? Listen to Marva Dawn. She says, “By embracing God’s instructions in response to his immense grace and love, we choose to imitate God.”

In other words, by embracing God’s command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, not only can we keep our

Keeping Our Hearts Together at Arm's Length

sanity in times like these, but we can keep our hearts together when we have to live at arm's length.

Look back at our story in Luke's gospel when Jesus heals a nameless woman on the Sabbath. The rules were in place about ceasing and resting on the Sabbath so God would be glorified.

It would be easy to say that Jesus was doing the right thing by healing the woman, just in the wrong place at the wrong time, in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In fact, the leader of the synagogue says, "We're not against healing, just come back tomorrow. We're closed for healing today."

But Jesus seems to suggest that Sabbath was sacred because it is more than that place and or that day and this bent-over woman's claim to the sacred is good any day of the week.

He calls her to come to him...but hadn't he read his Bible...in Deuteronomy...she was unclean, to be avoided at all costs.

He called her "a daughter of Abraham", a child of the promise of God. This woman is just as worthy to receive God's grace and love as any of those men standing around in all their glory with their stingy hold on the sacred.

Jesus touches her, an embrace that sets her free from her affliction, and in the words that are used, sets her free to enjoy the fullness of life forever.

We need that Sabbath embrace from Jesus...yes, those afflicted with COVID-19. I have a friend who is on ventilator, receiving treatment, his wife quarantined at home. Maybe you, too, have someone who needs our prayers for that embrace.

For many of us, though, we need the embrace that frees us from the fear and anxieties that afflict us, a freedom to make good decisions about our life and the lives of others in the days ahead, a freedom to treat everyone as a child of God with full access to all that we hold sacred so that no one is left vulnerable to the cruelties of this pandemic.

I remember what Jesus said at another time, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens...if you come to me, you will find everything that is to be contained in the Sabbath day: rest, refreshment, restoration, renewal!”*

Jesus offers what the Sabbath day offers. Jesus is Sabbath.

When we embrace the Sabbath of Jesus:

- we embrace a world out of control with justice,
- we embrace an untrusting world with truth,
- we embrace a self-centered world with generosity,
- we embrace a cruel world with kindness,
- we embrace an intolerant and vengeful world with divine patience,
- we embrace a corrupt world with peace,
- we embrace a sorrowful world with joy,
- we embrace a divided world with love.

We are being forced to distance ourselves socially in these days, yet at the same time Sabbath reminds us to embrace

Keeping Our Hearts Together at Arm's Length

our humanity: To take care of people over profit; where the weak share the strength of the strong; the old are supported by the young; where pain and sorrow and despair find compassion, joy, and hope.

So, we must choose what kind of Sabbath we want to keep for God, that what we say and what do goes together: A time for God? Time to figure out where God is within our lives and our world? Time to remember who our neighbor is? A time to find creative and imaginative ways to embrace our neighbor?

I close with these words by Laura Kelly Fanucci that I think will help us make those choices:

*When this is over,
may we never again
take for granted
A handshake with a stranger
Full shelves at the store
Conversations with neighbors
A crowded theater
Friday night out
The taste of communion
A routine checkup
The school rush each morning
Coffee with a friend
The stadium roaring
Each deep breath
A boring Tuesday
Life itself.*

*When this ends,
may we find
that we have become
more like the people*

*we wanted to be
we were called to be
we hope to be
may we stay
that way – better
for each other
because of the worst.*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org