

## *Sabbath Time*

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Readings: Exodus 20:12, 8-11  
Hebrews 4:1-11  
Mark 2:23-28

I want to start this morning with part of an article written by Eugene Peterson, a pastor and author of many popular and fairly traditional books:

*I got into it early, and engaged in my sin with gusto. As I developed in the Christian faith, I was examined and instructed in ways to discern, repent of, and defend against the classic sins that interfered with faith and love and hope. When I became a pastor, I was subject to even more rigorous examination. But not once did anyone call me on this sin. Instead, I was—if you can believe it—commended in my lawbreaking. In fact, at one critical point in my life, when I was out-of-control obsessive in my indulgence of this sin, I was rewarded with the largest single annual increase in salary I have ever received.*

*It is the American bargain-basement sin, on sale in virtually every American church. The sin? Sabbath breaking... (“Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker,” *Christianity Today*, 1988.)*

Are we Sabbath breakers or Sabbath keepers? Or maybe we’re a little of both? In the book of Genesis it says that God sets aside a certain amount of time of rest as holy and sacred. The scripture says that this was a time when even God rested: “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because God rested from all the work God had done in creation” (Gen. 2:3). Here we have a glimpse into what it means to be *whole*. God modeled Sabbath wholeness; it’s a gift for our well-being. “But,” as Barbara Brown Taylor said, “we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command.”

We live; we also rest.

We act; we also reflect.

We give; we also receive.

We work; we also relax.

Keeping the Sabbath holy was one of the foundations of faith for the people of God. The fourth commandment is “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. In Deuteronomy, Sabbath as the day of rest from labor was also a reminder of God delivering the people from the oppression of their taskmasters in Egypt. Sabbath is a sign of God’s desire that people are not mere cogs in a machine; it is a sign of God liberating people from a life of mere drudgery and toil.

*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)*

So part of Sabbath *is about justice*. This is often overlooked. Sabbath is about treating all people with dignity and not allowing them to be exploited for their work. The notion of Sabbath is more than just personal wholeness; it also involves a concern for *providing rest for others*: family, strangers, workers, animals and even the land. “Hallow the Sabbath,” means to hallow one another, to hallow the cattle, to hallow the earth. It is a statement about human relationships. It is not just individual completeness, but completeness for community and society. In a world that is organized and centered around tasks and results, Sabbath emphasizes the value of relationship—with our children, with our friends, with the world.

Sabbath is the experience of being able to trace the deep connections and make them bolder. Time stands still, suspended, and we feel our connections, our relations with humanity, with creation. It is be aware of our unity.

After the industrial revolution, our world change, and people eventually saw the need to set some limits. This happened largely through labor unions and legislation. For example, the 40-hour workweek was established. Better working conditions, safety laws, pension funds, the abolition of child labor all followed.

These are just some of the ways that even society has recognized the need for rest, and the need for time for personal wholeness and for family wholeness. Even our secular society, to a limited extent, realizes this need. Just look at all the talk about stress management and stress seminars. Even society is learning that we do not live by bread alone and that we need time set aside to rest, to integrate, and to center ourselves, and that *all* people deserve this.

But lately, the American worker has been losing ground in this area. Many have felt the pressure of stagnant wages, cuts in benefits and demands to work longer and harder. Parents have less and less time to spend with their families, sometimes working two or three jobs, sometimes working 60, 70 or 80 hours a week.

So we know about and hear about Sabbath, yet we resist. As individuals, we often stoke our egos and strive for achievement at the expense of Sabbath time. As a society we deny Sabbath time for others by denying living wage jobs and make lives difficult, harsh and without much rest.

It’s getting harder and harder to practice Sabbath in our world today of email and cell phones. And much of this we impose upon ourselves. Many of us feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. Wayne Muller described it well:

*It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: “I am so busy.” We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath—this has become the model of a successful life. (Sabbath: Remember the Sacred Rhythm of Rest and Delight, 1999).*

In today’s modern world, Sabbath is in serious danger of being totally lost. As a kid, I remember that Sundays were days that I couldn’t get anything done even if I wanted to. Typically we would go to church, so there goes the morning right there! Then most of the time we would go to my grandparents’ house. I can remember that whenever we arrived I always smelled pot roast in the oven, and everything seemed really quiet at their house. I could even hear the clock in the living room, “tic, tic, tic.” Then down into the family room we would go to take part in the great American tradition, watching football. There would be a fire in the fireplace, and it smelled good. And I would take my usual place on the sofa, which always felt so warm and cozy. Then we had dinner: pot roast, potatoes, green beans, and that jello salad with fruit in it. I came to enjoy our time together, even though I would never admit this at the time. Sometimes I would play chess with my grandpa or Chinese checkers with my sister. Or sometimes I would just sit and listen to everybody talk.

I had to forget about homework or practicing my music or anything else that I was responsible for. It was a kind of a *forced relaxation*, which is part of what Sabbath is. Sabbath says, “You may not want to do this, but you need to be kind to yourself.”

“In returning and rest you shall be saved,” wrote the prophet, “in quietness and confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15). Frederick Buechner wrote,

*We return to our deep strength and to the confidence that lies beneath all our misgiving. The quiet there, the rest, is beyond the reach of the world to disturb. It is how being saved sounds.*

Jesus said, “Come unto me all who *labor and are heavily burdened*, and I will give you *rest*” (Mt. 11:28). This is the saving, redeeming activity of God. This is what the idea of Sabbath is about. Jesus himself was regularly withdrawing, stopping and reflecting. He would take breaks with his disciples. He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (Mark 6:31).

Yet even though Jesus practiced Sabbath in his own living, there were many instances when Jesus was accused of the opposite—accused of disregarding the observance of Sabbath. Many accused Jesus of breaking the law and undermining the Tradition, but Jesus clearly though he was following its spirit. He said, “I come not to abolish the law, but to *fulfill* it.” Jesus said, “Look, Sabbath was created for you, for your own well-being. It’s not something for you to ignore or manipulate.”

For Jesus, remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy meant bringing life into the Sabbath Day, so he performs acts of healing and compassion on that day, too. And it also meant injecting Sabbath into *each day, all of life*, and so he took time to rest, pray and reflect on more than just the seventh day. And so simply supper together each day is a way of practicing Sabbath time, for example.

The call of Christ, the demand of Sabbath, it to live a *balanced life, a whole life*.

Maria Harris has pointed out that the idea behind Sabbath is *completion*. She said that the image of time which is dominant in our society is sequential, a series of points moving from the past through present to the future. In our culture, our meaning is based upon where we find ourselves along this continuum. But the idea behind Sabbath is that there is a fuller understanding of time. There is a sense in which Sabbath is an invitation in the direction of *depth*, rather than distance, that each moment, no matter where it may fall on the continuum, has infinite amounts of meaning. Abraham Heschel has said,

*[Sabbath] is like a palace in time...The meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space...In Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness of time.*

We are to stop... and roam through this palace. Heschel, in fact, suggests that the meaning of the verb, *shavat*, is “to be complete.” Normally the command is “to rest, to cease, to desist from work, to let go.” So what Heschel is pointing out is that, contrary to our culture, the law of Sabbath asserts that human beings become complete not just by doing, but by non-doing, by rest. Sabbath holds these two ideas of *rest* and *completion* together.

So you see, the idea of Sabbath is much bigger than a certain day. We are to have Sabbath time *all through* our lives. It is a *way of living*, incorporated into our *entire being*.

Some people think of Sabbath as sort of a vacation, and this is not an entirely bad image. The word, “sabbatical,” comes from Sabbath, and the idea is to withdraw to a quiet place to relax and renewed to go back in—with new strength and vigor. Yet it is also more than just relaxation.

Peterson put it this way. He says that keeping Sabbath is really about two things: playing and praying. We need both, but it is difficult to integrate them. He wrote,

*In America we have conspicuous examples of widespread observance of half-Sabbaths, prayerful Sabbaths without any play, and playful Sabbaths without any prayer.*

So Sabbath is not just relaxation and rest, it is about resting in the Sacred Presence. It is about trusting a Reality that embraces us when we are resting. It is to be still with a *clear intention*. It is to be quiet and *to listen*. Sabbath is about falling asleep in the arms of

God and trusting in those arms. It is to experience and enjoy life without guilt, to celebrate what is beautiful and good with gratitude and wonder, without thinking you should be doing something. You know, it is often pointed out that we are human *beings*, not human *doings*. It is good to focus on our true essence regularly. It is healthy to be continually aware.

Jesus often said that we need to be more like children. Sabbath is to remember what it's like to be a child, to *simply be* in the world and experience it with wonder.

Sabbath invites us to take joy not in what will be or what might be, but to take joy in what *already is*. It is to savor the simple pleasures of life and God's love and acceptance. I like to think of it as practicing living in the "sufficiency of grace." We say that God's grace is sufficient for us, but how often do we actually live this way? Sabbath time is to say for that moment we don't need to achieve anything; we don't need to produce results; we even need approval or respect from others. There's only one thing we truly need, and we already have it: God's presence, God's grace.

Sabbath is to stop activity and to "find it (life) good" and say that life itself is miraculous and beautiful, and that God is present at the heart of each moment, and that noting is more important.

Theologically, this can also be described as the problem with idolatry. It is written, "You shall have no other gods before me." But often, work, schedules and achievement become idols to us. Often we find ourselves under the spell of these masters without even knowing it. And the principle involved here is that if anything begins to assume *that* kind of importance, then we must release it and practice letting it go. John Calvin wrote,

*Sabbath keeping is way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God...*

*On the Sabbath we cease our work so God can do God's work in us.*

Friends, in his own way, Jesus restored the Hebrew concept of Sabbath, which itself had become an idol. Jesus reintroduced a way to deal with the destructive power of idolatry and shared a regular way of living to keep us whole and maintain our health. It is not restricted to one day of the week; it is a way of living each day.

It is an act of faith and is a faithful act. It is a giving up. It is an enjoyment of God and the world. As the poet wrote, "Everyday do something that won't compute." It is when we take the time to feel the depth of life and sense the presence of the Holy. It is to trust, to rest and to fall asleep in the arms of God.