

“Take a Rest”

September 13, 2020

Sabbath: Holy Rest series – Livestream

It was October 2002. I had been serving in pastoral ministry for just over a year, and it had been a tumultuous year – with September 11, 2001 coming just two months after I had started serving in my first appointment. Ivan and I had been married just over two years. I was still figuring out how to balance work and life and everything else.

Bishop Linda Lee called a mandatory clergy session. Now called sessions usually happen only when we gather for Annual Conference, but this was different. All clergy in Michigan had to go to Lansing for a gathering about Sabbath. It wasn't a choice or option; it was a requirement. Wayne Muller, an author, was the presenter. He had just written this book called *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*.

There was some pushback from pastors, including comments like, “I don't have time to come and learn about Sabbath.” I hope you catch the irony. Our resident bishop – the pastor to pastors – was telling us to come and rest and learn about the importance of keeping Sabbath time. And some of us didn't think we had the time to do it! We were too busy!

And so it goes when we talk about Sabbath. This command from God bumps up against our “go, go, go,” always more to do, always busy way of living and calls us to stop from creating and rest. Perhaps some of us can relate to the image of a low battery signal. **SHOW SLIDE:** Low battery. We know the feeling of being drained and having no more to give. We know the irritability that comes with exhaustion. There are consequences of going too hard for too long. We know that our bodies, our minds, and our spirits are tired and weary when we don't take the time to rest. Yet, rest is holy time. “If you get tired, learn to rest, not quit.” It's good advice. **SHOW MEDIA:** brother to sister - “You need a nap.”

Sabbath doesn't necessarily mean sleep, although that's important. We follow the pattern of our God who created, looked around at all of it, exhaled, and rested. Remember when we looked at all of the special times in Leviticus 23 a few weeks ago? The first appointed time that God told Moses to give the Israelites was the Sabbath day – a holy time. It was a day for no work to be done by anyone. Every seven days...a call to rest.

God was forming the Israelites into a holy nation, but they were also coming from a place where all they had done was work. They had been slaves in Egypt. They were

valued only for the work they could do. So this command reminded them that they were valued because God created them and loved them. It's simple, and yet profound.

I shared this insight from one commentator: "A sabbath or a festival was like a kiss between lovers. It gathered into a special moment what is always true." Sabbath reminds us of what is true. We are not loved by God because of what we can do or all that we accomplish. We are loved because of who we are as God's beloved. We have to slow down in order to hear God's word of grace for us. Our bodies, our minds, our spirits need rest if we are to love God and love others – if we are to care for ourselves and others.

Hymn writer Carolyn Winfrey Gillette says that we have a longing in our hearts for this time apart – time set apart – time that is different from the everyday work we do. She also writes that our lives are more than the work we do. That's quite a word to hear, especially as the line between work and home has become more blurred for some of us in the past few months!

But how many of us pride ourselves on our busyness and our productivity? "Our culture invariably supposes that doing something—anything—is better than doing nothing." A therapist shared that she sees a direct connection between whether people feel productive and how they feel about themselves. Our self-esteem and self-worth can sometimes become too tied to what we do instead of who we are.

When someone asks how we're doing, many times we say, "I'm fine." But maybe our reply is "I'm so busy!" I don't think it's an accident that in the Chinese language, the word "busy" is made up of two characters that mean "heart" and "killing." We're hurting ourselves when we prize busyness as a way of life. We're hurting our hearts. When we honor Sabbath, when we claim that much-needed rhythm of work and rest, we do better at loving God and loving neighbor.

SHOW SLIDE – Ten Commandments – Sabbath is pivotal

Notice how these ten words from God are laid out. The first three deal with our relationship with God (worship God alone, don't make idols, don't misuse God's name), and the last six focus on our relationships with others—with our neighbors (honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, and don't covet). It's interesting that the Sabbath commandment falls right in-between. Walter Brueggemann cautions us: "Worship that does not lead to neighborly compassion and justice cannot be faithful worship of YHWH. The offer is a phony Sabbath!" So that connection between worship and mission - love of God and love of neighbor - is real!

I talked to Rabbi Alpert this week, and he said that every day is holy, but that the seventh day – the Sabbath – is a time to remember God as Creator and to worship God. It's time set apart to be re-created, renewed, and re-remembered (put back together).

And when we discussed the Sabbath commandment as the pivotal role, he mentioned that connection between humanity and divinity. We are profoundly connected to God and each other. Our lives depend on each other, and Sabbath reminds us of that deep truth.

Walter Brueggemann says, “In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by...production and consumption...”

It’s a challenge, isn’t it? Work is important, but so is rest. I grew up on a dairy farm. It was constant work for my parents, and my sisters did a lot of work. I had a few jobs as the youngest kid, but any kind of rest required that my parents get help to cover the chores. It took planning, attention, and intention, and the same is true for us. No one will keep the Sabbath for us. No one will remember the Sabbath for us. We have to keep the boundary around it. It requires planning, attention, and intention.

Eugene Peterson says, “If you don’t take a Sabbath, something is wrong. You’re doing too much, you’re being too much in charge. You’ve got to quit, one day a week, and just watch what God is doing when you’re not doing anything.” I’m challenged by that thought – that perhaps we don’t always experience God clearly because we’re not expectant and waiting and watching for what God is doing.

I was listening to and praying with Pastor Anita McCants from Philip Chapel AME Church, and she reminded me that sometimes we’re not coming to worship expecting God to show up or ready to watch what God is doing. It was a powerful reminder even as we’re gathering in a different way. Are we watching for God?

We have to hear that challenge to consider how honoring the Sabbath stands against what we prize in terms of doing and getting - production and consumption. Jeff Foster writes, “Time does not always need to be filled.”

Sabbath is about being and remembering who we are. It’s not a vacation day or a day off. It’s a different time that we set aside (hopefully each week) to connect with God in worship and in life. There was another spiritual retreat that I attended early on, and the leader surprised me when he said, “You know, no one is truly able to multi-task.”

I had prided myself on being able to do more than one thing at once, and I’m still haunted by that word. Even though I don’t want to admit it, he’s probably right. I find myself caught in moments when someone is trying to get my attention (usually a member of my family) and I’m trying to do something else – write a text or read over something. Sabbath invites us to focus on where we are and who’s around us. Wayne Muller writes, “Sabbath implies a willingness to be surprised by unexpected grace...”

And he writes, “If we refuse rest until we are finished, we will never rest until we die.” There’s always more to do, and yet we’re called to stop and rest – not quit, but rest.

If you already do a great job at remembering the Sabbath and keeping a day set apart, please tell me your secret! If you’re working on it, perhaps we can try to find Sabbath time every day. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, a Presbyterian pastor, says that Sabbath is to “let time have its way with us.” I would also invite us to ask the question: how am I experiencing God’s holiness in this moment? That may lead us to a fruitful Sabbath time.

I would encourage us to find a time to take a technology Sabbath – put away the phone or tablet, turn off the TV, and just be without the distractions that surround us. Many of us have to use technology for work and school, but taking time away is important. Even if we take five minutes to sit in silence, we might be surprised by what God will do. One child says: “Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.”

Prayer has been called a “portable Sabbath.” We may have to put it into our routine—block out time to rest in the peace of God. If you’re wondering how to do it, consider if you might do this safely at a stoplight: take that moment to thank God for a specific blessing or offer a short prayer: “More of you, O God, less of me.” Even a moment can re-center our hearts.

Some of us find Sabbath in journaling, music, walking, reading Scripture, praying, gardening, sewing, creating, cooking, eating a good meal, being with others, or even sitting in silence. However, we keep and remember Sabbath, God wants to be with us. God wants to have time with us. God rejoices when we remember that we are not defined by or valued because of what we can do. We are valued because we are God’s beloved and are dearly loved. May we take a rest in God’s care.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD’S PRAYER