

A Sabbath Way of Life

Mark 2:23-3:6

June 2, 2024

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Years ago, on our first overseas vacation, my husband and I made a fairly common mistake that most novice travelers can be guilty of: we tried to do way too much. Over the three weeks we spent in Great Britain, we drove over 1800 miles, packed up our suitcases every other day and frantically moved on to the next place we felt we must see. After three weeks of this hectic and unrealistic pace, we were absolutely exhausted when we returned home. I remember telling a good friend soon after I needed a vacation from my vacation. Maybe you've had that experience, too.

The lesson I learned on that first overseas trip dramatically changed the way I travel now. Generally, I plant myself in one place for longer periods of time and give myself permission to do nothing if I'm tired. I may end up not seeing everything I want to see, but paying attention to my physical need for some form of sabbath rest now makes each trip far more enjoyable. The older I get, the idea of taking a cruise for a vacation is ever more appealing. Pack and unpack only once, and let the ship take you from place to place.

The ancient art of sabbath keeping of course has been lost in our 24/7 culture. A 40-hour work week for most professionals of my generation who wanted to get ahead vocationally became a thing of the past. Our smart phones are perhaps the most visible symbol of our frantic need to stay busy and engaged today, and I am as guilty of that as anyone else in this sanctuary. Even our kids and grandkids don't get a break. The message for teenagers today is work, work work, with school activities morning, noon and night, soccer and swimming and band practice on Sundays. No rest for those who want to go to a good college, who want to get ahead of the pack.

In her book *Practicing Our Faith* Dorothy Bass writes: "Americans need rest, and they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things. Moreover, the planet needs a rest from human plucking and burning and buying and selling."

In the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, God is busy creating for six days and then takes a day off. This is a different kind of God, a God who rests, a God who, in Walter Brueggemann's delightful words, says, "I'm not going into the office tomorrow. I've put in long hours every day all week and tomorrow I'm putting my feet up and enjoying what I've accomplished." This is a life-changing way of thinking: in the divine economy work is not finished until it is enjoyed in rest. There is a lesson in grace here—the world does not depend on our activity; we do not have sole responsibility for the grain growing, or any responsibility for the sun rising.

For years, poet Wendell Berry took a walk every Sunday morning and then went home to write a Sabbath poem. In one of those poems, he describes how we ache and sweat in our daily labors, "and yet no leaf or grain is filled/ By work of ours; the field is tilled/ And left to grace. That we may reap, / Great work is done while we're asleep."

The ancient Israelites took seriously this divine economy of sabbath rest and built an elaborate ritual structure around it to protect sabbath observance in the human economy. A day of rest on every seventh day meant exactly that: no work of any kind. No farming for the peasant class, and no healing in the temple precincts by the religious professionals.

Over time, what happened with the sabbath is that the ritual of sabbath observance became an end in itself and not a means to end. Pages of tedious rules and regulations evolved, and harsh punishments for sabbath violation were enforced. The joy and delight of rest became just one more ritual burden for the Hebrews.

Some of us are old enough to remember a time in our own culture when sabbath observance was serious business. Scottish Presbyterians have long memories about the rigidity and ritual burdens of sabbath. So do Missouri Synod Lutherans, as do Baptists who grew up in the South. Go to church on Sundays and then enjoy a leisurely meal with the family. No drinking. No entertainment. Businesses were closed on Sundays. So-called blue laws, rooted in Christian sabbath keeping, were commonplace in the United States. Even the civil authorities enforced the ritual observance, whether you were Christian or not.

I can remember that both of my parents, who grew up in this culture, did not speak fondly about the sabbath. In fact, their most vivid memories of it were when some member of the family was resourceful enough to violate the prohibitions and get away with it. The uncle who always found his way to the backyard patio on Sunday afternoons in the summer because the neighbor's radio was blasting the play-by-play of a major league baseball game. Or the teenage cousin who snuck out after Sunday dinner to join his friends for a forbidden cigarette or a dance in someone's living room. That's how my parents remembered the sabbath growing up.

Of course, this is what happens when a ritual becomes an end in itself. It turns into a burdensome obligation, a ball and chain around our neck, precisely the opposite of God's original intention, the joy and delight and renewal of sabbath rest.

And so, over the last century, our cultural pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other: from sabbath as burden all the way to our 24/7 lifestyle that leaves little room for sabbath today. Jesus, it seems to me, is aiming for us to embrace a middle ground in this story from Mark.

Practice the sabbath, he is saying to us. If you find yourself and your family all wrapped up in the 24/7 craziness that the world is demanding of you these days, make a bold, counter-cultural decision for sabbath rest. Say "no" to what your work and your kids and grandkids and the culture may be pressing you to say "yes" to. Your physical and emotional well-being and your family's spiritual well-being may depend on it.

On the other hand, practice the sabbath, Jesus is saying, but don't be rigid about it—if grain needs to be plucked, or a withered hand needs to be healed (the two examples in this text), don't be bound by legalistic rules when a higher purpose is served. Be flexible. Don't beat yourself up when you fall short. Dance, go to the movies, watch that ball game, do whatever gives you refreshment and delight. The sabbath was made for humankind, says Jesus, not humankind for the sabbath.

In moving us to the middle ground, I think, Jesus had something deeper in mind. His goal in arguing with the Pharisees was to restore sabbath observance to its true purposes. The sabbath is about participating in God's rest and God's justice for all. These are gifts from God that make life human and full.

So, let's admit that our Presbyterian forebearers were a little shortsighted in their rules and strict sabbath codes—they got the notes but not the music—but they were in their own way on the right track, I think. For followers of Jesus, the sabbath is a way of life, a way of training one's attention that leads to a quality of life that really *is* life. Deep in its disciplines is the goal of clearing away life's clutter and focusing on what truly matters. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it best. Practicing sabbath, she says, is letting God run things without my help. Amen.