

June 2, 2024  
2 Pentecost  
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### **Sabbath Rest: The Art of Doing Nothing**

*One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so, the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." Again, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Mark 2:23-3:6*

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus had a decision to make. Would he fall into another trap and allow tradition to be used to prop up and even distort the faith, or would he liberate the past in order to point to a new future and way of being and living in community. We can see which road he chose to travel when he said to the Pharisees, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." Or hear the version you may be more familiar with: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath."

The encounter of Jesus and the Pharisees offers us a look into how religion can divide or unite – how it can be used to pull down or lift up, to muddy the waters or to make things clearer, to push away or to invite in. It reminds us how Scripture is meant to bring about the fullness of life and love. What was done on the Sabbath was meant to make that point and draw the listener into the very heart of God.

Where does this meaning of the sabbath come from? We can start at the very beginning in Genesis 2: 2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

The word "sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word "shabbath," which refers to a day of rest. It simply means: God rested.

Early Christians moved their Sabbath from Saturday the seventh day to Sunday, the first day of the week and the day the resurrection is commemorated. Sunday is our sabbath.

We heard the directions from the Old Testament passage today from Deuteronomy. In a nutshell: keep it holy.

12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns. 5:12-15

No work. Not for you or your animals or alien residents -- today we might call them “undocumented immigrants.” Even they get the day off.

So, how do you think we are doing with the kind of rest that is being described here? On this day we honor graduates, how might we grade ourselves on our sabbath keeping? Does it seem outdated, unachievable, or even legalistic?

The Episcopal monks at the Society of St. John the Evangelist (SSJE) across the river from Boston have it stated quite plainly in one of their brochures that welcomes visitors to the monastery: “Rest: the gentle art of doing nothing.”

You might think that doing nothing is easy – just relaxing on the couch -- but it can be challenging for some. In our work and productivity focused society and economy, resting can be seen as downright wasteful.

Let’s consider some ways that doing nothing can remind us of the something God so wants us to know and remember.

I’m probably not be the only person here who remembers when I actually looked forward to flying in a plane. As a teenager my first-time flying was from Cleveland Washington D.C. for that rite of passage Junior High School trip that many young people still take to our nation’s capital. I sat by the window and took pictures as we fly over the Pentagon. Very exciting.

Today, not so much. As the years have gone on and as the airlines seems to pack more people onto planes – coupled with the unraveling of some social norms – flying is just no fun anymore. You might get a small bag of pretzels and drink of water. When I board a longer flight, I’ve given up on trying to sleep. I just can’t get settled and comfortable. I squirm in my seat. And I’ve self-diagnosed myself with restless leg syndrome – probably thanks to the many television commercials I’ve seen that have convinced me that I have it while flying. When I know I would be so much better off when we land if I rested and actually slept, my only fixed condition is restlessness.

Restlessness can describe anyone who thrives on constant motion but does not make much progress, let alone go deeper and further. We are a restless people.

“Busy” is the catch word of our day. Everyone is busy even if you are past your working years. This is when we can be reminded of the Chinese pictograph for “busy” is composed of two characters: *heart* and *killing*.

Four years ago, I went on a sabbatical – another form of the word sabbath -- I wanted to be very intentional about taking some time away from my parish work so that I could return renewed and refreshed. The global Pandemic crashed the party and my visit to the Holy Land, but nevertheless I appreciated the fact that this time was a precious gift to be given, because many people never get an extended time away for their jobs.

I wanted to learn more about Sabbath keeping. So of course I took a book with me by Wayne Mueller: Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives. I learned a few practical things I wanted to share.

First, a sabbath time need not be an entire day. This can be the first obstacle in trying to regain a sense of the holiness of this day. Who has the time? There can be such a thing as Sabbath afternoon or a Sabbath hour or a Sabbath walk. Remember that it is a time when we take our hand off the wheel – off the plow in the old days – and let God care for things.

Sabbath keeping is more than must an absence of work and a day off to catch up on errands. It can become a time to regain some needed balance.

And what is that balance for? To remember what is most important. Love of God and love of neighbor: this is what Christ wanted his disciples to live into. Sabbath is not just good for the person, it is good for whole community.

In Mark’s gospel the Pharisees, if they were strict followers of the Law, shouldn’t have even been out in that grainfield to even challenge Jesus, but nevertheless they challenged him. Jesus responded by pointing again to the reason of the sabbath. What does God desire? Life. When there is need, respond to it. If someone is hungry, don’t create reasons why not to help. When there is someone who is hurting and need of healing, turn to them, see them, pray for them, try to comfort them.

We hear in Matthew’s gospel Jesus said: 8 Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Matthew 10:8

Hear the wisdom of mystic Julian of Norwich: “For God is the Very Rest. God wishes to be known. And it pleases Him what we rest in Him. For all that is beneath Him will never satisfy us. Therefore, no soul is rested until it is emptied of all things that are made. When, for love of Him, it is emptied. The soul can receive his deep rest.”

As kids we used to play the game “Red Light, Green Light, Stop” for hours in our driveway. With our back to the others, we’d yell Red Light, no running. Then Green light and the kids could run to tag you. But when you yelled Stop, and they were still running they were out.

Sometimes we need to hear again what the sabbath can offer us. Surrender. Stop. We stop because in many ways our work will never to completely over. That is something I have wrestled with in three decades of ordained ministry. Muller, in his book, puts it this way. “Stop now. As the sun touches the horizon, take the hand off the plow, put down the phone, turn off the computer, leave the mop in the bucket and the car in the driveway. We stop because there are forces larger than we to take care of the universe. The galaxy will somehow manage without us for this hour, this day.”

Let us commit to giving Sabbath rest another go: the gentle art of doing nothing.”