

Discovering the Gift of Sabbath Rest

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” Exodus 20:8

Exodus 20:8-11 Isaiah 40:28-31 Matthew 11:28-30 Mark 6:30-32

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So how's your summer going so far? How many of you can answer that question something like this: "It's fantastic. There's been no stress, and I'm finding lots of time to simply relax. I'm almost getting too much rest." If you find that doesn't quite describe your experience, then this sermon is for you. Let's be honest. Chances are that most of us, if not all of us, don't get near enough rest. And I'm not just talking about the amount of sleep we get.

Last Sunday I preached from Matthew 11:28-30, a passage known as The Great Invitation, "**Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.**" In context, however, we learned that Jesus wasn't directly addressing the weariness we experience when burdened by living life itself. That would include things like our obligations, responsibilities, and concerns related to our jobs and careers, our finances or relationships, our own vices or addictions, or even by the things related to our health and well-being.

We discovered that the rest Jesus offers in that specific biblical passage concerns those of us who have become weary and burdened by trying to earn God's favor and blessing by attempting to be perfect. (Any perfectionists out there?) I summarized it this way, **God's grace is always lighter and easier to bear than religious legalism!** Many of us learned that the hard way.

Now, I'd be in violation of my own standards of biblical interpretation if I said it would be okay to remove this passage from its original context and intent and apply it to something else. We call that cherry-picking, and I'm not for it. So I decided to look for other scripture passages that more specifically address the issue of experiencing the weariness and burdens that come simply from living life. As it turns out, Jesus does address this directly.

When Jesus' disciples return after being sent out two by two to minister throughout the region, we learn in Mark 6 that they told Jesus that in all their coming and going they didn't even have leisure time to eat. Now that may sound like something in which you can relate. So Jesus acknowledges their weariness with the invitation, "**Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while**" (Mark 6:31).

Rest. **What is rest?** It can be defined as "**freedom from activity or labor, to refrain from exertion**", or "**to be free from anxiety or disturbance.**" Given that, I wonder if any of us have really experienced much rest. There's comfort to be found, however, in the simple fact that the scriptures acknowledge that it is human nature to get exhausted and just plain tired out – if not burned out.

As we heard a moment ago in a reading from Exodus 20, one of the Ten Commandments deals with the very human need to take a break from work. We are actually commanded to take time to rest. **“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.** For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” Translation, “Thou shalt chill out.” The literal translation of the root of the Hebrew word for ‘sabbath’ is ‘to cease’ – to stop what you are doing! Most of us, however, simply use our rest time to exchange one kind of doing for another.

The prophet in the book of Isaiah, as we also heard, acknowledges that those who found themselves in exile in Babylon were weary, so he instructed them to wait for the Lord to renew their strength. A popular verse here at College Hill, Isaiah 40:31 provides the following comforting words: **“But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,** they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

So what can we glean from these Old and New Testament passages that encourage us to get some rest for our weary bodies, minds, and souls? Several years ago *Sojourners Magazine* had an article by Jewish Rabbi Arthur Waskow entitled, “Radical Shabbat: Free Time, Free People.” It is subtitled, “Honoring work and restful renewal are both aspects of responsibility.” He reflects how most Americans today have less time to raise children, share neighborhood concerns, or develop our spiritual life. The rabbi asks, “Why is this happening?” and then answers, “Because doing, making, profiting, producing, and consuming have been elevated to idols.” The biblical concept of Sabbath is a critique of these idolatries. Contemporary religious leader Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command.”

It’s not that doing, working, and making are intrinsically bad, it’s just that a society that never pauses has a hard time affirming community, relationships, family, as well as physical, spiritual and mental health. So it is helpful to recognize that Jesus encourages the disciples to care for themselves. We are no different from those disciples when it comes to our need for rest. **We must be intentional about self-care!**

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) released a paper back in 2000 entitled, “An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift.” See if the following excerpt doesn’t ring true for you, and perhaps for us as a congregation:

For some the need for Sabbath emerges as a cry from within. Exhausted, we yearn over the loss of time to rejoice in those closest to us, or simply to play, to rest and be still, to delight in the goodness that we believe yet surrounds us.

For some the need for Sabbath names itself in quiet grief. Grief that we are moving faster and faster in our lives, but the only progress we seem to make is into a greater emptiness. Grief that the ways we have strained so conscientiously to live are simply not working. Grief that although we partake abundantly from the table our culture spreads before us, we come away from the table still hungry, as hurried and pressed as ever rather than nourished and renewed.

So what's the answer? To put it most simply: **Rediscovering the gift of Sabbath.** Referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath, our own John Calvin (who helped invent the 'Protestant work ethic' 500 years ago) declares that *sabbath* simply reflects God's genuine concern for God's people. Calvin writes, "**Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing.**" And as that General Assembly report states, "And so Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is, even as God rested on the seventh day and rejoiced in all the goodness of creation."

Sabbath, however, is not only a time for our physical and mental rest and renewal. It is also a time for our **spiritual growth**, of deepening our connection with the Sacred Presence of God which dwells within all of creation, including ourselves – within you and me. "On the Sabbath," writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "we especially care for the need of eternity planted in the soul." John Calvin simply tells us, "On the Sabbath, we cease our work so God can do God's work in us."

Sabbath keeping is also a way of living out our Reformed/Presbyterian understanding that ultimately we are not our own, but that we belong to God. **Good and faithful stewardship, therefore, includes not only the giving of yourself and your resources, but also taking care of yourself. That's something many of us forget or neglect to do from time to time.**

The goal of sabbath rest is to find refreshment and rejuvenation. So how you and I accomplish that may vary. For some, it may involve taking a break from other people and outside activities. For others, it may mean engaging more with other people. Hence, rest is not only about being alone by yourself. Rather, **rest is doing that which brings you renewal.** And for many that often *includes* family and friends, and the community of faith. While some have difficulty saying 'no,' others have difficulty saying 'yes.'

Let me refer again to that General Assembly paper, "An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift." Beyond ourselves as individuals, it also recognizes what often happens in our corporate church life. It states, "At all levels of our denomination, persons struggle with exhaustion." Then it asks, "**What patterns of drivenness do we need to let go of in our congregations? What forms of true spiritual rest do we need to embrace?**" One of the dangers in relatively smaller congregations like ours is that so much of the work falls upon so few people. This especially applies to those ruling elders who are currently serving on the Session. So, to you elders, I especially want you to take note of Jesus' words, "Come away and rest a while." Yet, this may also serve as a call for others of you to volunteer to help.

And know I'm trying hard to practice what I preach. I want to thank those who encourage me (and sometimes have to nudge me out the door) to take my four weeks of vacation and two weeks of study leave each year. Most pastors are bad at doing this. Sometimes we all need a little push, a kind of permission-giving, to take a break from 'life-as-usual.' **I'm not sure if it will do any good, but you certainly have my permission to take a break.**

It is my hope and prayer that each one of us re-discovers, or perhaps discovers for the first time, Sabbath - true rest that comes from ceasing what we are doing. For as many of us know, **there is a price to pay, sometimes a heavy price, for ourselves and those around us if we don't find rest and renewal and rejuvenation.**

So let us take a good close look at how we order our individual personal lives, and how we order our church life as well, to see if there are ways that we might slow up from all our

'doing' in order to find much-needed refreshment and renewal for our bodies, minds, and spirits. The path to renewal begins by taking to heart Jesus' instruction to "Come away and rest a while."

Give yourself permission to take Sabbath rest seriously! What would that look like for you?

Amen.