

“SABBATH”

Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 11:28-12:14

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Dorothy Bass observes, in her book, *Receiving the Day*, that we don't take this commandment as seriously as we do the others. We understand why commandments against murder, theft, and false witness are important, but the commandment to rest on a particular day seems less necessary. Over the course of my life, I've seen Sabbath restrictions relaxed to the point that the culture hardly acknowledges it anymore. When I was young there were no organized sports for children and youth on Sundays. But it wasn't long before games would be played Sunday afternoons and then hockey, because of the difficulty of getting ice time began to have practices on Sunday morning, and then because we felt it was important that skills be developed at an early age, the leagues began to proliferate. Some kids would play in three or four different leagues. Between going to school, doing homework, and playing sports, many young people had no time for even a few hours of rest, let alone a whole day.

The impact on parents was predictable. Between working, household chores, and the taxi service they provided, they also had no time for rest. It's not surprising to hear complaints from some Christians about the decline of respect for the Sabbath. There are still some who say that we shouldn't go to movies, restaurants, or our children's ball games on Sunday. There are still plenty of Christians, Jews, and Muslims who share the sentiment of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. In some ways, I share their view that we have lost respect for the Sabbath.

But... then I read the gospels, and I see that Jesus opposed the strict observance of Sabbath advocated by the religious leadership of his day. He criticized the Pharisees because they had reduced Sabbath keeping to obedience to a certain set of rules.

Our culture is eager to hear Jesus' critique. We are not excited about rules. Our emphasis on freedom and individualism sets us up to resist a "one size fits all" view of the Sabbath. And so we applaud Jesus for encouraging the disciples to satisfy their hunger by plucking the grain in the field. We applaud Jesus for doing the work of healing in violation of the Sabbath rules. But I have to wonder whether being eager to relax the rules won't result in losing Sabbath altogether.

In fact for many of us, Sabbath as observing rest on a particular day in the week is already gone. We settle for sabbath times spaced throughout the year: vacation, occasional "down time," exercise, leisure activities or hobbies. We are too busy and too driven to enjoy Sabbath rest in anything but small or infrequent doses.

I recognize that many of us continue to be busy, but it struck me that this is a good time to think about our Sabbath practice. Many of us are not too busy. We are not watching sports. We are not living a busy social life. We do not have places to go and people to see.

But first, a word to those who continue to be busy. Sabbath is especially for you. On this mother's day, I am mindful of all the women who have worked hard without breaks. I think about the women during the second world war who worked in factories six days a week, would come home to household chores, and the nurture of children, and sacrificed sleep to maintain the structure of society and their families. I think of the eighties when women went to work because a second income was needed and still carried on most of the household chores. I wanted to talk about Sabbath today because so many women and mothers are working so hard. Sabbath rest is for you.

While some of us are working harder than ever, many people are finding that they have time to do some things that they've been putting off. They are experiencing "rest." People are finding time for walking, for preparing meals, for calling a friend, for reading, for sending cards and notes. People are finding time for prayer and for a variety of virtual worship experiences. People are finding time for renewing their bodies and their spirits. People are discovering practices that could become part of honoring the Sabbath.

Think about those things that are feeding you in this time, those things that are restoring your soul. Think about how they might be taken into a regular observance of Sabbath while a say a few words about this passage from Matthew.

The first thing I want you to notice is that I've pulled three "stories" together in the reading. We would normally read Jesus' invitation to take up his yoke separately from plucking the grain on the Sabbath, which we would read separately from the healing of the man with a withered hand. We like to break complicated matters down into little segments, but in this case we miss the bigger picture. This is what the Pharisees did in breaking the observance of Sabbath into a series of little rules. And we do it too, turning what is intended for renewal into a matter of "obeying" a lot of little rules.

"Come to me," says Jesus. This is a favorite passage that many turn to when they're struggling with grief, disappointment, and challenges. It's a text that comforts us, but we hardly notice that it is in fact about Sabbath. Sabbath is fundamentally about rest and rest is necessary part of the order of creation. All things have periods of rest. God's world was never intended as an "energizer bunny" kind of world. The gospel begins with an invitation to those who are worn out and troubled. It begins with the promise of rest. It begins with Sabbath.

I don't know what women are being taught about childbirth these days, but when our children were born, our classes including instructions about breathing techniques. There were a variety of patterns depending on the level of pain, but all of them began with a cleansing breath and ended with a cleansing breath: a deep breath in and a slow breath out. The deep inhale and the long exhale invite the body into a state of relaxation, a state of rest. In the rhythm of the year, Sabbath invites us to rest from the struggles of the previous week and to rest before the struggles of the week ahead. Following Jesus is not easy unless... you hand the burden over on a regular basis.

The episode of plucking the grain reinforces the notion that the Sabbath isn't an obligation that we perform in order to satisfy one of God's requirements. Sabbath is for us, not for God. Certainly God models this behavior in creating the world, working six days and resting on the seventh; but we are the beneficiary of the practice, not God. Sabbath feeds

us. Even if we chose to fast on the Sabbath, it would only be to focus more on feeding the spirit; not on impressing God with our devotion.

Sabbath is for us, just as all the commandments are for us. Refraining from murder or hatred as Jesus later interprets it benefits all of us. Establishing a pattern of work and rest is good for the whole earth. There are natural processes that clean the air, the water and the soil, but we've taxed these systems to such an extent that there isn't enough time for the earth to keep up. But sheltering at home is reducing carbon emissions by 8% worldwide. Maybe if people were better about observing Sabbath, the earth could experience the benefit of a Sabbath as well. Nothing wrong with plucking grain on the Sabbath. It's supposed to feed us.

And there's nothing wrong with healing on the Sabbath either. The Sabbath is not just for you. It's for us. It's about the health of the community. To do good or to bring wholeness into another person's life is just what this day is for. The rule that says you're not to feed the hungry on the Sabbath is not in keeping with its purpose. The rule that says, you'll have to wait until tomorrow for me to address your need is a violation of the spirit of Sabbath.

I've never understood the rules about abstaining from dancing, going to movies, or playing cards on the Sabbath. It seemed that anything that brought pleasure was barred. But as a day of rest, the Sabbath is a day of joy. The Sabbath was made for dancing. It was made for taking pleasure in the company of one another. It's not at all about denying oneself, but about tending to oneself and one another.

Now I do understand the problems with engaging in activities that require other people to work, but those who make these rules aren't usually thinking about others, they're more often thinking about the appearance of their righteousness. But Sabbath isn't about flaunting goodness, it's about rest, and nurture, and doing good. It's a day of joy and celebration. This is why Sabbath worship includes praise and thanksgiving. We come to be refreshed from the struggles of the week and renewed for service in the week ahead.

This is Sabbath. It is for you as a follower of Jesus Christ. It is for you as a people of God. It is for mothers and fathers, children, brothers and sisters. It is for healing, comfort, and reconciliation. It is for every good imaginable and for goods we never imagined. It is for mothers who are worn out from tending to children and for mothers needing affirmation for the good work they are doing. It is for mothers who are afraid they are failing in their responsibility and for mothers confident in their abilities. It is for mothers looking to lighten their load by sharing it with Jesus.

Sabbath is a reminder to return to the Lord again and again and again. It is a time and a place to lay our burdens down, to be fed with the bread of life, and to do good whenever opportunity arises. So rejoice! This is the day that the Lord has made: a day for you. Amen.

Resources:

Dorothy C. Bass. *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. John Wiley and Sons: San Francisco CA, 2000.