

**Sabbath**  
**Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 12:9-14**  
**June 19, 2016; White Lick Presbyterian Church**

*Prayer: God, we believe our lives are touched by you- that you want something for us and of us. Give us ears to hear you, eyes to see the tracing of your finger, and a heart quickened by the motions of your Spirit. Amen.*

One of my favorite modern day parables goes like this...  
An American investment banker was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The Mexican replied, “only a little while.” The American then asked why didn’t he stay out longer and catch more fish? The Mexican said he had enough to support his family’s immediate needs. The American then asked, “but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

The Mexican fisherman said, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siestas with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine, and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life.”

The American scoffed, “I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats; eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution.

You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA and eventually New York City, where you will run your expanding enterprise.”

The Mexican fisherman asked, “But, how long will this all take?” To which the American replied, “15 – 20 years.”

“But what then?” asked the Mexican. The American laughed and said, “That’s the best part. When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions!”

“Millions – then what?” asked the Mexican.

The American said, “Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siestas with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your friends.”

I enjoy this story because it pokes fun- in a gentle and humorous way- with things that has become American values: busyness and productivity. I have some friends who love to be busy. For a few of them this is healthy- they have a lot of energy and have many things to focus on keeps them out of trouble. But I also know a lot of other people, for whom their busyness is less healthy: jobs that require too many hours, families that need more care than there is time in the day, houses to clean, meals to prepare, errands to run, yards to maintain, and volunteer commitments to fulfill. Having too much to do can lead to stress, health problems, despair, or depression.

At the same time, there are some folks who long to have more to do, like people who are unemployed, under-employed, or retirees

who have not found new interests. These people often struggle with knowing what to do with all the time on their hands. Many Americans have a strenuous relationship with time, and I think this is one of many reasons that Sabbath keeping has become an important topic in American spirituality in recent decades. People long to find a way of life with a sustainable rhythm of work and rest, a balance between doing and being, a cycle of giving and receiving. We long for meaningful work to fill our days, and periods of rest to reconnect with God and the people who are most important in our lives. This is what Sabbath keeping is about.

Sabbath keeping is so important it is one of the “big 10” in the Bible. It is the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The 10 Commandments are recorded in two places: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. We read the Exodus version today. In it:

- We are instructed to remember the Sabbath day & keep it holy.
- We are instructed to work for 6 days and get all of our work done in that time.
- On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, EVERYONE is to cease working (us, our families, and everyone in our community- even slaves, immigrants and animals)
- Exodus tells us God models the reason for Sabbath in creation- God worked for 6 days. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, God rested. Dorothy Bass writes, *“Resting, God takes pleasure in what has been made; God has no regrets, no need to go on to create a still better world or a creature more wonderful than the man and woman. In the day of rest, God’s free love toward humanity takes form as time share with them.”*

The word “Sabbath” in Hebrew means, “to cease or abstain”. Secondary it means, “to rest”.

Scripture says that the punishment for breaking Sabbath is death. When I was a child, I wondered if God or the community actually killed people who would not observe the Sabbath. Now I wonder if the kind of death God is talking about is a spiritual death. I have witnessed many times how a too busy schedule can suck the life out of people.

The Chinese pictograph for the word “busy” is composed of two characters: heart and killing. Medical studies show that the effects of our busyness can be life threatening. Many of us tend to eat poorly, not exercise, and make other harmful choices when we are busy. Wayne Muller, in his book “Sabbath” talks about busyness being a kind of violence we inflict on ourselves. And ultimately, our busyness can be most harmful when it separates us from God. Some of us are so busy (perhaps even “so busy doing God’s work”) that we don’t take the time to notice God.

The way that people have practiced Sabbath has changed over the centuries. In fact, we can even see if changing from Old Testament times to Jesus. The story we read from Matthew today shows this. There were strict laws about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath in Biblical times. Anyone who has practiced Sabbath today can attest to the complex decisions that need to be made about what is work and what is not work. Can I make food for my family on the Sabbath? Cooking is work in my book, but what if I’m just heating up leftovers? If we go out to eat on Sabbath then I’m forcing other people to work to make my food and clean my dishes. So making decisions about what is acceptable and what is not on Sabbath can be quite complicated. Surely that is why the Hebrews made extensive laws about this. But when Jesus shows up, he points out that sometimes there is a good reason to break some of those rules.

In order to trick Jesus, some folks brought him a man with a

withered hand and asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The answer, technically, was “no”. Healing was not allowed on the Sabbath. But Jesus tells them a story:

“Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

With that, Jesus stretched out the man’s hand and healed him.

As we consider the historical context, let us now consider what Sabbath can mean for us. Some of you may have never observed Sabbath before and for others it may have been your rhythm of living since childhood.

I confess that for many years I thought I didn’t have time to practice Sabbath. I thought I had too many responsibilities and I wasn’t willing to give up any of them or disappoint people who were counting on me. Years later I realized that I just choose not to make time for Sabbath. Pretending I was so important that the world could not survive without my work for one day was a form of idolatry. It was a hard transition, and I still have my Sabbath fails, but I realize I have more energy for my work on 6 days if I take a day of rest.

So what does it look like to practice Sabbath? I’d encourage us to think about two questions:

1. First, what is God asking you to cease doing on Sabbath?  
Traditionally this has included work, shopping, and worry.
2. Second, once you have created space by ceasing these things, how is it that you can best reconnect with God and make this day holy? What is it that will lead you to awe and delight, bringing deeper peace and joy to your life?

When we think about the first question about what to cease, we have to figure out: what is work?

- Traditionally work has been defined as anything that changes the natural world. But the answers can be different for different people. For some people gardening is a wonderful therapy and for others it is definitely a chore. You need to decide what is work for you.
- As you might already imagine, practicing Sabbath takes some planning, to make sure that you have already finished whatever work needs to be done the night before.
- As I mentioned earlier, people of faith have also traditionally also ceased from shopping and worry on the Sabbath. Shopping forces other people to work. Worry seldom helps us and it robs us of peace and joy.

Once you have decided what you will cease from doing, then you can consider how you will make the day holy.

- Traditionally people of faith practice Sabbath on the day of community worship because this is such an important part of Sabbath keeping.
- Reading scripture- either in worship, alone, or as a family- has also been an important part of Sabbath keeping throughout the centuries.
- Beyond that, you can decide what it is that will help ground your life in God, find rest for your body, & restore your soul.
- Introverts surely need time alone on Sabbath- perhaps by reading a book or spending time in nature.
- Extroverts may choose Sabbath as a day to reconnect with friends in family- in person or through telephone calls.

It is impossible for some people to practice Sabbath on Sundays. Eugene Peterson, who worked as a Presbyterian pastor, scholar, and author practiced Sabbath every Monday with his wife by driving to the country, reading a psalm, taking a silent hike for several hours, and spending a quiet evening at home.

In whatever way is right for you, remember the Sabbath and keep

it holy. It is a gift from God, waiting to be unfolded. AMEN.