



What is the – or a – Sabbath and why is it important? One answer can be found in the alternate Old Testament reading for this morning Deuteronomy 5: 12-15:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 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—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, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Simple, right? God commanded us to (a) have a Sabbath day and (b) keep it holy. God commands and we do – right? Well maybe not always. And what did God mean by “make the Sabbath holy”? One definition of holy is blessed.

We talked at Bible Study this week about Sabbath practices from our childhood. Every one of us remembered the Sabbath – Sunday – being a day when we went to church with our family, came home to a special meal and then experiences varied. In my family, Sunday was the one day when my brother and I could neither invite friends over to play or go to their houses to play. It was a day for family. A consistent experience was that at the end of the day you felt rested and ready to go on Monday. How many of you today have Sundays that are so packed with doing this or that that on Monday you are tired already when you wake up? We have, by and large, lost or forgotten the purpose of a Sabbath day or even find ourselves unwilling to stop the merry-go-round for fear of missing out.

A Sabbath day does not need to be on Sunday. It is a day, though, that is set aside to rest, to be with family or in case where family is no longer close by, with friends. To enjoy a day set apart from the rest of the week where the demands upon all of us are pretty unrelenting.

A Sabbath day does not always need to be a full day. It does need to be a period of time where you really can slow down, reflect and recharge, though. A Sabbath needs to be an intentional time-out. Even God took a Sabbath – a day of rest – after completing creation. Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible puts it this way in Genesis 2: 1-4:

Heaven and earth were finished, down to the last detail. By the seventh day God had finished his work. On the seventh day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day. He made it a Holy Day. Because on that day he rested from his work, all the creating God had done. This is the story of how it all started, of Heaven and Earth when they were created.

If even God finds value in a Sabbath, then why is it so hard for us to follow this commandment? Perhaps it is in part because our culture no longer values a Sabbath. Remember when there were pretty encompassing “blue laws” on Sundays? One reason, perhaps, that many of us can remember Sabbaths from our childhood is the simple fact that stores were not open. Alcohol was not sold. Today, almost all blue laws have been repealed. In fact, I think that just about the only thing not available for sale on Sundays now are cars. Even alcohol now can be bought between noon and 8p on Sundays.

One important reason for a Sabbath is that our bodies and our minds need a break. Burn-out is rampant. One of the most difficult parts of burn-out is that you lose your sense of perspective. Everything is important. It’s hard to prioritize. It’s hard to separate who you are from what you do. Also, ignoring our circadian rhythms can cause significant medical and psychological damage to us. Anxiety flourishes. We need rest. We need connection with family and friends. We need a break which is what Sabbath offers us. God knew this when God commanded that we keep the Sabbath holy. We need to regain the sense that this time apart from the everyday is blessed. It blesses us to be more of what God has created us to be when we will take the time to do what God has sanctioned for us.

Our Gospel story this morning is found in all three synoptic Gospels, indicating perhaps its importance to the members of the Way- those Jews and Gentiles who followed the teachings of Jesus. There are 174 references to Sabbath in our Bible. It is an important topic, and one that we ignore at our own spiritual and physical peril.

The Sabbath is not intended, however, to be a hard and fast, black-and-white- set of rules. Something legalistic and judgmental. Human need transcends rules. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” asks Jesus. Seems pretty simple – of course you act, even on the Sabbath, to do good and to save life. Of course it is so why do the Pharisees take such offense at what Jesus does? Can’t they see that the man with a withered hand, a man considered unclean and outside of society has now been restored to life and is able to be a productive and valued member of that same society? Which of you would not rush to keep a child from stepping into a busy street and getting hit by a car? Which of you would not feed and water your pets or provide meals to those living in your household? The Sabbath was made for humankind and part of the Sabbath is caring for those in our world. The Sabbath was created for us by a compassionate God who knows we need rest, we need space, we need a break from our normal regular lives. And we also need family and community. Sabbath is both an individual and a community necessity.

As you reflect on what a regular Sabbath time might mean for you, think more broadly than just Sunday. As you think about your own “hot buttons” consider whether you have made a response to an issue a “Sabbath prohibition” – that is, are you holding something as absolute that cuts off relationship or cuts off the possibility of seeing God in new ways and doing new things. Maybe

not the way “it’s always been done” or maybe not the way you would do it if you were doing it but perhaps whatever needs doing gets done in a new and creative way that works just as well. We generally like doing things “my way” - thanks, Frank Sinatra. But doing things my way, and **only** my way, can lead to loneliness as others who are willing to help stop offering. Sabbath is about compassion when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand. Sabbath is about community as Deuteronomy reminds us by mentioning all those who must share in a time of rest and rejuvenation. Sabbath is about building up: you, your family and friends, you and your relationship with God. Sabbath is about regaining peace, the peace that passes understanding, the peace that is at the center of our being when we know who we are and whose we are.

Just as fairly recent research has busted the myth of multi-tasking, and encouraged us to focus on one thing at a time, a Sabbath space asks much the same of us. Take some time each week to rest from your labors. They will still be waiting for you after your Sabbath. But you will be able to pick them up better rested, clear-eyed, focused, and with perspective. Sabbath is a gift that God has given to us. Open that gift. Enjoy the love and compassion of God who wants only the best for God’s creation, us. **Amen.**