

The Gift of Sabbath  
Mark 2:23-28

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*The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath*      Mk. 2:27

We begin our thoughts today with the ancient Hebrews and their terrible days of slavery in Egypt. Those poor people were allowed to have only work, work, and more work fill their days. They knew next to nothing of breaks during the course of the day, a day off during the course of a week, or a vacation during the course of a year. They had only those blasted mud pits, the making of bricks, and the building of buildings. Their labor was hard and they were the beneficiaries of none of it. All the while, they were under the watchful and brutal treatment of taskmasters, who themselves, no doubt, knew little of time off or breaks or rest. All these people must have been exhausted, broken, and at the end of their tethers.

We begin our thoughts there because there is some terrible and troubling sense in which these conditions have returned and plague many of you. My heart goes out to you when I hear some of you speak of the demands of your work. Some of you seem to say, and I believe you, that your time is not your own, that your employer is ever hovering over you, claiming you, expecting something from you just as Pharaoh and his taskmaster did in days of old. Technology long ago brought work into your home, and now the pandemic with its work-from-home ways has further blurred the line between work at home. Some of you feel as though you are back in Egypt – perpetually on call, pressured to answer work claims immediately, expected to be present for meetings at any hour regardless of inconvenience, and under the constant demand to produce and perform. You are exhausted, broken, and at the end of your tether.

Against that background let us remind ourselves today that one of the first things God was sure to do in the ancient day was to give rest to the newly liberated and have them make rest part of their life in their new society. Almost as soon as those ancient Israelites were out of Egypt, God worked to get Egypt out of them. That is the purpose behind the Ten Commandments, Our focus today is only on one of them, the fourth. Right after they left Egypt and the cruel, relentless conditions of slavery there, God told those people who had known no rest, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 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 . . . .” (Ex. 20:8-10)

This command to rest was modeled on God’s own practice and need. The practice can be seen in Genesis where it says God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then rested on the seventh” (Gen. 2:2). The need can be seen in such places as Exodus 31:17. There it says, “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh [God] rested, and was refreshed.” That added phrase – “and was refreshed” – is important to our theme today. United Church of Christ Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the Hebrew word translated as *refreshed* is a verb form of the Hebrew noun *nephesh* – a word that means life, soul,

or self. Brueggemann interprets Exodus 31:17 to say God worked for six days at creation and then rested and was re-*nepheshed*. In rest God received back the life and soul and self – the *nephesh* – God’s work and effort had depleted.<sup>1</sup> And so God, knowing the replenishing value of rest following work, commanded the newly liberated to make regular rest part of their lives. Work for six days but rest every seventh, and make that rest holy unto God.

The Pharisees came along and made a specialty of this. They were the experts in sabbath-keeping. Their intentions were quite good. They wanted people to be sure to honor that fourth commandment. The way they devised to help people keep the commandment was to do what is called building a fence around the law. The fence is another set of laws around the key commandment. Keep the outlying laws and the inner law will be protected. And so they built a fence around the fourth commandment, detailing what was and what wasn’t considered work. The trouble was that the Pharisees got carried away with this and over-emphasized sabbath rules to the point that sabbath became a work to perform instead of a gift from God to enjoy.

Jesus, in our text for today from Mark, reminds the well-intentioned but misguided Pharisees of the sabbath’s true and intended nature as a gift from God. “The sabbath,” he said, “was made for humankind.”

Now, this gift of sabbath rest and refreshment is available to you today. To see how this is so, let us first remind ourselves what sabbath is. In the biblical understanding, sabbath is one day in seven. In the Old Testament world it is Saturday, for God rested on the seventh day, on Saturday. In the realm of New Testament Christianity, the sabbath is the first day of the week, Sunday, the Lord’s Day, because Christ rose from the dead on the first day. Often – and we preachers are probably the ones to blame for this – we limit sabbath in our imaginations to attending worship on a Sunday morning, as though the way to keep sabbath is to go to church.

That is part of it, of course; but sabbath is more than going to church; it is more than worship. Sabbath is sacred time. It is time away from ordinary exertion. It is time given to spiritual expression, reflection, and reception. Sabbath is openness to the holy. It is opening the doors of our schedules in order that God may enter our lives and be enjoyed.

With that understanding of what sabbath is as openness to the holy, let us now remind ourselves of what Jesus reminded the Pharisees; namely, that sabbath is a gift from God. It is *made for humankind*. It is something God has created. It is given. It is there. There is no need for you to create it.

Somewhere along the way I read of a weaver during the days of cottage industries. He was working in his cottage away back in the countryside one day and his pastor called upon him. The pastor noted that the cottage was small. Its roof was low. It seemed to the minister dismal and dark, and he felt sorry for his parishioner. When he said something to that effect, the weaver smiled, turned, and opened the shutters of the window behind him. As soon as he opened the shutters, light flooded the room with brilliant day, the hillside stood with magnificent beauty just

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Tenacious Solidarity*, edited and introduced by Davis Hankins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), p. 225.

outside, and beyond the hillside a mountain rose in majesty. The busy day in the dark place could be lighted up anytime by opening a window!

Just so the sabbath for you! Sabbath rest and refreshment – *renepheshing* – are possible for you in the busiest and most demanding days. They are possible not because you can keep certain rules but because the Unseen Friend stands near as your Daily Companion.

The chief advantage of this gift of sabbath is the opportunity it affords you to receive the spiritual refreshment that comes from seeing yourself in the light of God.

Society is always ready to diminish people. We see that happening already in the New Testament. People were bringing children to Jesus that he might touch them, but the disciples sternly deterred them as if that were inappropriate and beyond their worth (Mk. 10:13). Blind Bartimaeus was sitting beside the road, calling to Jesus for help. Bystanders sternly ordered him to be quiet as if he had neither the right nor the privilege to ask anything of Christ (Mk. 10:48).

Today there is a kind of “Sorting Hat” like the one in *Harry Potter* and it puts people in their place, categorizing them – you are too dull, you are too unskilled, you are to inept, you are too unathletic, you are too old, you are too young, you are too much of a failure to matter.

But the sabbath comes along and speaks quite a different message. James S. Stewart says there is an old Gaelic proverb that pronounces, “If you cannot get back to the place you were born, try to get within seeing distance of it.”<sup>2</sup>

That is just what sabbath does. It puts us within seeing distance of our blessed and strengthening origin. It tells us, in the words of a psalmist, “Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us; we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Ps. 100:3). It speaks in the words Isaiah heard God say: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Is. 43:1). Or these words from Paul: “you are not your own. You were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Sabbath words like those, sabbath truths like that, are like rescuers who pull people out of the frozen lake in which they have fallen. They give us a spiritual CPR. They resuscitate us. They refresh us. They *renephesh* us.

The most vital part of a sermon like this comes when it shows how you can enjoy the gift of sabbath in your busy days. The superficial answer is insufficient. The superficial answer is the one that simply says you should go to church on Sunday and worship. We’ve already said that sabbath is more than church attendance. The most expansive answer may be impractical. The most expansive answer says to do no work at all one day in seven; but who can do that? So if the superficial answer is insufficient and the expansive answer is impractical, perhaps the answer that teaches a gradual beginning is the most helpful.

Here, then, is how you can enjoy sabbath now, even on your busiest of days. Set aside a portion of each day for sabbath rest. Do not tell me you have no time, for I do not believe it. If you chart how you spend a day, I suspect you can find, easily, 10, 15, or 20 minutes that you waste. Put those to spiritual use, to your *renepheshment*.

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<sup>2</sup> James S. Stewart, *The Gates of New Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), p. 228.

Disconnect. The world will not end if you do not respond to a text immediately. The world will not end if you do not answer an email right away. The world certainly will not end if, when you see an antique pictured on Facebook, you do not “like if you know what it is, share if you have used one.” Turn the outside world off for just a bit of time. Disconnect. The world will not end.

Set the mood. My preference is for silence. You may prefer some non-distracting music in the background. But do your best to set the mood in some way.

Then work at letting go of waiting work. Embrace the rest God wishes to give you. Imagine in these 10, 15, or 20 minutes, imagine that you are with God. Imagine that you are loved by God, for you are. And listen for what this love may require of you.

Do this a little each day. It is best if you do it the same time every day. It will feel awkward and difficult at first. But it will gradually become easier.

Soon you will be enjoying the gift of sabbath and feeling the *renepheshing* that God is wishing to provide you.