



## **Remember the Sabbath**

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Sundays were long in the seventies in Williston, North Dakota. Because of Blue Laws there was literally nothing to do. Even the bowling alley was closed, and there was nothing happening in the town except for church. It could have been worse. I remember being horrified at reading chapter five, entitled Sundays, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, *Little House in the Big Woods*:

*“On Sundays Mary and Laura must not run or shout or be noisy in their play. Mary could not sew on her nine-patch quilt, and Laura could not knit on the tiny mittens she was making for Baby Carrie. They might look quietly at their paper dolls, but they must not make anything new for them. They were not allowed to sew on doll clothes, not even with pins.*

*“They must sit quietly and listen while Ma read Bible stories to them, or stories about lions and tigers and white bears from Pa's big green book, *The Wonders of the Animal World*. They might look at pictures, and they*

*might hold their rag dolls nicely and talk to them. But there was nothing else they could do.”*

*“One Sunday after supper she could not bear it any longer. She began to play with Jack, and in a few minutes she was running and shouting. Pa told her to sit in her chair and be quiet, but when Laura sat down she began to cry and kick the chair with her heels.*

*“I hate Sunday!’ she said.”*

-Laura Ingalls Wilder, **Little House in the Big Woods**

I always thought Ma and Pa took the commandment of keeping the sabbath to the extreme, but I suppose if I were making balloons out of pig’s bladders to entertain my children on hog butchering day or using rocks to work out the stains in Pa’s overalls, I would be glad for a day of the week whose only rule was to do absolutely nothing. The only requirement being not to lift a finger in play or work. Their adult, work-worn bodies needed the rest. I always felt sorry for little Laura, though. I mean, come on, Jack wanted to throw the ball!

However, those blue laws of yesterday had a point, and it wasn’t to inconvenience little girls who wanted to go bowling on Sunday afternoons. They actually protected the least of these from “having to work”, from having to decide on whether to pick up an extra shift of the factory or get to spend time with one’s children or friends in

breaking bread together. A time away from work, a time to rest, and for some, a time for God.

In our book groups this week, Mark kept pressing the question, what is Sabbath?

While we all had different definitions~~from “time apart” “anything that brings me closer to my true self” “God-time” “meditation and quiet, even if it is boring” “baking a cake” “building a french drain in my basement” “making love” .....we all agreed what Sabbath was NOT: work.

If Sabbath isn't work, then what is it? Walter Brueggemen, the great OT scholar, wrote a book entitled, “Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now.” (you don't even have to read the book, the title is so powerful!) He writes, *“In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.”*

Our lives are not defined by producing or consuming~~even though this is what is celebrated in our culture. We ask people to define themselves by their accomplishment: *How many people on your team? How big is your business? What is the bottom line? How far up the ladder did you climb? How can you give of yourself in service? How many volunteer jobs do you*

*have? How many miles did you hike?* You know the drill. The more we can measure, the more we feel accomplished, the more worth we think we have.

Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy. Brueggeman reminds us that when we practice Sabbath, we are remembering that God's people in the world "are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production, they are not "hands" in the service of a command economy." Rather, Sabbath reminds us that we are subjects of an economy of neighborliness. An economy of community, of interconnectedness, of hearts and hands and bodies and souls that need compassion and care. We are beloved children of God—we ARE. Or, as you have heard it said, we are human beings, not human doers. (this is attributed to Jesus to the Dalai Lama to Rick Warren, so....)

Sabbath. Holy Rest. We would do well to remember the origins of Sabbath in our faith tradition. In Deuteronomy, Sabbath is a gift given to former slaves who knew no rest when they were in bondage in Egypt. They toiled under oppression and domination, under whippings and beatings to produce and build for up riches for the Pharaoh.

After liberating the enslaved Hebrews, carrying them safely out of Egypt with Moses and Miriam, in the wilderness, God and God's people establish a way of living in community. They needed to know how to live as beloved, as people of freedom—not as commodities at the

beck and call of slavers. God gives them ten ways to live, in covenant community. Within the covenant, God creates the Sabbath for her people, giving them and all of theirs (including animals!) the rest they need to order to promote life, and to remember who is the Divine Liberator and Creator of Life.

And there is more~~author Cole Arthur Riley reminds us, “When God tells the Israelites to practice rest, he uses the memory of their bondage to awaken them to what could be. ‘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’ (Deuteronomy 5:15).

“When we rest,” Riley writes, “we do so in memory of rest denied. We receive what has been withheld from ourselves and our ancestors. And our present respite draws us into a remembrance of those who were not permitted it.”  
Sabbath is Remembrance.

And, Sabbath is Compassion.

Jesus had a lot to say about the Sabbath, and was continually reminding religious leaders that the Sabbath was created FOR people. For the sake of life. Not to be a load of burdensome rules to be followed to prove one’s piety. So, if someone was hungry on the Sabbath, they should eat, even if the only food available needed to be

harvested from the stalk. If someone was desperately ill, and you could help them be restored to health, then you should do it. Mercy and compassion was at the heart of the covenant, at the heart of God's rule, at the heart of Sabbath rest.

Sabbath is Holy Rest. Sabbath is Mercy. Sabbath is Compassion. Sabbath is Resistance. Sabbath is Remembrance.

Sabbath is also a way of seeing.

New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis calls this “sabbath perspective.” She writes “...*a Sabbath perspective sees that observing the Sabbath is not optional. We keep the Sabbath so as to look around and ask who needs rest? Who is in need of life when no one else seems to notice? We keep the Sabbath to be reminded that without it, it becomes too easy to give up on fighting for those for whom life has been taken away.*” She continues, “*A Sabbath perspective ...reorients us to [re-enter the world, into a new week] looking for ways in which we might renew and restore the lives of others. Keeping the Sabbath, you see, is not just about your rest, but that of those all around you.*”

Keeping the Sabbath is not just about your rest, but that of those all around you. The whole neighborhood of God. Whose lives need restoring around you?

I think about the multitudes of working poor dedicated to simply clearing a tiny path for to have abundant life for themselves, for their families. I find myself wondering, as I sit down in a restaurant, what the life is like of the person who washed the dishes that I eat from; or considering workers that work in the hot laundries of the hotels I stay in—do they have other jobs? Are they working for their children? Trying to keep in school? Do they have enough to eat, or is it cereal tonight? If that?

You see, a Sabbath perspective has no qualifiers or quantifiers for who deserves abundant life, who deserves deep rest. Observing Sabbath is a way of seeing that life should be holy for all.

I have to circle back to the idea of Sabbath as resistance, though. Because sabbath perspective can easily be distorted into “I should be DOING more to make things better for others.” Maybe this is so, but it isn’t doing in terms of what the world preaches—the incessant and relentless addiction to better and busy. It’s a tricky line. Because even if we discard the idea of “doing” in our culture of MORE MORE MORE and BUSY is Best; as children of God, we also want to seek God’s calling for us. What is our mission as God’s neighborhood? What should we be doing in the name of justice and compassion? We ask ourselves, “with my particular gifts and skills, how can God use me?”

Cole Arthur Riley, reminds us of God's Resistance to "doing". She writes, "We become obsessed with the language of how God might 'use' us, never pausing to ask ourselves, What if God doesn't always want to use you? What if sometimes God just wants to be with you? We've become estranged from this idea. We would never articulate it as such, but undergirding much of our concept of calling is the belief that our primary relationship to God is anchored in transaction. God resists this."

What if God doesn't want to always use you?  
What if God just wants to be with you?

Most of the time I don't want to be with myself if I am not productive, and yet...  
the idea that Love just wants to be with me  
breaks my heart  
and  
makes me want to weep with relief and wonder.

If I can embrace the wild concept that God just wants to be with me,  
swinging on a hammock in my back yard, or splayed out on my back on top of Big Glassy bald out at Carl Sandburg, that is more than enough.

Keeping a holy Sabbath isn't the only commandment—for sure there are nine others to consider. But it's essential.  
It's a gift.  
It's a way of life,



it's a way of knowing who we really are.  
Remember the Sabbath, my beloved,  
let us keep it holy.  
Amen.

### **Sources**

Walter Brueggeman, **Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now**

Cole Arthur Riley, **This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us**

Karoline Lewis, "A Sabbath Perspective" at Working Preacher, Sunday, May 27, 2018

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5169>