

Sabbath Blessings

Isaiah 58: 9-14

Luke 13:10-17

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Smith Church at Centre Church

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Isaiah 58: 9-14

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Luke 13: 10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

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There is a story told of a wagon train traveling from Missouri to Oregon in the mid 1800's. They observed the Sabbath day by stopping to rest and not traveling. But as winter began to approach some people in the group began to panic that they would not reach Oregon before the snow fell. So they proposed to start traveling on the Sabbath days as well. The group was split over the idea so they broke into two traveling groups - one would travel all seven days and one just six days to honor the sabbath rest.

Both groups managed to arrive before winter. The group which rested arrived in Oregon..... first. There were no shortcuts taken, no slower people or quicker horses to make

the difference. The people and the horses were rested so they could travel much more efficiently on the other six days.

That we can be surprised to learn that those who traveled one day less each week were actually more successful says quite a lot about our understanding, our perception, of sabbath rest.

Sabbath keeping is a publicly enacted sign of our trust that God keeps the world, therefore we do not have to. God welcomes our labors, but our contributions to the world have their limits. If God trusted creation enough to be confident that the world would continue while God rested, so should we.¹

Keeping the sabbath as a day of rest and renewal, as a day of worship, is something slipping away from us in our ever growing secular society. Our work, activities, shopping, practices and games have more and more come to fill each day of the week. We have come to see efficiency as working, as moving constantly, but a Sabbath rest is a healthy and holy efficiency. It has been said that sabbath is a sacred exhale, as if God was exhaling on the seventh day. We must exhale in order to fully inhale, both are important to the cycles and the rhythms that make for vitality and wholeness.

Yet we have in many ways become as the horses themselves. Think about the horses you see when going to a parade, or for a carriage ride around a major city. They have blinders placed on them so that they can only see what is in front of them. No distractions, just focus on the task at hand. We too can be bridled and harnessed and have our blinders on. We can only see what is directly in front of us, what we need to do and what we must accomplish.

Now sometimes this is a good thing. Horses could be startled, endangering and trampling people near them. We could make huge, dangerous, life changing mistakes if we are not focused on certain tasks. We could fail a class or damage a relationship if we are overly distracted.

But we also miss so much if we constantly have our blinders on, if we do not unharness and unbridle ourselves from our go-go-go work for a sabbath rest, a time of renewal. We miss the beauty of creation that surrounds us in the changing seasons. We miss rare and irreplaceable moments with family and friends. We miss time with God in silence, prayer, sacrament and word.

How often do we respond to the question, ‘how are you?’ by saying just how busy we are?

Yet Sabbath invites us to see that it is easy to hide behind being busy as it allows us to mask anxiety, frustration, grief, vulnerability and insecurity. Busy puts us in control, in charge, makes us feel needed and important. We hide behind our busyness to avoid what we do not want to see, to talk about, or even to feel. Our busyness is social currency and we often see it as a badge of honor and value.

Our culture worships this busyness, glorifies the way we work and produce and achieve with blinders on. So much of our worth--personally, spiritually, emotionally and financially is tied to our tangible output.

But busy can also dull our true enjoyment and pleasure, wear away at our bodies and our spirits, dim our relationships and hide our longing for God.

Sabbath is a gift and blessing from God that calls us to slow down from the busyness, to find spiritual rest and religious renewal, to find joy and peace, to contemplate, appreciate and create.

¹ William Willimon

In a Christian Century article², Barbara Brown-Taylor, wrote that, “Our willingness to constantly be working is a compulsion. . . . Compulsions are defined as: thoughts, urges, or behaviors that persist despite negatively affecting health, job, and relationships. Sabbath was the day when Israel celebrated its freedom from compulsion, and, on that day, every week, the people did not work. Still, they were fed. On that one day of the week, they remembered that their worth lay not in their own productivity, but in God’s primordial love for them. Sabbath offered them a foretaste of heaven when they would lie back in God’s arms and behold the glory of creation for all eternity.”

It's so easy to keep the blinders on that we can forget they are even there, until we are reminded that our worth lies not in our own compulsion and productivity but in God’s primordial love for us.

On a Sunday morning after a snowstorm when I was traveling to a church where I was serving during the pastor’s sabbatical, traffic was heavier than usual and I seemed to be the only car on the highway without ski gear on my roof. The traffic volume, the fresh snow and the sun glare slowed us down. I kept looking at my watch as time was moving quickly while the traffic was not. Then we slowed down even more. I groaned, conscious of how far I still had to go to work while they were off to play. Then I noticed why we were so slow we had almost stopped completely. The skiers around me were paying attention to the sky, not the speedometer as I was. When I too looked up I was breathless as a rare and beautiful winter rainbow, a snowbow, arced in the sky. It was amazing to see something so unexpected, so stunning. Even though I was the one on my way to church I realized they were the ones doing a better job of observing the sabbath---resting and appreciating—while I was task oriented. They were being fed by God’s beautiful creation and I was almost too hung up on my own productivity. With my blinders on I almost missed God’s gift and blessing of this sabbath moment.

While we bemoan the ever growing loss of sabbath in our time and culture, understanding and following the commandment first given to Moses, ‘Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,’ has been always been confusing and unclear. It was that way in the prophet Isaiah’s time more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. Although people gathered to worship, Isaiah needed to address those who turned that gathering into times of hypocrisy and fighting as they abused the sabbath for their own personal gains and interests. The wealthy oppressed the poor and disregarded the marginalized and afflicted. They neglected the education of their children. They were following their religion in its rituals but not at its heart. They trampled the sabbath rather than delighting in this gift from God and honoring the holy day of the Lord.

Just how to honor the sabbath also continued to be confusing and unclear in Jesus’ time as interpretations of following the sabbath faithfully were varied. The leader of the synagogue, the teacher of the Torah, called Jesus out for working on the sabbath, for breaking the ancient commandment. There was a list of tasks forbidden on the sabbath, activities such as baking, sowing seeds, building, or traveling even a short distance. It was this last labor that Jesus challenged. “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?”

It is important to notice that what is forbidden does not include healing, so this is where the sabbath command moved from defined black and white to grey. For the synagogue leader, life-saving healing was permissible, but tending to an eighteen year disability could have waited.

² Brown Taylor, Barbara. “Letting God Run Things without My Help.” The Christian Century, 5 May 1999, www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-12/remember-sabbath.

Jesus, Lord, the One who came to bring radical good news for the poor, release for the captives, and emancipation for the oppressed widened the narrower understanding of sabbath by honoring God through liberating this bent-over woman, this child of God, this daughter of Abraham. For Jesus, healing and liberating and renewing were exactly what the sabbath was about, setting free from bondage on the sabbath day.

Taking off our blinders, finding renewal, opening our eyes to the wonders of God's creation, honoring God, and breaking free from what hurts and binds us, bring us a sabbath rest so that we may call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable.

May this day bring sabbath rest to your heart and your home. Amen.