SABBATH: A WAY OF LIFE
Communitas is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by communitas and liminalities.
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“After nearly two years of wondering what has possessed the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and the College of Pastoral Leaders to be so generous and expect so little in return, it finally dawned on me. It’s about Sabbath. It’s about ministering to ministers. It’s about shepherding shepherds.”

—Kevin Pleas (page 13)

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As I ponder the contributions to this edition of *Communitas*, I think back maybe twenty years to a pastor-colleague in a neighboring town who made national news by declaring a month of no meetings in his church. He was interviewed by NPR and other networks, and the whole nation seemed startled, at least for a moment, by his out-of-the-box idea. A month without any church meetings!

It captured my attention, too—I who was captive to what was profoundly un-Sabbath-like about Sundays. It was on Sundays, after all, when most of the meetings in my congregation took place.

If you can relate to my captivity, then you will enjoy this issue.

Dorothy Bass, in her book *Receiving the Day*, invites us to contemplate an understanding of Sabbath that is profoundly biblical. She reminds us that after that sixth day, when God rests from God’s creative activity, God “declares as fully as possible just how very good creation is. The work of creating is finished, and God has no regrets, no need to go on to design a still better world or a creature more wonderful than man and woman. In the day of rest, the Christian theologian Karl Barth suggested, God’s love toward human beings takes form as time shared with them. Indeed, it is on this day of no work that God ‘finished’ the work of creating the world by wrapping the world in blessed and sacred time” (Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 47).

This is the nub of what we explore in this issue—the idea that we can in fact live in such a way that allows us to set apart a day at least, or maybe a season, in which to remember that it, and that we, are wrapped in blessed and sacred time.

Read on—and rest!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
*President, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary*
Day after day we hear from pastors who tell us how tired they are. We hear of families who fend for themselves while the “pastor of the house” works long hours without vacation, days off or quiet time. People have told us how they have little time for self care or prayer. It seems clear to us that the concept of Sabbath has been edged out of the lives of many (if not most) of us by the prevailing societal concepts of busyness, production and achievement.

Since a major component of participation in the College of Pastoral Leaders is spiritual renewal, we decided to dedicate this year’s annual conference and issue of Communitas to a discussion of the Sabbath. We hope these reflections will resonate with you in your lives, and we hope you will take time to rest in the gift of God’s time.

Janet Maykus
Principal, The College of Pastoral Leaders
The Liberating Gift of Sabbath

Kevin Armstrong

The man across the aisle on my flight to Austin was far more interested in the open notebook on my lap than the Sky Mall on his. “Goin’ to Austin for a presentation?” he finally asked.

“Yes. Goin’ to talk to a bunch of preachers.” That’s the line that usually either opens or closes the door to further conversation. I sized up Mr. 11-B as the kind of guy who’d politely slam the door.

“Huh. What do ya’ talk to preachers about? Preachin’, I guess, huh?”

I decided I might as well enjoy the ride. “Well, actually, I’m going to talk about the commandment that preachers break more often than any other.”

There was a long pause as I imagined him inventorying the shalts and shalt-nots. Pretty soon the corner of his mouth turned up in a grin like a snagged fish. “Ohhh … I hear that’s a real problem these days.”

“More than most people know. In fact there’s been a lot of research that says nearly every pastor breaks that commandment more than all the others.” I let that settle in for a bit and then added, “Sometimes I break it every week.”

I couldn’t tell if that look on his face meant he was genuinely sad or he was ready to use me to break another commandment but I decided it was time to let him go.

“Yes. If a pastor doesn’t keep the Sabbath, how does she expect anybody in her church to do so? Keeping Sabbath isn’t just about giving our body a rest but about letting God transform our life, our relationships, and our way of relating to each other. Sabbath-keeping is one of the ways we claim God is taking care of things even while we rest. Otherwise, we’re just a bunch of practical atheists.”

A few seconds passed as the effect of my rehearsal sank in. He chuckled and gave me points for pulling one over on him. The rest of the flight he sat with his unopened...
magazine on his lap. He never looked back at my notes but I hoped he might be making some of his own. Intuitively, I think he got it. I think most of us do. But if there aren't other folks to hold us accountable, Sabbath-keeping will disappear as soon as our feet hit the ground.

**CONFESSIONS OF A SABBATH-BREAKER**

I don't intentionally preach about God's commandments and then set off to break them. Most of us preachers, however, seem to be serial Sabbath-breakers. Although Sabbath-keeping is more than taking off one day a week, few of us even do that. Some pastors feel guilty because their parishioners don't get the “luxury” of a Sabbath. Other pastors will spend, literally spend, a day away while hardly resting. We run errands, finish the sermon, clean the house, and mark items of the to-do list than didn't get done.

My first supervising pastor was the poster child for Sabbath-breaking. He didn’t take a day off and made sure everyone else knew it. When I asked him which day of the week I should plan as my Sabbath, he told me I could pick any day I wanted since he didn’t have a day off. “But I know that’s how you recent seminarians are,” he moaned. It turns out that his father, also a pastor, did not allow lawn chairs in the parsonage’s front yard so parishioners wouldn’t pass by and see the pastor “being lazy.” Whenever the doorbell rang at the parsonage home, the elder pastor picked a book off the table and tucked his finger inside as if he’d been reading. He certainly didn't want to greet a parishioner empty handed as if he might have been “doing nothing.”

There are many reasons why we’re such poor Sabbath-keepers: cultural expectations, family influence, economic pressures, lack of planning, and high ambitions. Eugene Peterson likes to say that most of us preach like Augustine but act like Pelagian. We preach that we are saved by grace but know that we better get back to work.

*What are your obstacles to Sabbath-keeping?*

**WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SABBATH?**

The Genesis account of creation is certainly a good place to begin describing Sabbath. According to Genesis 2, God finished working on the seventh day and rested from that work. If God can rest, we ask, why can’t we? But there’s a deeper understanding of Sabbath that may be expressed more clearly in the Decalogue.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord you 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 of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5: 12-15).

Why do we keep the Sabbath? Because we’re free! Slaves cannot stop working; only
free people can. If we are free, we’re called to act like it. Rather than spending each day glued to the computer screen (I’ve broken the bonds and now neither read nor send emails on Sunday), chained to our desk (do you ever close the door to your study when you’re not inside the room?), or working the malls and shopping centers (trust me, you will not single-handedly destroy the economy or put people out of work), we are called to pray and give thanks, sing and dance, rest and relax, as a sign of our freedom. We are also called to exercise justice to others by ceasing from those actions that enslave our neighbors.

Reading the scriptures remind us how the development and interpretation of Sabbath has transformed over time. Nehemiah recollects a strict enforcement of Sabbath, so strict in fact, that Jerusalem was said to have fallen in 168 BCE because Sabbath-keepers were prohibited from taking up arms to defend themselves on the Sabbath.

When Jesus was criticized for plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12: 1-8), he reminded his critics that even King David allowed for such an exception (I Samuel 21:1-6). Some who condemned his Sabbath healings were reminded that if Jewish law allowed for taking care of animals on the Sabbath, why would they not want to care for humans?

The Sabbath practices of early Christians is a conflicted history. Some early Christians pointed to the debate at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as evidence that Jewish law, including the practice of Sabbath, did not need to be heeded. Constantine established Sunday as a day of rest but, similar to modern legislative action, slowly began to create exceptions and exemptions. It was not until the 12th century that Christian Sabbath emerges in literature. Luther and Calvin emphasized Sunday as a day of rest and worship but did not regard Sunday as a fulfillment of Sabbath. Some reformers were careful to legislate what could and could not be done on the Sabbath since Sunday was frequently the time for drinking and gambling. Some seventeenth century American Puritans lived up to their reputation, however, by declaring that smiling was not allowed on Sunday, nor was a mother allowed to kiss her baby.

I used to be one of the three heaviest kids on the youth football team. Every practice we had to run laps and every practice the three people who finished last would have to run extra laps. “Run faster!” our coach would yell at us. Did my red face and sagging shoulders make it look like I was holding back? All I could think was, “I’m running as fast as I can!” Today, we have people and devices that constantly urge us to run faster. God intended for creation to breathe in God’s Spirit, to rest as people free from bondage, and to rely on God. But unlike the New Yorker cartoon that shows a modern Hassidic rabbi telling a friend, “Remember, I’m here for you 24-6,” we have become a people who are available 24-7. We’re worn out but still wishing we could run a little faster.

What changes do you notice to the patterns of Sabbath in your life and in the lives of others?
Building a Sabbath House

There are many ways to begin or deepen our Sabbath practices but let me suggest just one. Perhaps the best place to begin is at home. Literally, at home. The shape of our homes has an ethical as well as architectural quality. How we dwell says something about who we are.

To be fair, Jesus seemed to be ambivalent about home life. Foxes and birds had their home but not would-be followers of Jesus. When his family came looking for him, presumably to take him home, Jesus said he was already at home. This unsentimental understanding of home was not meant to destroy our life together but to reconstitute it. Keeping Sabbath forces us to ask what conditions are necessary for us to keep the Sabbath in our home and among the people we call family.

Take a moment to draw a sketch of your home’s floor plan. Make an outline of each room, including any outside space where you may spend time. Now put a number in each room representing the hours (or minutes) you normally spend in each room on a given day. If you live with others in your house, ask them to try the exercise and compare notes for agreement and divergence. Then ask a few questions:

- What would an outside observer learn from your drawing?
- How much time do you spend alone, and how much time do you spend face-to-face with others?
- How much time do you spend in each room “plugged-in” to work or appliances?
- What would you like to deepen or change about the way your work and rest in your home?

Our attentiveness to how we live, work, and rest at home shapes, and is shaped, by Sabbath habits. Just as we need periods of solitude apart from work, noise, or one another, we also need a place of solitude where we are able to pray, listen, and read scripture in a manner that restores our relationship with God. Is there a quiet place where each day you can retreat from the crowds, chaos, cell phone, or Internet? If others live with you, do you encourage those practices for others as well as ask for those spaces and places of quiet rest “near to the heart of God”?

Similarly, we need time and place for community. What are the times and ways you discover God in your midst as you offer and receive hospitality with friends and strangers? Inviting and receiving others reflects the abundance and generosity of God. We are free to give of ourselves because God’s time and God’s daily bread is sufficient.

In our family, we’ve agreed to certain practices that allow us to receive the gifts of the day and to enjoy the gifts God offers us. (These practices are not for everyone. What helps us keep Sabbath may be oppressive to others.) For us, the kitchen is a place of liberation and feasting. As far as possible, we’ve tried to participate in a Sabbath-economy by purchasing our food locally. Much has been written about the Sabbath-economics of gardening, food purchases, and local markets so I’ll leave that discussion to the experts. But I can testify that such practices can instill deep attitudes of thanksgiving to God and to those who are stewards of God’s creation.
Dinner is a Sabbath occasion for our family. Except on rare occasions, we expect to prepare our meals and eat together. We may have to negotiate times and menus but dinner is the time when we share our day, our news, our stories, and our thanks for the goodness we’ve glimpsed that day. When our daughter was young, she would play on the floor as my wife and I prepared the meal. As a toddler, she’d help set or clean the table. Over time she not only learned to cook but we all learned how to narrate the many stories that have become our family story.

Like good liturgy, there are recognizable patterns to our time in the kitchen and around the table. The table is open. Guests are welcome. There are sacred rituals and sacred stories. We acknowledge what is offered to us and by whom. We often give thanks. Our interruptions are few: We answer the door but not the phone during a meal. We get up from the table together, a little stronger, a little more thankful, almost always more refreshed than when we sat down. Even when schedules call for fast food, we still eat face-to-face. We’re not among those Americans who now eat one of every five meals in their car.

Our Sabbath house has other rooms and rituals. No television or computer in the bedroom. That’s the room reserved for sleeping and love-making which, by the way, are both considered in Jewish custom as gifts of the Sabbath. We have a screened-in porch that allows us to breathe the fresh air as we eat, rest, talk, welcome guests, and pray. The garden out back provides food for the table and, perhaps more importantly, reminds us of the gift of the earth and our responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. Our home is not always tranquil but there are habits that we practice together that prepare us for living as a Sabbath people in the larger world.

What is true for a household is also true for a congregation. How does the design of your congregation’s space and the practices you share prepare people to live as Sabbath-keepers in the larger community?

RESOURCES FOR SABBATH-KEEPING

Our conversations about Sabbath at the College of Pastoral Leaders occurred in the context of communal worship. We acknowledged that Sunday worship is the primary, though not exclusive, focus of Sabbath-keeping. For some of our parishioners, Sunday worship is their only true Sabbath. The hour of worship in which they participate is the church’s one chance at an alternative vision for faithful living. If that’s all we have to offer, however, the church is merely a rest stop for people who will quickly return to the fast lane. As pastors and congregations, we need to develop a connection that is greater than one hour and wider than the walls of the sanctuary.

I’ve included a few books, articles, films, poems, and websites that I’ve found helpful in guiding a Sabbath attentiveness that can be shared with others. I want to commend three books that I’ve found particularly helpful. The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man by Abraham Joshua Heschel is considered a classic in the Sabbath literature. Heschel introduces the idea of an “architecture of holiness” that appears not in space but in time. Judaism, he argues, is the religion of time: it finds meaning not in
space and the material things that fill it but in time and the eternity that imbues it, so that “the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals.” Brief and accessible, Heschel helps Christians understand the Sabbath roots and offers the fruit of this life-giving practice.

Dorothy Bass’ *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*, is another volume in the Christian Practices series that offers both theological interpretation and practical testimony. Her stories from local congregations provide encouragement for practicing Sabbath communally and the accompanying website allows practitioners to share their challenges, stories, and questions.

Finally, Marva Dawn’s *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* offers a theological language for speaking about how we restore our Sabbath covenant with God and why it’s so difficult to do in our world.

No resource can define Sabbath for you but many of these resources can contribute to a Sabbath imagination. It’s neither possible nor commendable to incorporate every idea you discover about Sabbath nor to impose those insights and ideas on your family, friends, or congregation. Like a good friend, however, perhaps some of these resources will challenge your Sabbath-breaking habits while encouraging the gifts of Sabbath you’ve been afraid to claim.

**BOOKS**


Fink, Nan, *Stranger in the Midst* (This is the novel Lauren Winner reads and finds inspiration for her book, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, 1997.)


Schaper, Donna, *Sabbath Sense: A Spiritual Antidote for the Overworked*. Cowley Publications,
1999

**ARTICLES**

**FILM**
What movies come to mind that speak of rest, refreshment, feasting, re-creation, and Sabbath-keeping? Are there movies that have touched you in ways that inspire Sabbath-keeping, or movies that illustrate the perils of Sabbath-breaking? Here are just a few that come to my mind:
Babette’s Feast
The Bonfire of the Vanities
Crash
Fried Green Tomatoes
How to Make an American Quilt (a better book than movie!)
Places in the Heart
The Trip to Bountiful
Waiting to Exhale

**MUSIC**
I shared music by one of my favorite singers and songwriters, Carrie Newcomer. Carrie’s Quaker-ism shines through in quieting yet stirring songs like “There’s A Gathering of Spirits,” “Geods,” and “Holy as a Day is Spent.” Of course, you’ll have your own favorite hymns, songs, composers, and singers.

**POETRY**
Most of the individual poems can be found on one of the many poetry websites.
Cambridge, Ada, “The Dawn of God’s Sabbath”
Dickinson, Emily, “Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church”
Disch, Thomas, “A Sabbath Prayer”  
Yehuda Halevi (1086-1145), “Sabbath, My Love”  
Stafford, William, “Ask Me”  
Wingate, Walter, “Sabbath”  

WEBSITES  
www.practicingourfaith.org This familiar website contains a variety of resources on “Receiving the Day,” including ways that local congregations have grown in their understanding and practice of Sabbath-keeping.  
www.congregationalresources.org This website of the Alban Institute and Indianapolis Center for Congregations lists ten resources when you search “Sabbath.”  

CONCLUSION  
A good friend was once asked during an icebreaker which commandment he was least likely to break. “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” he quickly responded as he looked endearingly at his wife. “That’s good,” she said. “That way I won’t be tempted to break the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’” Few of us set out to break the commandments we commend. Sabbath-keeping, however, may be the most difficult. By God’s grace, and within a community that will hold us accountable, we can hopefully discover what it’s like to dance, pray, and celebrate as freed and liberated people.
The Reverend Kevin M. Please is Pastor of First Congregational Church of Camden, United Church of Christ, in Camden, Maine. He is a member of the Salt Bay Survivors cohort group.

On Sabbath

Kevin M. Please

I was once told about an inspirational speaker at a human development workshop who began his talk by asking if anyone knew why bookstores were usually so full of self-help books. After a few responses from the crowd, to which he answered “No, No, No,” the speaker shared the following insight. “The real reason that there are so many self-help books out there,” he said, “is that they don’t work.” People, he observed, are quite attached to the idea of self-improvement, but tend not to want to let go of the self that needs improving in order to actually become an improved self. Buying self-help books allows us to live in the fantasy of change, without suffering the discomfort of actually doing so; rather like loading up on travel books without actually going anywhere. When it comes to Sabbath, most of the clergy I’ve known are caught in a similar dynamic. We seem quite attached to the idea of Sabbath, but are not terribly good at making it a regular part of our lives.

Having not been raised in a tradition that honored a formal “Sabbath Day,” I’ve spent much of my ministry trying to feel my way into an appealing, but mostly foreign concept. I know that Sabbath is more than a day off, more than time for hobbies, more than a break in the action. But unlike the coming of sunset on Friday, for those in the Jewish tradition, there is no clear moment of separation for clergy between what is, and what is not, Sabbath. Ministry is hard, if not impossible, to leave at the office. And when quiet time, casual conversations, books read for fun, and walks in the woods all begin to blur over into what we’re being paid for, the idea of escape comes to loom large in our thinking.

In a recent article in the Alban Institute magazine Congregations, (Winter 2007), Martin Copenhaver offered a wonderful and poignant description of ministry. “The pastoral role follows you around relentlessly,” he says. “Anyone who has spent time in pastoral ministry knows what it is like to covet the ‘off duty’ sign of the cab driver or the established office hours of the therapist.” He goes on to say, “Not being able to escape the pastoral role means particularly not being able to escape the people. William Willimon says he worries when seminarians report that they are going into pastoral ministry because ‘I just love people. I want to work with people.’ Willimon responds by asking, ‘Have you actually met any of these people?’”

The truth is though, we do love these people. That is both the agony and the ecsta-
sy of ministry. We love them, we feel for their pain, we live to lead them out of the wilderness, to the extent we are graced with the wisdom and compassion to do so. But it never ends. My own favorite line about ministry is that it is a job for which there are no practical limits. As the demands of our professional living pile up, typically, our personal and family needs give way to make room for them. And all of this is reinforced by theological, scriptural, and traditional messages that emptying ourselves in this manner is the very definition of a “good pastor.” I know it may not be scripturally accurate, but I was always moved by the scene from “Jesus Christ, Superstar” when Jesus finds himself at the bottom of a pile of lepers, all crowding in to touch the Master. When He finally cries out, “Heal Yourselves!” I can’t help but take that as the heartfelt cry, sooner or later, of all who are called to “feed my sheep.”

Honestly, it doesn’t feel quite right to identify Sabbath entirely with escaping. It ought to be, we imagine, more about setting aside time to drink deeply from that same well that enabled our ministry in the first place. As noble as that sounds though, when we define Sabbath in that way, and particularly when we justify it in that way to others, the underlying message is that even our recovery is more for other people than it is for ourselves. So, that is where I draw the line. For me, Sabbath is largely about escape. Not so much escape to a particular place or activity, but escape from the mindset of always having to be the Shepherd. Escape into the precious awareness that we too are loved by God in our essence, and not for what we accomplish.

All of which makes me profoundly grateful for our recent conference in Austin. Getting away to a sunny climate out of a frigid Maine winter would be welcome under almost any circumstances. But I was caught by surprise when a conference about Sabbath actually became Sabbath. After nearly two years of wondering what has possessed the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and the College of Pastoral Leaders to be so generous and expect so little in return, it finally dawned on me. It’s about Sabbath. It’s about ministering to ministers. It’s about shepherding shepherds.

In the opening worship, during that simple service of hand washing, I was suddenly struck by how rarely I had been on the receiving end of such a blessing. As I later wrote to Janet, “Having spent nearly twenty-five years trying to be a channel for God’s blessing of others, I find myself stunned by how powerful it is to be blessed in turn. Not that I haven’t been nurtured in many other ways, and not that the work of ministry isn’t a blessing all by itself, but to specifically receive a compassionate benediction for my work felt healing in a way I’ve hardly ever known.”

For me, Sabbath is escape: not merely from the meetings, phone calls, sermon preparation, and general chaos of ministry, but from the all too common notion that we are to be forever on the giving, rather than the receiving, side of the equation. Though it can come as a surprise, even to those of us who think we already know it, we, too, are saved by grace.
A few years into ministry I started to feel guilty about not practicing a Sabbath. Maybe it was the sermon series on the Ten Commandments. Whatever prompted it, my husband and I began to experiment with Sabbath-keeping. It was hard, especially for me. The first obstacle was my relationship to my Do List.

I've had a Do List almost as long as I can remember. In fact, I keep more than one. There's a Do List for school or work and another one for home—errands I need to run, birthday cards I need to send, chores I need to do, phone calls I need to make. I love my Do Lists.

When I got married, though, it was to someone who wasn't as big a fan of my Do List as I was. My new husband particularly disliked the way I woke up on Saturday mornings and asked, “So, what’s on the agenda for today?” He wanted a day without an agenda. I, naturally, already had one in mind. He also objected to something else about my Do List: on the rare occasions when we got to the end of it, I’d add on a few extra projects. After all, there was unexpected time left over. What my husband wanted to do was celebrate our accomplishments by relaxing for a change. He wanted to stop. My tendency, always, was to keep working.

Then a funny thing happened. While I was trying to get the hang of Sabbath-keeping—and failing pretty miserably at it—I was also studying “Family Systems” with Rabbi Ed Friedman. As part of researching my family of origin I wrote to my aunt, my mother’s only sister, and asked her to share some of her childhood memories with me. She fulfilled this request in the form of a ten page handwritten letter. Several of her recollections focused on her grandparents—my great-grandparents—Art and Minnie.

One story from my aunt’s letter stood out from all the rest. She recalled a day when she was 7 or 8, and my mother was 5 or 6. They were visiting at Art and Minnie’s house and had spent much of the day playing outside. An afternoon rainstorm forced them to choose between the house and the detached garage. They chose the garage. What they found inside was their grandfather, sitting all alone in the dark. “Shhh,” Art whispered, index finger pressed to his lips. “Don’t tell your grandmother where I am. She’ll just have something else from her list for me to do.”

This story made me howl with laughter. I suddenly understood something I’d never understood before: I was a slave to my Do List. And no wonder. As my husband remarked when I read the story to him: “Oh my! That’s four generations of Do Lists,

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and that's only what we know about—there could be more!"

The story and the laughter triggered a vision and a realization. There were at least three powerful German women bearing down on me—four, if I included my aunt. I was the direct descendant of women who were such unrelenting taskmasters that their husbands fled to dark garages for refuge. In that brief moment, the “spell” was broken—my relationship to my Do List altered. The vision of my great-grandfather hiding out in his garage sprung some kind of family systems trap for me, and suddenly I was free. It was that quick. I could imagine myself saying “no” to those stern, no-nonsense matriarchs who were all work and no play. I knew I could stop working and let other people stop working, too. It would take practice; but I knew it was possible, and so it was. I still keep a couple of Do Lists, but my relationship to them changed fundamentally in the wake of my aunt’s story. My husband will attest to this, and our regular Sabbath practice continues to confirm it.

But slavery to my Do List was only the first obstacle to practicing a Sabbath. The other big obstacle turned out to involve timing. After considerable thought and experimentation, we settled on Friday as our Sabbath day. The other days of our week began in the morning, so our Friday Sabbaths began in the morning too. We liked them, but they fell short of our expectations for refreshment and restoration. We wondered what the problem was.

Help came in the form of something simple and obvious: the Hebrew and biblical sense of time. What if we modified our approach and began our Friday Sabbaths on Thursday evening instead of Friday morning? We tried this, and it had nearly the same fast results as the story about my great-grandfather. Not that we haven’t had to do a lot of tweaking and re-tooling with our Friday Sabbaths and ourselves—we certainly have. But this shift in timing was fundamental in the same way that my aunt’s story had been. It made it possible for us to practice a Sabbath at all.

In particular, an evening-to-evening Sabbath provided a better way for me to transition from one kind of time into another kind of time, which is what Sabbath is all about. Over a period of several months I noticed how, on Thursday afternoons, I was unconsciously leaning into the approaching Sabbath. Anticipating it. Longing for it. I had never experienced these sensations on our morning-to-morning Sabbaths. I didn’t know what they were, but I trusted them as significant. More than any other factor, they have enabled my efforts toward Sabbath faithfulness.

Only recently have I gotten a couple of solid leads on where they come from. In Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, Eugene Peterson remarks: “We are embedded in time, but time is also embedded in us.” And in Sabbath, Abraham Heschel speaks of “the longing of the Sabbath for man.” Here’s what I suspect: even in my clumsiest attempts to stop and rest one day a week, I’ve been cooperating with the deep reality of how God created us to live and yearns for us to live. And that deep reality cooperates with me. It sets me free.

NOTES

1 Eugene H. Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 68.
Sabbath, in traditional Jewish homes, begins at sundown on Friday with the lighting of candles and prayer. Growing up in a pastor’s home, Sabbath (although we wouldn’t have called it that) began at dusk on Saturday with Archie and Edith Bunker wailing “Those Were the Days” and a big bowl of popcorn. Like clockwork the six of us in my family would gather around the television, freshly scrubbed and shampooed, for an evening of family entertainment that included the Bunkers, Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, Bob Newhart, and in later years, John Belushi and Rosanna Rosana Dana.

Sunday, the Lord’s Day, was always the same: Dad nervously jangled his keys and paced as he waited for us to get ready. Mom doggedly herded us to the car. There was Sunday School, worship, lunch at Luby’s Cafeteria, then a slow afternoon of reading, riding bikes, playing catch, or talking on the phone while mom and dad napped. Our signal to get ready to go back to church was the click-clacking of Dad’s manual typewriter as he put the finishing touches on his Sunday evening sermon. And so it was, week after week, year after year.

I left home and the familiar rhythms of childhood gave way to the exciting, energetic beat of college life, dating, studying, and travel. Eventually seminary beckoned and several years later I landed at the doorstep of a small, rural Louisiana church as their pastor. I found the pastoral life to have a rhythm all its own. Although I thought about Sunday all the time, I gave little thought to the Sabbath. Sunday was the day I had better have a church school lesson, liturgy and sermon ready, and my game face on. On Sunday, after worship and pastoral responsibilities were discharged, I usually collapsed in a heap, only to begin the cycle again on Monday.

Life continued. I married and two vibrant children arrived, bringing more responsibilities and commitments. Inexplicably I often found myself melancholy on Sundays, as if I had forgotten or misplaced something, but the idea of remembering the Sabbath, of not doing any productive work one day a week, seemed impossible and unrealistic. It was all I could do to keep the many plates of my life airborne and spinning. Sabbath, I concluded, must be for people who weren’t as busy as I.

When I had been in my current position with The College of Pastoral Leaders about a year, one of our cohort groups (providentially named Abiding Presence) contacted me to see if Janet and I would lead them in a retreat on Sabbath. For the first

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time I began to wonder seriously about the Sabbath. I read Abraham Joshua Heschel's book once, then twice, and then a third time. Savoring his words I sensed an ancient door slowly opening; a light being rekindled; an old rhythm seeking to be heard; an understanding taking root.

During this time I attended a large conference. Just before an afternoon break one of the conference facilitators urged us to “take a nap, take a walk, grab a little Sabbath time!” I envisioned a church with a drive through window where I could pick up an order of Sabbath and some fries. No, I decided, Sabbath isn’t something I can grab on the run. Neither is Sabbath collapsing in a heap of exhaustion after an impossibly busy week; it isn’t running errands or doing laundry or weeding the garden; it isn’t even a pedicure on my day off or a night out with the girls. Sabbath isn’t about me at all. Sabbath is about God. Sabbath is about the way the sun comes up in the morning whether I am ready for it or not; it is about the way the light makes the grass look impossibly green and causes the spider’s web to glisten with dew. Sabbath is about the everyday wonders and miracles of living: that cowlick, those freckles, a steaming cup of coffee, wildflowers, thunderstorms, jazz. Sabbath is about understanding life as a gift, knowing myself as part of God’s creation and resting my full weight in that grace. Sabbath is, in Heschel’s words, about “being in love with eternity.”

At our annual CPL conference in February, 2007, the speaker, Kevin Armstrong, gave us four words that are helpful as I try to remember the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, Armstrong said, we “cease, rest, embrace, and feast.” Sabbath has become the day I move at a slower pace. I’ll call my brothers; try a new recipe; take a walk; sit on the porch; start a good book, or shoot hoops with my kids. I think of it as a day in which I may joyfully and freely sink into life’s goodness, giving thanks for breath and bread, for love and family. Interestingly enough, I’ve discovered that as I remember the Sabbath I am re-membered by it. Somehow in the quiet of that day the fragments and pieces of my life are sewn back together. I am lifted briefly beyond the tyranny of the temporal and I know myself as one of God’s beloved. Even when I do it well, however, I keep Sabbath imperfectly, but like any discipline, the more I practice, the better I get, the farther I realize I have to go, and the more I long for its presence.

Perhaps at the heart of all God’s commandments is an invitation to come home; home to God and to ourselves. Whether remembering the Sabbath begins with the lighting of a candle or gathering around a television, it seems the important thing is that it begins in thanksgiving and joy that in life and in death we belong to God.
Sabbath Means Stop

Someone was sitting by the side of the road when a man on horseback came racing past. The horse was thundering along, tearing up the roadway. The bystander hollered, “Hey, where you going so fast?” The horseman hollered as he flew past, “I don’t know. Ask the horse!”

We know that horse in the San Francisco Bay Area. The cost of living is extremely high. Most families must have both parents working extremely hard to afford to live in a house here. If you are unwilling to work 70, 80, 90 hours a week and be available on Saturday and Sunday for work, there is always someone behind you in line who is willing. If you get off the horse, you better plan on moving.

The root of the Hebrew word “Sabbath” is “to stop.” That simple notion opens a vital window to God’s presence in justice and healing in human life. But the opening of that window is a difficult spiritual discipline.

The horse that carries us at such breakneck speed is both an economic engine that Walter Brueggemann calls production-consumption, and our own addictive patterns of life and work. We are on that horse and we may resent the horse, we may even chastise the horse, but something keeps us on it, keeps us from saying, “Stop!”

And there is cost to us as a society when we cannot stop the horse.

Increasingly it seems that most of America gets its news from television and radio—it’s quicker that way, more efficient. It saves time. But there is a cost.

In a televised news conference, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace of the Marine Corps, had an exchange with a reporter. The reporter began with “an involved but perfectly well-sourced discussion of Abu Ghraib and the fact that all the reports suggest that something systemic—something ordered by higher-ups—was going on there … then he asked, ‘I wonder if you would just respond to the suggestion that there is a systematic problem rather than the kinds of individual abuses we’ve heard of before.’ Secretary Rumsfeld said, ‘I don’t believe there’s been a single one of the investigations that have been conducted, which has got to be six, seven, eight, or nine …’ General Pace [interrupting]: ‘Ten major reviews and 300 individual investigations of one kind or another.’ Secretary Rumsfeld: ‘And have you seen one that characterized it as systematic or systemic?’ Pace: ‘No sir.’ Rumsfeld: ‘I haven’t either.’ Reporter: ‘What about—?’ Rumsfeld: ‘Next question?’ [Then, laughter in the press room.]”

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The very first Abu Ghraib report, by U.S. Army Major General Antonio Taguba, said, “between October and December 2003, at the Abu Ghraib Confinement Facility, numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted … This systemic and illegal abuse was intentionally perpetrated.” The Red Cross reported: “These methods of physical and psychological coercion were used by the military intelligence in a systematic way.”

Now, back to the television version. Rumsfeld: “And have you seen one that characterized it as systematic or systemic?” Pace: “No sir.” Rumsfeld: “I haven’t either.”

The point of this is that, if people are only taking time to watch the television, they have no idea what is really going on. None of this is hidden. It is all a part of the public record, but it takes time to read. And some of those in leadership are counting on us to be so busy that we can be sold blatant lies.

Keep the Sabbath holy. Stop.

Our skimming over the news of the day, our failure to stop and reflect, either separately or together, leaves the horse, not the Holy One, in charge.

At the Nuremberg war tribunals, many who were accused of crimes against humanity defended themselves by saying something akin to “I was only doing my job,” and almost without exception, these people were described as good, kind, and caring people. Hannah Arendt coined a phrase to describe the root problem with a defense based on ignorance and good character. The shorthand for her insight was “the banality of evil”—the banality—the dullness and facileness of it. Evil, she demonstrated, is often the result of an unreflective life. What she showed was that not thinking about what one is doing and about the sometimes hidden and not immediately obvious consequences of our actions, does not excuse evil.

In *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Nieman offers a parallel insight, “precisely the belief that evil actions require evil intentions allowed totalitarian regimes to convince people to override moral objections that might otherwise have functioning.” The point of her book is “to make us more morally alert to ways in which we participate in evil without intending to do so and to increase our sense of responsibility rather than diminish it.”

The evil we commit can not be reduced to our intentions to do evil. We are caught up in systems that make use of us for evil work, which do not entail any evil intention on our part. We are just riding the horse. It is precisely our being absorbed into accepted and assumed patterns of work, consumption, and entertainment, where our life’s energies are affecting the lives and deaths of people far, far away—to whom of course we intend no evil—that is the systemic problem of our failure to stop the horse.

And there is a cost to us as individuals when we cannot stop the horse. Most of the time these patterns of work make us successful, but occasionally, blessedly, they become debilitating such that we can be stopped in our tracks.

Karl Jung tells the story of a patient, a minister, who was addicted to his work, laboring 80-90 hours per week. He was suffering from disabling ennui. Jung asked him to stop working for two nights. He asked him to spend the nights alone by himself.

The first night the minister listened to Beethoven and read poetry. The next night he listened to Mozart and read a novel. The following morning he went back to Dr.
Jung, who asked him how he spent his time. The minister told him, and Jung cried, “No! That’s not what I asked you to do. I asked you to spend the night not with Mozart but with yourself!” The man said, “But I can’t stand to be with myself like that!” Jung said, “That self that you cannot stand is the self you are inflicting on the people around you 80-90 hours a week.”

The story points to profound human frailties—just how difficult it is for us to stop and to attend to our interior life for even one night—a partial Sabbath—let alone a full day. The story points to the havoc it produces in our life and the lives of those around us when we don’t stop and become self-reflective. This minister is too much like us. We are easily lured away from deep life—the banal seduces us. We know, when we stop a routine, how quickly something is sucked into the vacuum created by our stopping. Often our unconscious behaviors are highly addictive behaviors. The requirement to stop for Sabbath is an invitation to become aware of our leanings toward addiction and be lead to confront the horse’s power in our lives.

Theologian Wendy Farley writes, “Addiction is a distorted attempt to relieve the painfulness of existence … It is rooted in the subconscious insistence that some good thing will be able to provide sufficient relief from pain, boredom, and anxiety.” The real danger in our addictions is not in our wanting the things that we want or enjoying the things that we enjoy in our addictions. The danger lies “in allowing them to obfuscate the depth of our soul, blocking access to the spiral that carries consciousness through fire and emptiness to compassion, love, and joy.” so that we’re not just inflicting ourselves on the people around us nor living so unconsciously that we become mere riders on the economy, merely skimming across the possible reflective depths of our existence.

Barbara Brown Taylor’s word carries this same weight: “The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone.” Even some of our most trivial-seeming habits, when we stop them, can be windows on the presence of God. Sabbath stopping is an invitation to embrace the real depths. Our stopping is the point—our awakening to God’s presence is the point of our stopping our addictions in a small or large way.

These depths that I refer to above are not a tame reality—ultimately benign, but not tame. The deep is unknown. There is an emptiness at their doorstep.

When we stop for Sabbath, stop our daily routine or eating chocolate or smoking cigarettes or drinking or TV or whatever, we likely feel empty, incomplete, annoyed, anxious, even afraid. We are cut loose from the usual activities that distract us from the emptiness. If we are attentive to the feelings that this deprivation provides, we find ourselves suspended over a kind of abyss, a depth that opens the sense of an unknown, mysterious threshold. There is a hollowness that we actually experience rather than merely masking it by habitual behavior.

When we first feel that hollowness, we simply want it to stop—not still the craving but feed it. We want to reverse the move toward emptiness, the move toward annoyance and anxiety and fear. We want to step back from the edge of the abyss. We want to be distracted from the feelings that our stopping has generated. And with real addiction, we end up with the illusion that filling our craving won’t just fill the little hole. We think it will soothe us completely. We’re not just filling the coffee, alcohol, or retail
therapy hole, we are filling the big emptiness—the one that our addiction keeps us from experiencing.

When we are faced with the abyss and with the persistent temptation to fill the hollowness with anything other than God, we can invite the Holy Spirit to fill us, to fill that hollowness within—and God is aching to do so. Teilhard de Chardin, the Christian mystic and philosopher, once wrote of his Sabbath stopping:

And so, for the first time in my life perhaps (although I am supposed to meditate every day!) I took the lamp and leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seems clear, I went down into my inmost self, to the deep abyss whence I feel dimly that my power of action emanates. But as I moved further and further away from the conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet, and out of it came—arising from I know not from where—the current which I dare call my life.7

Keep the Sabbath holy. Stop.

There is Sabbath. When we stop and interrupt our routines, the conventional certainties, and recognize the fragility and wonder of our existence, our mortality, our creatureliness, and open ourselves to depth, we feel that empty place within. If we do not quickly fill it with the things that do not satisfy, with things that leave us empty and lifeless again and again, we will find, arising from that abyss, the fullness of our God. That is the promise of Sabbath, that when we stop, when we get off the horse, the God who is always there, as surely as the ground itself, will be fully present to us because we are fully present—and we will be filled.

Notes
2 Ibid.
3 Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York: Viking Press, 1970), some of this was referred to in Placher, see below.
5 William Placher, ibid..
6 Placher made the connection between these two works in the Christian Century cited above.
8 Ibid., p. 65.
9 Barbara Brown Taylor, op. cit.
The new science informs us with glee
that the energy powering everything
no longer is thought to reside in the thing itself –
the modern tidy atom,
the humming quark with its letters of recommendation –
but rather (prepare yourself) in the
space that exists
between this thing and that.

All the fuel for all that is
quantumly there,
where otherwise nothing is mapably, empirically evident.

In my work and yours, brothers and sisters,
where even overperformance is underperformance,
where often we are only as good as what we are up to at this very instant,
where the inner critic has most every last functional word –
in this work of public vulnerability and coffee cups,
we hold to the sabbath of moment, and presence.

Between the services and the meetings,
the counseling and the administrivia,
between things,
take sixty seconds and have a sip of holy life.

There will always be these minute handfuls of grace,
when, between one thing and another,
we might catch God’s likeness
and kindle it in our hands
as to enflame the memory of inspiration and intention.

Alas, even our rest is programmatic.

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I walked into the room. I had heard of such meetings. I knew the format. The pattern of patter was proclaimed in parody the world over. But still I felt the intimidation of crossing the threshold for the first time. I wondered if I belonged. I wondered if my own maladies were too bizarre for the rest of them. What if I learned, “Yes, I am the only twisted one in the world. I am the only one who is this broken.” Some in the room seemed to know each other, but all of the faces were new to me. Each of us parked ourselves in a chair. We were called to order and the introductions began. One after another around the circle, each one is named, each one welcomed. My heart pounded. My palms perspired. What if I was too unworthy? What if they all sensed the particularly egregious nature of my sin. What if I was the Judas of this gathering, the one rejected and turned out like a sacrificial lamb. What if I was to be the one hoisted on the petard of my confession? Wasn’t my sin worse than all these others? After all, I am a pastor. I am one who should know better, who does know better. My turn came and I blurted the words. “My name is Sam, and I’m a Sabbath breaker.”

The truth is, this shouldn’t be the first time I’ve attended one of these meetings. I’ve fallen off the Sabbath wagon a thousand times. I’ve built a prayer life more times than I can name. I’ve used lectio divina and taught it to others. I’ve discovered centering prayer and found its usefulness. I’ve kept lists of people to pray for and mentioned each one by name over and over again. I’ve written and rewritten psalms of praise and confession. I’ve used one guide after another. Read the Mission Yearbook. Lead Daily Devotions. Gone on spiritual pilgrimages and retreats. Lit candles in cathedrals all over Europe. Taught classes on prayer and approaching God. Counseled others on their spiritual commitments. I’ve listened to Sabbath gurus urge me to Sabbath observance, heard how well they have kept the Sabbath, and what it has meant to them. I’ve read books, made Lenten commitments, joined accountability groups. And fallen off the Sabbath wagon again, and again, and again.

As I confess my brokenness, my new friends remind me that the first step to my recovery is to know I am a Sabbath breaker. And, not surprisingly, my Sabbath breaking shows a spiritual deficit in my life. I need God’s help to do what God requires. The place for me to start on the journey to becoming a Sabbath keeper is to ask God to guide my Sabbath keeping. My task isn’t to keep all the Sabbaths, but to keep one Sabbath—the next one. “One day at a time” can help a Sabbath breaker not feel over-
whelmed by the enormity of trying to live the perfect Sabbath-keeping life.

The second step for me in keeping the Sabbath is to take Sabbath in manageable amounts. Like so many of my first-named friends, I get caught up in the enormity of Sabbath. Where can I get enough time to keep the Sabbath completely? I’m helped by the phrase, “Easy does it.” Sabbath keeping has always seemed like such a vast undertaking. And it is a commitment. But not having a huge time to sit in quiet doesn’t have to be the roadblock to keeping the Sabbath that I have made it. They tell me to begin with three minutes of Sabbath. Three minutes. That I can do.

I won’t be so bold as to call myself a Sabbath keeper yet. But with God’s help, one day at a time, I am on the pathway. I may fall back into my Sabbath breaker ways. But I know that I do not have to tread this road alone, for Sabbath keeping is about connecting me with someone greater than I am. So “Easy does it, Sam L.” This is not a brokenness that God and I cannot handle together.
Sabbath: To Cease, To Rest

Josh Bell

Sabbath is a holy experience, and one that is not often followed in today's church. As a youth minister I cannot honestly say that I practice Sabbath. All my life Sunday has been a day of work in the name of the Lord. My parents and grandparents are all ministers in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I am the oldest of six. As long as I can remember we never spent Sundays resting. Usually our family ran full steam until we crashed at our home and prepared for the rest of the week.

The annual conference of the College of Pastoral Leaders, “Sabbath a Way of Life,” generated lively discussion among my own cohort group. It seemed we all viewed the concept of Sabbath in a different way. One member thought the time our cohort spends together was Sabbath. Another thought that ceasing and resting must be a part of our daily routines and that Sabbath can be found in a variety of ways. Someone else believed the traditional definition of a weekly day of rest must be put in place in our lives. Finally I found myself wondering if we all were right!

Even in the midst of the theological differences within our group and the others at the conference, I was pleased by the fact that we were talking about it at all. It set me to wondering, how do I recharge? How do I spend time with God? Finally, the most important question of all, how do I rest? It seemed to me that these are three separate issues that get combined in the notion of Sabbath.

Recharging is much more than a physical experience. It is a time to let go the things of man and focus on the things of God. My cohort group, I feel, is focused most on this aspect. Each person in my cohort group is, in some way or another, making gradual lifestyle changes. We all know the need to feel God’s presence, but in reality, most of us are workaholics. I think of other ministers I know, and I wonder when any of us regularly find ways to recharge ourselves. I am an avid canoeist. I take advantage of canoeing as often as I can and I feel recharged after spending a day on the water. Others feel recharged after reading, spending time with family and friends, exercising, or writing. I think we can find God in all these activities, but I do not think they are the same as Sabbath. They are things we have to do to stay sane.

It seems the greatest challenge facing ministers is finding ways to spend time with God without distractions. We must take our cues from our earliest mentor, Jesus. We must spend time with God in prayer. Ministers, myself included, seem to procrastinate when it comes to this basic spiritual practice. But Jesus spent a lot of time in solitude.

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He fed the multitudes, and then he spent time in prayer. He healed someone, he spent time in prayer. The Jesus of the Gospels spent a lot of time alone with God praying. Our calling to ministry is not a “career” it is a life. The world, our congregations are chaotic. We must make time for prayer, time to spend alone with God, and we must make the people we serve know that this time is essential to our callings.

Sabbath is a lifestyle of spirituality. We need to REST!!! We need to find ways that we take a day truly of worship and rest. As modern Christians, it is difficult to fathom this practice, but God wants, no needs, us to rest. We may need to turn to others to ask how they practice Sabbath, perhaps our Jewish brothers and sisters. I think I will do this. Then perhaps, gradually, I can find ways to make meaningful Sabbath a part of my life.
Ah, the Sabbath. It’s not just for the seventh day anymore. It is difficult to find a simple definition for Sabbath. There are many layers to the word in dictionaries and in people’s minds. But, the use of Sabbath shapes our calendar and how we know the world.

As it is with all of God’s commands, the command to “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” is a gift from God. In the creation stories God looks at what has been created and says “good” or “very good.” God’s purpose is for life to be lived in relationship with God and all of creation. Life is not to be lived as exploitation and misuse of others and the rest of creation, rather God calls all people to lives of service, good will, healing, growth, and restoration. Even so, it seems that life can become burdened with over-work. In our day “workaholism” is a real disease. Without Sabbath, holiness is taken away from so much of life. Without Sabbath, we work until we drop. We cease to enjoy our labor, and we forget how to enjoy the fruits of our labor. We also forget to give thanks to the One who makes possible all that we have and are and may become.

Perhaps it is good for us to take time to take a break, to stop, to rest, to pray, to think, and to listen for God’s messages of hope, healing, restoration, and new life. For time away from the duties of life to celebrate and give thanks for the wonders of God’s love made present in the possibilities of each day. The still, small voice of God can come only when we set aside holy time and stop, turn off the noise of our everyday world, and listen, really listen. In the listening, God will sharpen us. Sharpen our hearing, our receptors of love built into our souls when God infused us with the breath of life. I suspect that unless we stop to listen to, and feel our breath, we may forget that our breath is the very Holy Spirit flowing in and out of us. Our breath is the Spirit that renews, refreshes, and restores.

Kevin Armstrong challenged my thinking about Sabbath when he spoke at the annual conference of the College of Pastoral Leaders. He said he was going to speak to pastors about the commandment they most often violate. Until that moment it had not occurred to me that I did just as Kevin said. I am guilty. I violate the Sabbath law on a regular basis. Kevin also grabbed my attention when he laid out four ideas central to living in Sabbath: ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, based on Marva Dawn’s ideas in Keeping the Sabbath Wholly. What a challenge it is for me to do these things. When I ponder the notion of ceasing work, productivity, accomplishment, I find

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myself wondering, What will I think about? How will I be? When I consider how it might be to rest, to rest as my very own self, in spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual ways, I wonder if I have ever been able to rest. To ponder the notion that God is at work while we rest calls me to a new level of trust in God.

Ah, to trust in God completely, now there is a concept. Not to trust in my activity, my intellect, my accomplishments, my plans, my hopes, my dreams, my disappointments, my angers, my fears. To trust in God, to rest in God, to breathe in the Spirit, to trust this gift and allow it to infuse me with the very Spirit, I need, this is my Sabbath challenge. The idea of embracing fully Christian values, intentionality, calling, time instead of space, Shalom, world, recovery of Christian practices, causes me to wonder how it is that I have been immersed in the life of the church for my entire life and have not been encouraged to embrace these as part of Sabbath.

My dad, a self-employed carpenter-contractor, used to say, Time is money. By this he meant, Hurry up, you’re going too slow. The faster you get this job done the more money we can make. Those messages continue to ring in my soul. I still find myself wanting to produce and I feel guilty when I am not producing. Even when I rest from work I replace it with other work that I call recreation. I hunt and fish so that I can enjoy the outdoors. I act as if it is not okay to enjoy the outdoors simply because I enjoy the outdoors. I must produce something in the process. Sitting in the sun resting is acceptable only if I contemplate my schedule for the upcoming week’s work. I find as I examine myself that I am truly and deeply involved in avoiding Sabbath in every area of my life.

Perhaps now that I have been challenged to see anew the holiness of time, the restorative qualities of ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, I will be more empowered to live into Sabbath. I just need to think about when to schedule it. After all, this next week looks very busy.

NOTE
I have a friend who cleans houses for a living—or at least she did. I went to visit her recently, while she was recuperating from serious health problems. Distraught, she told me that her doctor had now declared her disabled, and she would no longer be able to work. As a part of coming to terms with this new situation of losing both her livelihood and vocation, she recounted for me some of her experiences over the years with her employers, most of whom were quite wealthy. One in particular loomed large in her reminiscing. He was a man who, she was surprised to find out, was a member of the same Lutheran congregation where she worshiped. When she registered surprise that she had never seen him, he informed her that he was indeed a member because he sent contributions and furthermore, that he and his family had always been Lutheran. I had to admire her for answering him boldly that she was Lutheran by conviction, not by heritage. For this extremely active churchwoman, sending a check was in no way, shape, or form equivalent to remembering the Sabbath. It had to mean being present in person with the congregation of believers, to worship, serve, share, take on leadership, show concern for others, and in general to witness to her faith. Even as my friend now lay in bed, forbidden to be up for several weeks, she was making plans, somehow, to attend church on Easter Sunday.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Most Christians take for granted that this commandment means going to church on Sunday. But below the surface of this seemingly simple charge to God’s people is a deep and complex history of developments, changes, and controversies that, if taken seriously, leaves us with a host of unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, questions, especially as we consider what Sabbath-keeping may mean for Christians in our time. To indicate only some of the complexity: the Sabbath commandment points back to the creation narrative, but its observance derives from Mosaic Law. For the Israelites, the Sabbath’s original sense of liberation from forced labor and rest from subsistence farming pertained to their particular political and economic situations, and even that changed over time. Jesus on several occasions disputed with some of the religious leaders of his day over proper observance of the Sabbath, and his own view has been interpreted both as a break with tradition and as a more faithful rendering of it.

And how did we get from Saturday to Sunday? Looking back on the resurrection,
New Testament writers began to refer to the Lord’s Day, but there is no indication that this was a replacement for the Sabbath. The early Christians who were Jewish may have been more likely to celebrate the seventh day Sabbath than their gentile counterparts, and abandoning the Jewish Sabbath in favor of Sunday may have come from Hellenistic and Roman influences as well as a move to disassociate with Judaism. Eventually the Roman church officially declared Sunday the primary worship day, so Roman Catholics can appeal to ecclesial authority. But can Protestants, who stand on authority of Scripture, definitively argue for Sunday as Sabbath? Seventh Day Adventists have said no, although the vast majority of Christians readily accept Sunday as the traditional day of worship and rest.

So we are left with a commandment from God concerning a day that takes second place to the day on which we honor God with our worship. Jesus was concerned about honoring God’s intention for life on the Sabbath; we are concerned about honoring Jesus as Lord by celebrating Sunday as the memorial of his resurrection and the anticipation of our own. What, then, is the Sabbath for Christians? In looking back over the biblical and historical tradition(s) we have inherited, we see that questions regarding the Sabbath—which day, how much of the day, whether a portion of time, an idea, or an attitude—are not easily settled.

What is entailed in keeping the Sabbath holy? If we take our cue from Jesus, it is the spirit of Sabbath that is more important than adhering to rules and regulations regarding what ought or ought not to be done. For those of us who worship on Sunday, the main rule is to go to church. But perhaps we have gone too far in rejecting the idea of other restrictions on our activities and have lost the sense of wonder at the root of Sabbath-keeping—the covenant between our all-encompassing and all-gracious God and us as finite, dependent human beings who are perennially unsettled and unable to get beyond that. Resting, or taking a break from our usual routine in a regular rhythm of spiritual exercise, can help us to regain a more appropriate estimation of ourselves and more appreciation for the depth of God’s compassion toward us. Yet surely God’s compassion can also be felt by those, like the friend I visited, whose personal circumstances do not permit them to exercise spiritually in the manner they would like!

Elusive as they may be with providing answers, our complex traditions have given us a gift. They have called us to broaden our idea of God who declared the Sabbath holy because it was the time in which God rested. For Christians, the real issue is how to honor not just God the giver of commandments but the triune God, creator, redeemer, and sanctifier—the God who has been made known to us in Jesus the risen Christ and the life-giving Holy Spirit. No time or idea or attitude that we have will be sufficient to accomplish that, but we may be able, out of our present personal and communal struggles, to contribute something important to the complex mix of interpretations and traditions that is still forming.

The questions remain with us. There are no simple, straightforward answers for how we shall keep the Sabbath commandment and simultaneously celebrate the fullness of the hope we have in God who has been revealed to us through Christ and the Spirit. Whether we interpret Sabbath as time, idea, or attitude, we are presented with unsettling complexities, and precisely in those complexities is blessing. Beyond our
ability to pin down, Sabbath comes to us as “both and”—both command and invitation, both a time for rest and a time for worship, both restriction and liberation, both remembrance and anticipation, both present and future reality, both for us and for God, a blessing.
I remember a series of conversations early in my ministry with older, more experienced ministers when the question of rest and self-care for clergy surfaced. With derisive snorts, they offered their opinions that this new generation of clergy was too soft. These seasoned colleagues shared that they thought nothing of working every day, that they couldn’t remember the last time they had a full day off, that they often were interrupted on vacation, and that being a minister meant working as many hours as it took to get the job done. The message was clearly, Quit your whining and get on with the job!

After twenty-three years of ordained ministry, I’d like to believe I’ve moved to a healthier approach to this peculiar calling. For instance, I’m zealous about not doing anything church related on my one day off. Four years ago I was blessed with a three-month sabbatical. I make serious efforts not to be away from home more than a few nights a week or to work an unreasonable amount of hours. Yet I find myself, as the years pass, gravitating more and more toward a version of my predecessors’ perspective. There’s really no way to take two full days off a week; you just can’t get the job done in five days. I turn around and I’m stunned by how much my predecessors’ perspectives have become my own.

That’s probably the main reason why the College of Pastoral Leaders convocation, “Sabbath: A Way of Life,” wasn’t as restful as I had hoped. Part of my discomfort was a running, internal argument with presenter Kevin Armstrong. I was mumbling and growling inside that not all of us are wired to live out Sabbath in silence, solitude, digging in the garden, cooking, or otherwise engaged in activities that make an introvert’s heart sing and an extrovert’s skin crawl. I’ve come to love and accept the raging extrovert I am. I champion the position that some of us find more renewal in a spirited conversation with friends around a common table than in contemplating a glorious sunrise.

But my primary cause for discomfort goes well beyond personality differences. Rev. Armstrong led us through reflection on the Deuteronomic version of the Sabbath commandment that calls the people to remember their former status as slaves as a motivation for resting and granting rest to others. They are commanded to be mindful continually of the taskmasters who would not let them rest and to not be such taskmasters to others or themselves. The question was then put to us in our cohort groups: Who

**Steve Jester**

Resisting the Taskmasters

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are the taskmasters who won’t let you rest? Is it guilt over not producing and staying busy? Is your taskmaster fear of failure? Or perhaps the one who is cracking the whip is our fear of ceasing to exist as a viable faith tradition if we let down our guard for even a moment.

That’s the source of my dis-ease, the real reason for my discomfort in dealing with Sabbath. It seems that the longer I’m involved in parish ministry the more aware I am of how tenuous it all is, how quickly a church’s health can change, how the move of a few key families, the closing of an industry, or a national tragedy can wreck a strategic long-range plan that seemed attainable only a few months ago. As Presbyterians, we’re part of a system, a faith tradition, that is highly anxious, wondering if we will survive much longer and, if so, what kind of changes will be required for survival. And how do we respond to these anxious times? We often don’t. We instead react to them. Driven by the overseer of the fear of failure, the taskmaster of the fear of becoming irrelevant, we work ever harder. We refuse to let down and we reach for the next program or emphasis or structure that will heal us and ensure our future as a congregation or tradition. At least, that’s how it often works out in my life.

That’s why I needed the challenge to observe Sabbath and take it seriously, though it wasn’t a pleasant or comfortable word to hear. My spiritual health demands a time of stepping back and stopping my frenetic striving, a sacred time of trusting in the gracious Holy Spirit to bring God’s future, a moment to listen for how I might be an instrument of that coming future. I desperately need that regular Sabbath observance to remember once more that I am not the one who finally makes it all happen, that I am creature and not Creator, and to find a blessed relief in that realization.

In his wonderful book on Sabbath, Abraham Heschel describes Sabbath variously as an “atmosphere,” an “island of stillness,” and “a day for praise.” We will shape and observe that holy time in different ways, depending on how we’re wired. There is no one way to “do” Sabbath. But because of my own tendency to return to and embrace the familiar taskmasters of fear, as well as the rampant anxiety on the loose in our Presbyterian world, I’m convinced that Sabbath is a discipline we’re called to embrace once more. Then, by grace, we may be able to hear with fresh ears Jesus’ invitation to “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burden, and I will give you rest.”
Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

—Genesis 2:1-3

TARRY A WHILE

JANET MAYKUS

Take a deep breathe and let it go. You’ve tied up as many loose ends as you can, you’ve packed, you’ve traveled, and now you are here.

Tarry a while and rest. Put away your tasks and be.

“God finished the work that he had done and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God Blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.”

I’ve read this passage all my life, and it wasn’t until I prepared for this worship that I saw something new. God rested and then God blessed. It was not that God created this day holy.

It’s as if God ran out of juice, rested, and said, “Wow, that resting thing, now that

The Reverend Janet Maykus, principal of the College of Pastoral Leaders, delivered this homily in worship during the annual conference in February 2007.
is a GREAT idea.” So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.

It’s not hard to imagine God ending each day with a reflection on the work accomplished that day and plans for the days to come. It seems it took five days after the seas were created to figure out a way to populate them.

The work of creation was fulfilling and it was good; it was as it should have been. But, apparently, it was exhausting. So much so that even God and all of God’s creation needed a good rest.

I used to think that to be a fine person, someone filled with God, someone assured of the presence of divine love, that I needed to be calm, serene, and exude quiet grace. I have never been a really fine person.

When I look at the act of creation, it seems though, that calm quiet grace was not what was going on. It was windy. Land and sea pulled apart from each other; lights suddenly appeared in the day and night skies; and all of a sudden there was bleating and braying and barking and squealing and squawking where once there was silence. And none of the work of each day stopped until evening settled over creation.

God must have been beat.

But then, when there was no energy left to do anything else, God tarried a while in the evening of the creation of God’s own making and saw that it was good.

So, you too must rest. You probably are not called to be a pillar of bliss. You are called to be a worker, a teacher, a leader, a builder, a hearer, a speaker. The work in this multitude of tasks surely is good, but, when there is no energy left, God calls you to rest.

The busyness of doing often keeps us from seeing, from feeling, from knowing. The busyness of doing often keeps us from the work of rejoicing, of lamenting and of expressing thanks.

A kind of melancholy often sweeps through me when I hike and camp. Recently I realized it is because I am alone with my self in the wilderness. It is here that I see my own significance and insignificance. It is here that I see the majesty of creation undisturbed by highways, skyscrapers, and billboards, and I lament my culpability in its destruction. It is here that I long for the silence of the wilderness in the cacophony of daily life. Yet through this time of melancholy I somehow come away refreshed. I return to the workaday world renewed in my conviction of God’s glory in creation and my small place in the midst of it all.

So, it is here that I ask you to stay, to tarry, for just a moment or two, in this place, a place of rest. Allow yourself to relish God’s blessings. Allow the weariness of tasks to flow away. Allow joy to bubble forth as laughter. Allow words of thanksgiving to be shared. Spend a smidgen of time living as if we have all we need, as if we never left Eden.
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