



June 20, 2010 Sermon by Wade Lifton
Practicing Sabbath

Readings: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

We're shifting into summer, which means some days of rest and renewal for most of us. And this week marks half way through Nancy's sabbatical, so I thought it would be appropriate for us to reflect on Sabbath this morning. And in addition to that, I think we need constant reminders about Sabbath in our fast-paced and busy culture.

I know that for some of us, setting aside one day of the week, 24 hours, seems unrealistic. Like something from long ago that doesn't really fit with modern life. But we have Jewish friends, including Rabbi Laura who spoke here not long ago, for who Sabbath is a normal weekly practice. And a Sabbath practice is going to look differently for someone living alone or with a partner or with family. But it is possible, and I think it could be a spiritual antidote for many people who feel overwhelmed in their lives. So if you are someone for who the idea of Sabbath seems challenging, I would invite you to start small in your imagination as we reflect on Sabbath. How might a weekly Sabbath morning look in your life?

In the introduction of his book *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller says, "All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale."

Culture of busyness

I think most of us would agree that this rhythm of rest has gotten a bit out of whack in our culture. A culture of busyness has trumped a rhythm of rest. Being productive and having accomplishments are so highly valued, that tending to our bodies and souls can easily fall down the priority list, usually bit by bit, until we have a wake-up moment when we realize just how deeply we're longing for rest.

I've noticed in my own habits of busyness that a key factor is momentum. Momentum is very helpful when my goal is being productive – I get going, sometimes I get caffeinated, and then I keep it going, doing one thing and another and another, keeping the energy moving forward. Where it becomes dangerous is when I feel a little high from being productive, and I get affirmed for what I'm accomplishing, and I want to keep that high going. But we all know that what goes up must come down, and if we try to keep it up there, it usually comes down with a crash.

Where I notice just how much of a factor momentum is, is when I'm driving. I'm getting where I'm going, I'm making good time, and I hit a red light. And a little part of me goes, "Argh!" When I think about it, I'll be stopped for 30 seconds, maybe a minute, and I'm not actually upset about getting where I'm going a minute later. I'm upset because I lost my momentum. I drive a standard, so I literally have to gear down, and will have to gear up again. Ideally I'd love to get into fifth gear and stay there until I get where I'm going.

But in life, we don't actually get where we're going, so we'll stay in high gear until we run out of gas, or we burn out the engine, or we crash. Sabbath is a weekly practice of gearing down and stopping, and remembering that life is not about getting where we're going.

I'll say one more thing about busyness and then I'll get to the good news.

Thomas Merton described busyness as a form of violence.

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence, and that is activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

"To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

"The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

In my Sabbath moments, when I'm rested and seeing clearly, this makes so much sense to me. I know it to be true. I feel a sense of peace, and I look at how I often live, and it is violent. When I'm functioning out of busyness and momentum, my values are compromised. I rely on more conveniences. I eat convenient foods, that are less healthy for me, and usually come wrapped in more packaging, and probably weren't very ethically produced. I'm less present and patient and loving with people. The ways I really want to live, and I know that I'm capable of living, start to fall off the plate when there are too many commitments crowding it out, or when productivity becomes a higher priority than right living. This is mostly about ego, because my ego likes how I feel when I'm getting stuff done. But my truest self knows the value of rest, for me and the world around me.

That's the bad news. The good news is there is another way, and people have been practicing it for thousands of years, so there must be something to it.

My practice of Sabbath

I started a practice of Sabbath about two years ago, and thinking about this week I realized something. I've struggled with depression and burnout several times in my adult life, and the last time was just over two years ago. I'm not claiming that Sabbath is the solution to depression or burnout, but since a lot of my struggles have been related to over-functioning, Sabbath has been key to my spiritual well-being.

The first step for me in starting a practice of Sabbath was simply setting aside 24 hours every week – writing it in my day timer, and learning to protect it. When people would ask to book a meeting or an appointment on that day, I would be tempted, because it may be the only day of the week that isn't completely full, so I've had to learn to say 'No', that's my Sabbath day. Even though that commitment is important, I have learned to remember in that moment of temptation the deep importance of Sabbath.

To begin with, that's all I did was set aside the day and protect it, with no rituals or practices on that day. Eventually I asked what I should do with this day, and so the question I bring to each moment of the day is, 'What would be most life-giving right now?' When I wake-up, and at each choice moment, I practice listening inside and asking, 'What would be most life-giving?' Often it's a bath, a walk, sometimes a long walk, which leads me to a swing to sit in or a tree to climb. I eat good food on my Sabbath, and savor. And the day unfolds in this way, doing one life-giving thing until it's time to do something else, and asking the question again, and listening for the answer.

On my Sabbath I've learned to let go of should's. If my head is telling me that I should do something, I practice letting it go. Sometimes it's something productive, like doing a load of laundry which doesn't seem like a big deal when I've got this whole spacious day to just take a moment and accomplish one little thing. But it shifts my being into a different mode, a non-Sabbath mode. Or sometimes it's something that can be life-giving, like yoga. I have to pay attention to the difference between my soul saying, "I would love to go to yoga right now" and "I should probably go to yoga. That would probably be a good thing." I've learned to listen for the 'Yes' moments, when I'm considering choices of what I could do, and look for the thing that my soul says, "Yes that's what I want to do!"

The quality of my Sabbath day reflects the quality of the rest of my week. When I'm in good shape, Sabbath comes naturally. I would describe it as walking to the window, opening it, and breathing deeply the fresh air, feeling it soak into my soul. When the momentum of my week has been so frenzied that I wake up on my Sabbath completely wrecked, which happened one week last month, it is like there is so much clutter and crap that I can't find the window. My head is full of live-giving ideas like walking or cooking, but my all my body is capable of doing is lying on the couch. My Sabbath practice holds up a mirror to my life and asks, "How's that going for ya?" Sometimes the answer is a wake-up call that the rest of my week needs to change, and sometimes it's an affirmation that I'm on the right track.

Unpacking the scripture

When parents are at their best, they show children the best ways to live by how they live, and then they are in place to talk about why that is the best way. Parent is a common metaphor for God, and like a good parent God has shown us a rhythm of working and resting in the story of creation. So when we hear this scripture saying to observe the Sabbath, it is an invitation to notice God's choices, and to follow in God's way. An invitation to receive the gift of rest, and offer rest to everyone around us.

Like many of the stories in scripture, the writers have described their understanding of God with human qualities, with a strong hand and outstretched arm, offering a way out of the slavery of busyness and momentum, or whatever it is that enslaves you and holds you back from that place of rest and renewal and deep peace.

Like any parent, I imagine God seeing us making choices again and again that consume us, and wanting to lay down the law saying, "Practice Sabbath! It's the best way! Trust me on this one." And like most children, we hear what our parents say, and then we find our own way. And we may find our way back to what our parents were telling us.

Sabbath is a practice, and like all practices it takes a lot of clunky practice to find our way. Practicing an instrument means a lot of plunking and not so nice sounds before we get to a place of musicality, and learning to play a sport means a lot of awkwardness and fumbling before we find a rhythm. And the story we have is not crossing the river from slavery into the promised land – it's a journey through the desert with disheartening struggles and incredible moments and set-backs and gifts.

We are people on a journey, striving to follow in God's way, to receive what is offered to us with outstretched arms, to know it deeply enough to participate in offering it to others. May it be so.