

**Reclaiming Sabbath: For the Rest of Your Life**  
**(3) Practicing Sabbath**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: John 2:13-22**

John Cardinal O'Connor, archbishop of New York City made news not long ago by criticizing metropolitan youth baseball leagues for scheduling games on Sunday morning. Parents interviewed by the *New York Times* responded by saying that the archbishop was seriously out of touch with modern realities and with his own flock. I remember reading the article and marveling at his courage in speaking out on something that would surely not win him many friends. Most of us have given in to cultural pressure which challenges religious practice. Sure, we'd like our kids to attend Church School, but we also want them to play hockey, and ice time is Sunday morning.

*Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.* The fourth of the Ten Commandments is increasingly counter-cultural, calling us away from the relentless pursuit of success and productivity to a time consecrated for rest, for renewal, for celebrating the priorities we hold most dear. As we have considered the meaning of Sabbath for our busy lives during this Lenten series, I've appreciated your many thoughtful comments, resonating with the need for "time out", while acknowledging the seemingly impossible task of actually doing so. I've also appreciated the question some of you have directed to me: *And how do **you** keep Sabbath?*

Not very well. So I think the question of how to "keep the Sabbath holy" bears further exploration. The gospel reading for today suggests that we are not the first generation of the faithful who find it difficult to keep holy things holy. Here, in a passage tellingly referred to as "the cleansing of the Temple," Jesus counters Sabbath violation with anger and swift action. As we read it, ask yourself what Jesus is reacting so strongly against...and why. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the second chapter at the 13<sup>th</sup> verse (p. 93 of the New Testament section of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along).

[JOHN 2:13-22]

This incident from Jesus' earthly life is one of relatively few told in all four gospels, no doubt because it made quite an impression on everyone who witnessed it. But John's account differs from the others in ways that may

be pertinent for our Sabbath struggles. The other gospels place it at the end of Jesus' ministry, as the Big Bad thing Jesus does that finally seals his death warrant. But John has it at the very beginning, when he is still new and novel, impressing people with his healing power and authoritative teaching. Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke imply that Jesus' action was motivated primarily by the cheating and financial improprieties carried out by the moneychangers, here the action is interpreted simply as Jesus decrying the marketplace atmosphere of God's house. And then there's the additional parallel drawn here but nowhere else, between this action and Jesus' death and resurrection. John moves quickly from the scene of overturned tables and freed animals to the curious comments about destroying and raising the "temple of Jesus' body."

John appears less interested in depicting Jesus' judgment against corrupt temple practices than he is in defining Jesus' ministry at the outset as one that challenges the status quo, particularly when it violates the spirit of that for which creation was intended. Jesus' accusation that they have made his Father's house a marketplace suggests that in some critical ways the two need to be kept distinct. Moreover, his decisive action presses those gathered around to make a decision about him—who he is and whether or not he acts with Divine authority. The disciples, we learn, make a decision for faith—even though they don't get it until much later, following their experience of Jesus as being raised from the dead. The religious leaders, in contrast, remain resistant, limited by their logic and bound by their realistic assessment of things.

I wonder if we are similarly limited and bound when it comes to practicing Sabbath. Have we so bought into the mindset of our age that we don't even realize the violation of the holy within us? Are we so busy tending the tables and counting the money that we have forgotten the worship of God? Have we accepted the status quo so thoroughly that we simply don't see any way to change it? Behind these questions is the larger one: Who---or what---rules our lives?

Perhaps Jesus' anger burns intensely because there's so much at stake. Life without Sabbath sentences us to slavery—the tyranny of ceaseless activity, the stunting of our souls, and the thirst that can never be quenched—the voices that whisper lies *ad infinitum*, "You do not have enough. You are not happy. You are not enough. But buy what we are selling and you will be happy; achieve what we tell you is success and you will be successful; fill your life with the activities that we proclaim are meaningful and your life will have meaning." These voices call to us and to our children in many forms, a thousand times every day. And the only

thing that will free us from their siren song is to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Here again we can learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters who offer a prayer at sundown at the beginning of Sabbath, that confesses: "Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles." A prayer to distinguish between the ordinary and the holy, the marketplace and the sanctuary, a time for work and a time for rest. A prayer to open our eyes to miracles discovered when one stops long enough to notice. The Jewish Sabbath is built around three practices: rest, which recalls God's resting on the seventh day of creation; revelation, found in reading and reflecting on God's word; and redemption, a taste of the world to come through celebrating over leisurely meals with delicious food and drink. Our own Presbyterian *Directory for Worship* (part of our church's constitution known as the *Book of Order*) identifies five Sabbath practices:

- \*resting from daily occupation and tasks;
- \*sharing with others in worship;
- \*taking time with God's Word;
- \*engaging in acts of compassion;
- \*enjoying activities that refresh and renew the spirit.

Each practice in its own way nurtures relationship with God, with one another, and perhaps most surprisingly, with oneself. By consecrating time each week for these practices we obey God's command to keep Sabbath holy. Even more, we recognize that this commandment (and the other ones by the way) are God's gifts to us, for our delight and for our good, for our life, body and soul.

But having said that, we return to the realities of our time, and the question of how we can possibly do this. I want to acknowledge the difficulty of practicing Sabbath in contemporary culture and to recognize that each individual and family may make different choices as to how best to do that. And I want to say explicitly what I hope has become self-evident: practicing Sabbath is not anti-fun. Shooting a round of golf on Sunday morning does not automatically make you a moneychanger in the temple. During study for this sermon series, I discovered that even our great Reformed forebear John Calvin liked to go bowling on Sunday afternoons, though he doesn't mention it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Bass, p. 74]. The question for us, I believe, is consecrating time each week for the full range of Sabbath practices, of developing a regular rhythm of rest and worship and attentiveness to the Spirit.

I have read with interest an initiative of the Massachusetts Council of Churches urging parents, schools, and recreation departments to protect

Sundays until 1 pm as a public time of rest. By building broad community support for the idea, the Council was successful in taking pressure off families struggling for balance amid competing priorities. You've also made a number of practical suggestions. One Fairmount family I know limits their children's sports participation to one per season. Another makes a color-coded chart of weekly activities, with one color designated for an all-family outing or evening together. A quick glance lets them know if that color is missing in a week so they can make adjustments. A young couple with a toddler who joined our church not long ago both work at jobs on Sunday morning, so they have made a commitment to worship together on Sunday night, at New Vision. Because I work on Sunday mornings too, I find I am often more able to worship deeply during the silent prayer and Scripture readings of our Wednesday evening service. One of the reasons we offer worship four times every week at different hours is to allow such flexibility. Recently I was puzzled by the lack of response to several e-mails I had sent to a family. When we finally connected by phone on Monday morning, the wife explained that they have declared a Sabbath from e-mails on Sunday when they realized how tightly tethered they were to their Internet connections. They are enjoying newly-found time for reading, walking, napping (although the husband confessed to me that he had checked his messages after everyone else was in bed). Well, we're still learning! A number of you have told me you're using the guides for Scripture reading distributed on the first Sunday of Lent, and finding that helpful.

My favorite bulletin "bloop" sometimes makes me laugh ruefully. *Don't let stress kill you...let the church help.* Even the faith community is not immune from the full-plate syndrome. We need to examine our community life from time to time to ensure that we are providing Sabbath REST opportunities for members and leaders. A quick story from Israel, which I was going to save for the stewardship campaign season, but is too apropos to pass up. You know there are two bodies of water on the Jordan River. One, the sea of Galilee, sparkles with life, and supports a flourishing habitat for fish and plants. The other is completely devoid of life, and is known as the Dead Sea. The difference lies in the fact that water flows in and out of the sea of Galilee. The Dead Sea has no outlet; no way for water to flow in and out. Friends, we need to receive life-giving water to replenish our own supply. We are too busy to practice Sabbath at our own peril.

Finally, it's a fundamental re-orientation of our center, away from ourselves and toward God. Remember the Sabbath... remember God's grace. Author and pastor Wayne Muller tells of visiting the home of an old potter at Santa Clara pueblo. When he admired the enormous collection of stunning pottery the man had on display, he asked "How

many do you have?" The potter lowered his eyes as he replied quietly, "We do not count such things." During Sabbath we stop counting. [Muller, p. 112] How can we tally friendship or laughter? How do we calculate the aroma of fresh bread, or the value of honesty? How can we assign worth to watching a sunrise, taking hold of a child's plump hand, singing a familiar hymn, feeling our heart beat faster with anticipation, coming to a place and knowing we belong? So many good gifts are experienced only when we stop counting, only when we stop, only when we rest in the grace of God.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO IS ABLE TO KEEP US FROM FALLING, THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP, WHO WILL KEEP US IN PEACE FROM THIS TIME FORWARD AND FOREVER, EVEN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

In Reformed worship, the sermon is generally followed by an affirmation of faith, often one of the historic creeds and confessions that mark our theological tradition. During Lent, I've suggested that we use this time to practice Sabbath, to experience God's grace to be found in recovering this sacred rhythm. Farmer, poet, and essayist Wendell Berry reminds us that public solutions must begin in one's own life, by claiming the fundamental principals by which we are guided. He writes, "it is useful during Sabbath to clarify or reaffirm those principles that calibrate our inner compass to illuminate our inner direction" [quoted in Muller, p. 113] Today I invite you to find a place on your bulletin or some scratch paper and write the words of the fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. In the silence that follows, begin to think about how you would like to do this. Think about the challenges, and consider the benefits. How can you enlist the support of your family? How can your church family support you? See if you can identify one practice and make a commitment to keeping it. Ask God to consecrate your choice.

Resources upon which I have drawn for this sermon series, and suggestions for further reading on Sabbath

Bass, Dorothy C. *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951. Re-released in 2005 with an introduction by Susannah Heschel.

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

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