

## The Hidden Treasure of Sabbath

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The Sabbath is a hidden treasure for many Christians, and in my case, one late discovered. Growing up in the 1950's as a Baptist boy my first awareness of Sabbath keeping other than weekly worship was the number of "blue laws" which shut down certain businesses on Sunday and the religious prohibition of enjoying certain forms of secular entertainment such as going to the movies.

Later, as the son of a minister of music, Sunday was the busiest day of the week. In the morning Sunday School and at least one of two worship services, in the afternoon Bible training (first Memory Work, then Sword Drill), followed by Training Union and Evening Worship.

As a pastor I was once caught mowing my lawn on Sunday afternoon by a neighbor who expressed his shock to a church member. He did not know that mowing the grass was a welcome form of relaxation for me and a resting of my over-taxed mind.

I have come, however, to love the deepest meaning of Sabbath. In this chapter I will explore the biblical/historical/theological dimensions of Sabbath

and Sabbath keeping, then I will explore the spiritual meaning of Sabbath and Sabbath keeping and finally the spiritual practice of Sabbath keeping.

## I

Sabbath keeping is the spiritual practice where we honor the needs of the body, mind and spirit for rest and where we put into practice our trust in God to provide. If this were easy there would be no need for a commandment, the fourth of Ten Commandments:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8).

The Sabbath was the holy gift of God, and keeping it holy meant first to stop our work. “Sabbath” in the Hebrew means “cease.”

To the Hebrew people the Sabbath was founded on the two great events Creation and Exodus. The form of the commandment in Exodus connects its meaning to Creation:

For six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

(Exodus 20:1)

We honor the Sabbath by remembering God the creator as Christians remember Jesus and his words at the Last Supper: This is my body broken; this is my blood poured out for you and for all. Remembering re-members the past to the present.

The Sabbath helps us enter time as “holy time”, befriending time rather than making it our enemy. God rested on the seventh day, and established a holy rhythm of work and rest. Now we can too.

Walter Brueggemann writes that before the Sabbath was a day of worship it was a day of rest, “a complete and comprehensive work stoppage.”<sup>1</sup> When I traveled to Israel I entered a stationary store and looked at the calendars. To my surprise there were no Saturdays in the calendars! What, no appointments on the Sabbath! If you go into a store shopping for a stove today you discover that many stoves have a timing device so that you cannot turn the stove on on Saturday. These Hebrew people really mean Sabbath keeping!

Brueggemann goes on to expand the theological meaning of Sabbath:

Israel rests because God rests. This God is not a workaholic.... It is ordained in the fabric of creation that the world is not a place of endless productivity, ambition, or anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

Too many of us Christians work on Sunday afternoons or evenings to get a jump on the work beginning the next day. Endless productivity, ambition, anxiety.

Sabbath keeping demonstrates our trust in God to provide. Jesus spoke of such trust when he said, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, what you shall drink....” Then he pointed us to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Matthew 6:25-34). I have in my home a beautiful framed piece of Japanese calligraphy which depicts in the Japanese language, “The lilies of the field” and “the birds of the air”. It is a daily reminder to trust in the provision of God and to loosen my anxiety.

So first, the Sabbath is rooted in Creation and the gracious rhythm of work and rest. Then secondly and just as importantly, Sabbath is rooted in Exodus, the deliverance of God’s people from slavery. Deuteronomy’s version of the fourth commandment emphasized the Exodus dimension. In Deuteronomy not only are you to rest on the Sabbath, everyone in the household is to rest, the servants and the animals too! Sabbath is a gift for everyone and every creature. And why then do we and the household rest? Deuteronomy links it to the Exodus:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

(Deuteronomy 5:15)

On the Sabbath, past and present is re-membered. In slavery we worked seven days a week in forced labor. The Sabbath is the mark of our freedom; now we rest one day a week. Brueggemann says that Sabbath is a “withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh”, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption.” Moses said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” Sometimes it is hard to let *Pharaoh* go.

The commandment says, “Live now as a free woman or man.” Paul wrote to the Galatians: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

How easily American Christians slip back into the yoke of slavery from which God has delivered us. The noted pastoral theologian, Wayne E. Oates, coined the phrase “workaholic” in his book *Confessions of a Workaholic*. Workaholism is dependency, like other addictions; this addiction is to “overwork.”<sup>3</sup> It can destroy our health, body mind and spirit and our closest relationships.

The Sabbath is a way of releasing ourselves from the bondage of overwork. It is a way we remember that God is our provider and deliverer.

Now we turn to the spiritual dimension of the Sabbath, Sabbath spirituality. Again our Jewish friends are our teachers. In the great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's collection of saying *I Asked for Wonder*, there is a whole section devoted to Sabbath. It begins:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and in embezzling one's own life.<sup>4</sup>

Embezzling one's own life! This is what addiction to overwork and lack of Sabbath does to us. As Wordsworth in his poem wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon  
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
 Little we can see in nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.<sup>5</sup>

Heschel goes on to say:

Six days we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soil.<sup>6</sup>

Sabbath, he says, is a "palace in time" we build. We can choose to inhabit it or not.

Sabbath is a way of acknowledging that we have enough. In Wendell Berry's poem, "The Wild Geese", we read,

Horseback on Sunday morning  
harvest over, we taste persimmon  
and wild grape, sharp sweet  
of summer's end....

We open  
a persimmon to find the tree  
that stands in promise,  
pale, in the seed's marrow.  
Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love and sleep, holds  
them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye  
clear. What we need is here.<sup>7</sup>

To slow to read this poem is Sabbath.

### III

Now to the spiritual practice of Sabbath keeping. Buddhism has given us this word “practice” and a happier phrase than “spiritual discipline.” How do we make Sabbath a spiritual practice?

For Jewish people the Sabbath has not only been a day of cessation from work, it has also been a day of joy and a day of wonder over the goodness of God’s world. God rested and took pleasure in what God has made. So can we.

The Sabbath is a festive time. Sexual intercourse with one’s spouse was considered a “good work” or *mitzvah* on that day.<sup>8</sup> One of the most beautiful dimensions of Sabbath in Jewish practice is how it begins, that is, on the evening before, as for Jews every day begins at sunset the night before (following the creation story in Genesis 1).

On Friday evening Sabbath begins with a shabbat meal where the family joins at the table, sometimes with friends. The mother lights the candle of Sabbath, and they welcome it with joy. Then on to the Shabbat service!

I have found that preparing for the Christian sabbath on Sunday it has been most helpful to have a restful evening the night before. Such “Sabbath welcome” helps me enter more fully into the “Lord’s Day” on Sunday.



At the beginning of the Christian movement Jesus' followers would worship as Jews in the synagogue on the Jewish sabbath. Then they would meet on Sunday evening for worship around the table of the Lord. By the second century they had established Sunday as their Sabbath. As the Jewish Sabbath was rooted in Creation and Exodus, the Christian Sabbath was rooted in two events. They worshipped on Sunday, the first day of the week, because on the first day God created the world. And they worshipped on Sunday because on Sunday God raised Jesus from the dead! <sup>9</sup>

So for Christians Sunday became a "day of rest and gladness." And a day of worship, of praise and thanksgiving, of remembering who we are as people of God. The goal of Sabbath however is not mere "church-going", it is God.<sup>10</sup>

The worship of God can happen outdoors too! The enjoyment of God's creation is a form of the love of God. In the movie *A River Runs Through It*, the Presbyterian minister takes his boys trout fishing on Sunday afternoons after church. Wendell Berry spends Sunday morning on walks through the woods and fields, and from this Sabbath observance has come his "sabbath poems". <sup>11</sup>

And how can we forget Emily Dickinson who found New England worship stultifying and wrote this poem:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church—

I keep it, staying at Home—

with a Bobolink for a Chorister—

And an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice—

I, just wear my Wings—

And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church—

Our little Sexton sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—

And the sermon is never long;

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—

I'm going all along.<sup>12</sup>

She wrote to a friend, "The only commandment I ever obeyed—'Consider the Lilies.'<sup>13</sup> She remembered the Sabbath and kept it holy.

Sabbath can provide us with a day of rest and worship, indoors and out. It can also provide a leisurely time to enjoy family and friends. But be careful, our Sabbath can be crammed with "leisure" activities.

Now, what of those who must work every Sunday? Can Sabbath be a “moveable feast?” Certainly so. We can designate another day of the week as our sabbath, a day of rest and joy. We can build our own “palace in time.” Eugene Peterson, the noted Presbyterian minister and writer and translator of scripture, designated Monday as his Sabbath. After the busiest day of the week on Sunday, he and his wife spent Monday together, taking drives, hiking, picnicking, resting, and on Monday evenings they would share a quiet evening together.<sup>14</sup> Part of what makes Sabbath a Sabbath is its *difference* from every other day of the week, the difference itself a way of restoring the mind, body and soul.

At the Passover meal the child asks, “Why is this night different from every other night?” We could ask this question every Sunday: “Why is this day different from any other day?” Then we could say around the table, “Because on this day God made the world, and on this day God raised Jesus from the dead!”

We can experience Sabbath in other ways. We can establish one hour every day as a Sabbath hour—and assist others in the family to help them have such an hour. And of course, we can establish a Sabbath day every week, and we could establish a Sabbath *weekend* every three months, time that offers sanctuary and rest from our frazzled lives.

Which leads me to the last dimension of Sabbath the Hebrew people observed. The Hebrew people also observed a Sabbath *year* every seventh year.

Things were different that year. The fields laid fallow, so the land could heal. The families ate the food stored up from the previous years. It was a kindness to the land as Sabbath is a kindness we give ourselves as a time of restoration and rest.

The academic world establishes sabbaticals, sabbatic years every seven years, for faculty to be away for rest, refreshment, research and writing. That is not available to most of us, but we can establish some consecutive weeks from time to time to provide us a deeper rest than we ordinarily get.

I have been extraordinarily blessed that most of my churches have given me a three-month sabbatical every fourth year. As one not good at weekly and daily Sabbath keeping these times have been essential in my well-being and for the ongoing practice of my ministry.

Time away, of whatever length can be a Sabbath where we rest and remember who God is and who we are. Gordon Cosby would say at the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C.: “we are human *beings*, not human *doings*!”

I once went for a week’s respite at the “Quiet House” at a Texas retreat center called “Laity Lodge”. The Quiet House was tiny one room structure where one could go and be totally alone and rest. On one wall there was a framed cross-stitch of these words from Psalm 46:

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

I know no better way to express the meaning of the Sabbath.

1. Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 845.
2. Ibid.
3. Wayne E. Oates, *Confessions Of A Workaholic* (N.Y.: Word Publishing, 1971), p. 4.
4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1983), p. 34.
5. William Wordsworth, "The world is too much with us" *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1950* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.507.
6. Heschel, op. cit.

7. Wendell Berry, "The Wild Geese", *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1998), p. 90.
8. Dorothy Bass, "Keeping Sabbath", *Practicing Our Faith* ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 81.
9. "The First Apology of Justin Martyr", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1 p. 186.
10. Bass, *op.cit.*, pp. 85ff.
11. Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998).
12. Emily Dickinson, poem 324 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1960), p. 153.
13. Letter, 904
14. Bass, *op. cit.*, p. 85.