

Keeping The Sabbath

By Jeanne McIver

Remember the Sabbath

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 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...For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Reflection

What is Sabbath? Sabbath is a day each week of rest and worship, a day to stop the things that occupy our workdays, a day to balance work and busyness with a day of clearing away so we can experience God in a new way. In the book of Genesis, it takes the form of a full day of rest after the creation when God rested and rejoiced. At Mt. Sinai, God speaks of Sabbath as a sacred mandate. God's people are forever to remember the Sabbath. They are to set aside one full day in seven and keep it holy to the Lord (Exodus 20:11). In the Gospels, Sabbath repeatedly provides both time and space for Jesus' witness to the life-transforming power of Abba (the Father). As we enter the many dimensions of Sabbath we begin to know the immensity of the gift.

The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew verb *Shabbat*, which means primarily to cease. Genesis 2:2 says God "ceased" on the seventh day. A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we let God take care of us as we give up trying to be God and refresh ourselves. Today God has a gift for us, a day of rest and worship. Centuries before Christ, other nations did not take a day to rest, this was a gift from God to the Jewish people.

I remember that my grandfather insisted that I not sew on Sundays as I was growing up. He said sewing is work and we do not work on Sunday. As an impudent teen-ager I insisted that sewing was my hobby not my work and surely God would see it my way. On Sunday, my grandmother had time to spend with me and to help me learn how to sew. Some days we did not use the time so much to sew as to be. I remember looking at all the buttons in her button box as she told me stories about each button and how it had been sewn lovingly into a special garment. After the clothes were well worn, the buttons were cut off and put in the button box to be reused in another dress or suit. My grandfather was sharing the message that his mother taught him. It was handed down through generations. Take a day to rest in the Lord, to worship and to rest. Grandma helped me remember and it stays in my mind to this day. I wonder what I teach my children and grandchildren about Sabbath.

Sabbath keeping can take many forms but it includes ceasing, resting, rhythms, feasting, happiness, wisdom, taking time, and space for God to be present in our day. "Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles," go the words of a Jewish prayer used on the eve of beginning Sabbath. "Sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command," writes contemporary religious leader Barbara Brown Taylor.

Activity

Think about your childhood, what do you remember about the Sabbath? What positive models do you remember? What questions do you have about Sabbath-keeping today? Write your reflections on this page. Talk to someone you know about how they keep the Sabbath in their life today.

Prayer

Creator God, you have called us to cease and rest on the Sabbath but we are so busy. There is so much that must be done before we can rest. Help us see the value in taking one day each week to be with you and to expect your miracles. This whole idea seems so strange, please help me understand how it can be part of my life. Thank you for helping us take time to be refreshed by our time with you. Amen.

Key Thought

The gift is yours. How will you keep the Sabbath and make it Holy?

Ceasing

There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest [literally a ceasing], a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord. (Leviticus 23:3)

Be still and know that I am God! (Psalm 46:10)

Reflection

Some people find Sabbath confusing. The idea raises so many questions about Old Testament legalism. Does it have to be Saturday or could it be Sunday or even another day all together? Might it be a few hours each day? Sabbath is a day to cease. Ceasing work means resting from productivity and accomplishment. Maybe you need to cease being anxious and worried. Many of us need to cease trying to be God and let go of the control that comes with trying to be God. Do we need to cease our possessiveness? Perhaps we need to cease the humdrum and meaninglessness.

John Calvin simply tells us, “On the Sabbath, we cease our work so God can do God’s work in us.” What would a day look like when we cease work? This ceasing is not just being lazy, though perhaps it might seem so at first until you notice the Lord in the center of our ceasing. Most Americans work five full days each week and then spend the weekend trying to do everything else that needs to be done—grocery shopping, laundry, lawn care, sports and workouts...more tasks than I can list here. This means that the weekend is for doing different work, not for **ceasing** work. The pressure is great to get it all done. When was the last time you did something that was enjoyable and freeing, rather than just one more thing to be checked off the list of things to accomplish?

Sabbath is a day to cease work and honor our relationship with God. We might wonder about people who work on Sunday like pastors, doctors, nurses, etc... We dare not be legalistic about the day or the work. Some people may make their Sabbath another day of the week. A day of ceasing once a week is the important commitment. Our own hard work can make us strangers to God as we fail to see the value of simply being with God and doing nothing. To do this is to miss the heart of Christianity. If in life we are not still then how can we suddenly achieve this in prayer? We are good at taking our cares to God and telling God everything that troubles us. It is in quiet stillness that we have the opportunity to see the miracles of God-- in nature, in reading, in music, in the company of friends, in doing good deeds. When do you take time to know God?

If we don’t take time to cease life becomes humdrum and boring. Do we have five days of work followed by two days of work at home?

When my children were young and I taught in a school, I took my Sabbath beginning on Friday after school. I didn't cook. We had a family night - sometimes going to the Y for a family swim and sometimes going to a movie or just playing games at home together. On Sunday morning we went to worship and then had a family meal together, usually with candles and a discussion about what we heard at church. I must admit that Saturday and Sunday evening were busy with taking kids to play sports and doing all the things that didn't get done during the week. I guess my Sabbath was a "two-parter"—our Friday evening and then half of Sunday. Ceasing was a regular part of our week.

Activity

Reflect on the word STOP. What emotion does that word evoke? If God were to ask you to stop something for twenty-four hours each week, what might it be? Consider your week. Is there a regular time to carve out some time to stop? What would that look like for you? Have you ever been forced, because of illness or injury, to stop normal activities? What did you enjoy? Make a plan for how you might stop.

Prayer

God of all time, hear us as we pray about Sabbath. Help us consider whether we are addicted to doing. Speak to us please about the time we take to listen for you in our lives...awaken us to the importance of stopping and being. Amen.

Key Thought

If we refuse to rest until we are finished we will never rest until we die.

Resting

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The spiritual rest which God especially intends in the commandment [to keep the Sabbath holy] is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more—that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we do nothing on our own. (Martin Luther)

Reflection

To live the gift of Sabbath is to receive it openly and with gratitude. According to John Calvin Sabbath reflects God's genuine concern for God's people. Says Calvin, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing."

In the news recently was a story about how the American people don't get enough rest. Is that you? God tells us to rest. We need physical rest and that is what the news story was about. Children and adults get too few hours of sleep. Obesity is caused by too little sleep. Do you ever wonder how someone could rest when there is so much to do? Do you find time to rest your whole being?

Spiritual rest is another aspect of rest. If our spirits are ill at ease how could we possibly rest and be genuinely freed by God's grace. We believe that with Sabbath our week can be more useful. But taking Sabbath does not give us an excuse to be workaholics all week. God loves us apart from what we do. The Spirit releases us and calls us to peace. Luther tells us that God works in us as we rest. The focus in this rest is on peace, grace, and the goodness of God. In spiritual rest we realize that we are not in charge of everything, God is.

Rest has been a tough lesson for me to learn. I am very good at work and even ceasing work, but resting I am not so good at. When I was born, God gave me a lot of energy and I use it liberally. Until recently, I never felt tired. When I was young, my mother did not see much value in sitting and reading but now I try and take time to read both my Bible and other books that feed my soul. It is sometimes hard for me to do. I am sure God wasn't tired on the seventh day, but God still saw that there should be a day of rest. From the beginning, God declares that Sabbath rest is part of our life in God. The idea that if we don't rest, God cannot work in us has turned has around my strong resistance to rest. Now I see that it is in rest that God works in and through God's people

Activity

How long does it take you to release all those “to do” lists in your head? Take a few minutes of Sabbath rest. Can you release all cares and just be for a few moments? Let the peace of God fill you and give you rest

Prayer

Loving God, you have given us many good gifts. Help us today to appreciate that you love us for who we are, not for what we do. Guide us in our exploration of Sabbath this day, and by your grace, give us rest. Amen

Key Thought

How will God work in and through you this day?

Share with Others in Worship

*If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day.
If you call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
If you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs
then you shall take delight in the Lord
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth. (Isaiah 58:13-14)*

Reflection

“How is the Sabbath to be sanctified?” is question sixty of the Shorter Catechism in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The answer is, “...spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.”

Sabbath comes to us as a many-layered gift. As we unwrap the gift of Sabbath, it gives us blessings beyond ceasing and beyond rest. We live out the gift of worship in community. Although we have stressed the personal nature of ceasing and resting, Sabbath is also communal. Sabbath is not a private gift. No one stands outside the call to rest in the presence of God. It makes good sense that if we are to come together as a community to be with God, there will be praise for God, a time for reading the Holy Scriptures, and a time to learn what God would have us know from one another. In worship, we remember the holiness of life. The mindfulness of sharing the Word and Sacraments helps us to be fully aware of the community of faith, as we join together to support one another and to learn and serve God together. In worship we repent together and receive forgiveness. We sing and join our hearts and voices in praise. We pray together and hear the results of our prayers. We read the Scriptures and share the Sacraments by serving one another.

I remember the day that our youngest son came home from high school basketball practice late one Saturday afternoon and told my husband and I that his next practice would be on Sunday morning because the next game was really important and they needed extra practice. I am sure my son will never forget his father’s reminder that Sunday morning is for worship. He stammered with many excuses why he could not miss the practice. His father went to the phone, and called the coach and said, “Bill will not be at practice till after worship on Sunday.” Coach called back in a few minutes to say that the practice had been rescheduled for Sunday afternoon, not in the morning. The coach thanked my husband for his reminder. I like to think that the worshiping community praying for young people was a good opportunity to show compassion and care. I noticed this summer that my grandson’s

cross country practices on Sunday are scheduled at two times on Sunday so that the boys can both worship and be a part of the team.

Activity

Make a list of what you need on a day of Sabbath rest. Do you need time alone or with people? Or both? In what proportion? Think about questions you have about the practical issues of Sabbath observance.

Prayer

Awesome and wonderful God, give me understanding about the connection between people and the Sabbath. Guide me as I think about Sabbath and help me make changes as they are needed. Slow me down God and help me welcome the Sabbath worship that builds the community of faith. Speak to us in love. Amen.

Key Thought

Community worship is important in the lives of Christian people of all ages. How can I make it so in the twenty-first century?

Compassion and Understanding

On another Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:6-9)

Reflection

Jesus was often in conflict with the religious leaders of his time about Sabbath. One incidence is about eating and five others are about healing. None of the healings were urgent because no one was dying. But Jesus taught that Sabbath time is for liberation. It is a time to remember the joy of creation as God wishes it to be. For Jesus the Sabbath was a day to do good, show mercy, save a life and free people from slavery. These acts of Jesus spoke of God's nature as merciful, loving, and freeing. Jesus showed that any act that glorifies God can never be a breach of the Sabbath.

There was a time when church people spent their afternoons on Sunday visiting the sick. Even now, we at Southminster carry on a form of this tradition by taking flowers from the Communion table to those who cannot attend worship. It is a way of showing compassion and caring for those who are ill.

There are people who empty themselves so that they can take on the cares of others. Wayne Mueller, in his book *Sabbath*, tells that he was always able to see the hurt in people. He remembers when he was young that his friend Jennifer's mother was always trying to get people to feel sorry for her, but no one seemed to want to hear about it. So Mueller sat and listened to her. As a family therapist he is still drawn to where things hurt, listening to people and their problems. Mueller is Sabbath for hurting people.

Sabbath keeping is more than ceasing and resting, and more even than worship with our community. When we embrace Sabbath values, we embrace time instead of space. It is a time to embrace what God embraces, to imitate God. Sabbath is a time of intentionality. At our best, we become Sabbath for one another.

I went to a friend's home for lunch after church one day. It was a simple meal and afterwards I started to clear the table. She said, "Please don't do that, I will get the dishes tomorrow. Today is our Sabbath." She was intentional about Sabbath time.

Activity

When you read about Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish leaders of the time about Sabbath, what questions come to your mind? What changes have you noticed during your lifetime in the weekly rhythm of life? In a perfect world, what would you do on the Sabbath?

Prayer

Great and wonderful God, we come. Let us welcome the Sabbath in joy and peace! Like a bride, radiant and joyous, comes the Sabbath. It brings blessings to our hearts; workday thoughts and cares are put aside. The brightness of the Sabbath light shines forth to tell that the divine spirit of love abides within our home. In that light all our blessings are enriched, all our griefs and trials are softened. Hear us O God. Amen

—from the Kiddush ritual of a Reform home service for Sabbath eve

Key Thought

What can I do to show compassion today?

Feasting

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23-27)

Celebration is honoring of that which we hold most dear. Celebration is delighting in that which tells us who we are. Celebration is taking the time to cherish each other. Celebration is returning with open arms and thankful hearts to our Maker. (Sara Wenger Shenk - “Why Not Celebrate!”)

Reflection

Sabbath feasting—celebration—is in direct contrast to fasting. During Lent we hear much talk of giving up something for Lent or fasting for Lent. In Sabbath feasting we honor the day by enjoying special meals prepared ahead of time so their delight is not marred by any work. We enjoy the feast of Sabbath slowly, just as in the Passover Seder, where there is much questioning and a very slow pace. If we lived simply all week then our Sabbath meal would stand out as very special.

I was famous for making several meals from one pound of hamburger. A cup of soup from a free case of *Knorr* soup was dinner many nights while we were in seminary. When my husband and I were at Pittsburgh Seminary, we had many meager meals because our funds were very limited. But on Saturday evening five, and sometimes more, families who were neighbors gathered to share from their abundance the leftovers of the week. It often seemed like a miracle to us that out of the meager meals we ate all week, we had more than enough to feed our friends and families. It was our Sabbath Feast. Often a stranger was invited to be part of our feast.

The Jewish understanding of Sabbath brings together the rhythm of fasting and feasting with a concern for the poor and the recognition of God’s gracious provision. It is a feeling of joy—for the present and for the future.

Activity

Eat some meager meals this week and give what you would have spent to help feed hungry children in the Food 2 Go program. Plan a feast for Sunday. Who will come to your feast? What will you eat together?

Prayer

God of the downtrodden and of the celebration, join us as we keep Sabbath by feasting with you. Help us to remember that there are children who do not eat on weekends when they have no school lunch. Help us also to remember that there are lonely people who yearn for fellowship around a table with another child of God. Bless our attempts at Sabbath keeping and help us to grow in love and understanding of your will for your people. Amen

Key Thought

What does a Sabbath Feast look like for you?

Small Group Meeting: Keeping The Sabbath

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved. In quietness and in trust shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:1-3)

1. Path of Community

Nearly 200 years ago the Quakers used questions to get acquainted with each other. See if in answering these questions you will get better acquainted. Go around your group on each question and let everyone share their memories.

- **Question 1** Where were you living at age 8 and how many brothers and sisters were in your household?
- **Question 2** What was the center of warmth in your life when you were 8 years old? (person, place, time)
- **Question 3** When did God become more than a name to you?

2. Path of Learning

Today we will review Sabbath keeping and learn about how we might keep Sabbath in the 21st century. Share about these questions in your group.

- What do you remember about Sabbath time as you were growing up?
- What is the toughest part about resting and ceasing?
- Does corporate worship give you Sabbath time?
- Isn't it hard to find time to read the Bible? When do you do that?
- Sometimes I feel so stressed I don't feel like listening to others. What would make it easier for you to help others?
- The rhythm of resting and being with God each week for one whole day sounds like it would be difficult. How would you do Sabbath at your house?
- Would you like some more ideas for Sabbath keeping?

The leader may read some ideas on this page about Sabbath keeping and then tell the group about them. Before you come to the group, review your week of reading about Sabbath.

I heard one person tell about starting Sabbath on Saturday evening as she entered her home after the end of her errands for the day. She lit a candle and read a scripture and prayed asking God to be with her in her time of quiet. Some favorite music helped her release the cares of the week. She spent her evening sometimes with friends joining her for dinner and sometimes alone with a book and some music. Dinner had been made ahead so that there was nothing to do but enjoy Sabbath. In the morning she went to worship at her church and joined friends for lunch or ate quietly at home. Some days she

needed a nap on Sunday afternoon and some days it was a hike at a local park. She ended her Sabbath by extinguishing the candle and offering a prayer asking God to be with her in the coming week as she took up the jobs she had put away on Saturday.

Some people have a Sabbath box. In it they put all the things they will not need for Sabbath. Put in a box all those things you don't want to use. For some it may be a cell phone, or a computer (maybe not actually putting the computer in a box, but a symbol of the computer—the mouse), car keys. You might even want to write on a paper the things you are leaving undone. Jesus said, “don't be anxious about tomorrow...” When you receive the things back at the end of Sabbath be aware of how you open the box and how you receive those things back into your life.

Sabbath time can begin in the evening or it can begin in the morning. Traditionally Protestants begin with worship on Sunday morning, but beginning at another time might work for you.

Most people find that some time in nature is essential for Sabbath. Some people plan to hike on their Sabbath. Some may go to the beach, or do anything that gets them outdoors.

3. Path of Service

Plan for your group to take part in a form of service to others – whether separately or as individuals – by the end of the fifth week of our study. Take time each week to work on your plans. During the final week, evaluate your project, celebrate what went well, and learn from those things that could have been better.

4. Path of Invitation

Brainstorm some people you can invite to be part of your group. Commit to inviting them the next time you get together. When it comes to the latter part of your study, you might want to plan a social event to which you could invite newcomers. This would be especially helpful if you elect to continue meeting as a small group after Lent.

5. Path of Worship

What are the precepts that guide your life? To be kind? To be compassionate? To be honest? To serve your neighbor, to help the earth, to love children? Take time to speak these aloud to your group. Offer a prayer after each person has shared asking God to help them notice when they might use those precepts in the coming week.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together.

6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.