

## Saving the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28

September 5, 2021 – Labor Day Weekend

It was fun to catch up family members over vacation that I have not seen in a long time. Cousin Steve showed up for dinner one night wearing a T- shirt that caught my eye. It said: “Retired: No boss, no phone, no kids, no money!” Well, I don’t know about the “no money” part. He did well and retired early, but it was a conversation starter about how he is doing in his retirement.

There has always been a type of bitter-sweet relationship between work and leisure, ever since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden, where the man blamed the woman, and the woman blamed the man, and they were forced to earn a living by the “sweat of their brow.” We’ve never quite recovered.

As people of faith, we are invited on this long Labor Day weekend to reflect on our work, our faith and our leisure, and if we’re fortunate, a sense of sabbath in our lives. It is a timely subject, considering that most people spend more time working than any other activity, with the possible exception of sleeping. I know many of you are retired, but it is an issue that working families and society struggles with. Besides, many who are retired still work part time or volunteer their hours, and so Sabbath time remains relevant.

The connection between faith, work and Sabbath is very Biblical, though one that is often not understood. About ten years ago, William Diehl wrote a book called The Monday Connection. Borrowing a line from the teachings of Jesus, Diehl asks, "What does it profit a person to worship God for one hour in church on Sunday, but be unable to experience God's presence in the Monday world?"

A society of computers, cell phones, and the internet doesn't want us to slow down and catch our breath. There is even a certain pride and expectation in the corporate world that society bestows upon those whose days are overworked and fatigued. I was just talking with my older son about this recently. He works for Boeing, and he has maxed out the number of vacation hours he is allowed to accumulate, but is having trouble scheduling actual vacation time because of the demands of the job. Mom and dad wish he could find a way so he could come and visit us!

The Bible offers us an appealing vision of Sabbath time. I believe it is important to cultivate a faith that “works” actively throughout the week, wherever your life takes you. In a book entitled, Sabbath Keeping, the author Donna Schaper speaks to this. She writes: “We are desperate for rest in a culture that seems to reward only effort. We understand ourselves as overworked, but in a way we are proud of our exhaustion and our failure to honor the Sabbath.”

Donna Schaper, Sabbath Keeping

Now in order to fully appreciate the Sabbath, let's take a look at how we think about work. A number of years ago, the author Studs Terkel wrote a book simply entitled, Working, that examined peoples' attitudes about their jobs. His research reported that the vast majority of people are very unhappy with their work. If you're still working and like your job, or you're retired from a job that brought you satisfaction, count yourself fortunate.

Sadly, many people fail to see the connection between faith and work, and have little concept of Sabbath time. Work is not just a "means to an end" of putting food on the table for family; it is a way of fulfilling God's purpose for you. Identity and feelings of self-worth seem to be wrapped up in work for many. We have all seen the reports about how many jobs and businesses have disappeared as a result of covid, and yet there are other employers and service sectors that are desperately seeking workers. We are in a complicated time when it comes to work.

Sometimes we talk about work as a vocation. The word vocation comes from a Latin word that means "a calling." A still, small voice deep within may call people of faith to a vocation where God can be found in what they do every day. I like Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation: He writes, "Your vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger."

What brings you "deep gladness" on this Labor Day weekend, even if you're retired? Is it your grandchildren? More travel or golf? Volunteer work? What might be one aspect of what you do that the world is hungry to receive? And where do you experience Sabbath time in your life? You see, Sabbath is not just a day, but a place in your week where you shift gears and slow down.

My wife and I have always tried to keep some Sabbath time in our life and marriage. Our Sabbath is usually Fridays. We may go for lunch or dinner, take a walk, discuss a book or current event. When our extended family gathered in the Sierras lately, we had lots of Sabbath time. Those family members who are more patient and skilled than me enjoyed endless hours of fly fishing in honor of my brother-in-law whom we memorialized on the trip. My Sabbath time was spent reading and writing on the cabin deck. The Sabbath can certainly refer to a day of the week, but for us it lasted nearly a week. I want to get away from designating the Sabbath as just a day of the week, and encourage you instead to think about the Sabbath as a change of rhythm in your week in whatever you do.

But what do people do when there is no work? Have you ever been unemployed? Out of a job? What was that like for you? How long did it last? Unfortunately, it is true for many Americans who are unemployed today. We remember those who work on Labor Day, but what about those who don't work, who don't have a job?

In my own life, there was a difficult time when my wife and I were unemployed. What is the context for sabbath time when it is not balanced with work? It was about 14 years ago, and my wife and I had finished up the work at the new church in the Poconos that we started. It was time to hand it off to someone else. We weren't sure what was next. Weeks stretched into months, and still nothing was on the horizon. We used up most of our savings.

But one day we decided to stop worrying and put it in God's hands. Maybe God was using this to teach something about sabbath time. What if we could think of it as a Sabbatical? An unplanned Sabbatical? We were able to live with my aunt for a while in Maryland. We explored the countryside and what the area had to offer. We took more hikes. We took up writing. We visited family in Pittsburgh. We went back to the town where I went to college. But most of all, we took time to notice what God was doing in our lives, and we got off the treadmill of constantly looking for jobs, and focused for a while on who we were in God's eyes and what might be next. We were able to reframe our questions from a deficit and see fresh possibilities. It was a gift, because for that summer, we were able to be more present to God and one another. Before long, we both had churches in New Jersey, and we would serve there for the next twelve years.

A faith that works. No faith? No work. Today you have the opportunity to find God in whatever you do, to find a rhythm of work and leisure that works to refresh you. Sometimes the Sabbath is more than a day, but rather a season of the heart and an attitude. The God we worship is not an idle, sit-back-in-an-easy-chair sort of deity, but a God who works. God was busy creating the universe.

Jesus himself worked for a living as a carpenter in his father's shop. But when Jesus started his ministry, he was caught healing a man on the Sabbath. They criticized him for working on the Sabbath day, but he replied, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17).

Again, Jesus and the disciples were walking thorough a corn field on the Sabbath and they were hungry. He saw fit to break that commandment when they picked ears of corn in the field on the Sabbath because they were hungry. He was criticized by the Pharisees – the legalistic religious leaders of the day. He answered them by citing David in the OT, and how they ate from the holy bread in the temple, even though it was forbidden. In his answer to the Pharisees, Jesus was trying to say that it is the spirit – and not the letter of the law that matters. Not even the Sabbath, the holy day of rest, could limit the work of God.

As Jesus concluded, he said, "The Sabbath was made for man and woman, and not the other way around." (Mark 2:27). Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of the Bible called The Message, "The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren't made to serve the Sabbath."

Sadly, many people forget the truth of Jesus' words. The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word "Shabbat," which means "the day of quieting the heart." The day of quieting the heart. Sabbath is about more than getting physical rest or taking a particular day off. It's more than keeping the stores closed on Sundays – though it's difficult to find a store that's closed on Sundays like they were when you and I grew up.

Sabbath time is a time that renews, restores, and inspires the meaning of all our days. Sabbath time is about resting in God, and joyfully being content to be with God without any other end or purpose in mind. For me it has a certain quality of worship about it, and I don't mean just on Sunday mornings. Even worship has its' roots in the word "workship." See the connection? Some of you may remember the first tenant of the Westminster Catechism—that "The chief end of man and woman is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." That's great work if you can get it!

How about you on this Labor Day weekend? Are you "resting" in God? Are you experiencing a sense of "Sabbath" in your life during the week? Someone once said to me, "I was never this busy before I retired!" Maybe a little Sabbath time is needed there.

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In closing, I would like to offer a few lines from a Japanese translation of the 23rd Psalm. It starts out:

"The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;  
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.  
He provides me with images of stillness, which restore my serenity.  
Harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours,  
For I shall walk in the pace of the Lord forever."

On this Labor Day weekend, may you keep the Sabbath, but more importantly, may the Sabbath keep you. Amen

Exodus 20:8-11

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Mark 2:23-28

23 One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ <sup>25</sup>And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ <sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for man and woman, and not them for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Son of God is lord even of the sabbath.’