

“The Substance of Sabbath”
August 21, 2022
Scripture: Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17

In the small town in Illinois where I grew up, Sundays were pretty quiet. We always went to church, where my grandmother also attended and my mom sang in the choir. Dad would often sit with us kids and give us Lifesavers to keep us quiet. In those days, Sunday School for all ages was held before the worship service and the kids sat with their parents during worship, no “children’s time” included of course.

After church we’d sit around waiting for my mom to finish talking with our grandmother and all the other folks we all knew and whom she’d known her whole life. Then, we’d go home to be met with the aroma of a roast in the oven, mom had set to cook on the timer and sit around watching television until dinner. After dinner it was cleaning up the dishes and more sitting around, watching my dad sleep through a football game or go to the park and hang around there until Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom came on usually followed by Disney. Or there may have been homework to do for Monday.

Fifty years ago, for me at least, Sundays were predictable and lazy. We weren’t an especially pious family; we weren’t scolded if we played too much or prayed too little. We could read whatever we wanted, that was always encouraged, or go for a ride on our bikes and be unaccounted for for hours. It was usually a free day, completely different from all the other days that were regimented and scheduled.

Now, that might not have been everything the Sabbath is meant to be, but it was definitely a break in the routine, it marked a pause in our normal pursuits. What we did with that pause, was mostly left up to us, so to a ten-year old it felt kind of boring. But I think the adults around me found it valuable. And valuing time, paying attention to it, using it differently, is at the heart of keeping the Sabbath.

In his slim book *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, scholar Walter Brueggemann makes the argument that Sabbath observance is the “alternative to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend, as Adam Smith had already seen, on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly ‘rest-less,’ inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which may satiate desire.” We live in a world that is built on and dependent on a system of constant production and consumption. Sabbath throws a monkey wrench into that machinery and calls us to bring it all to a halt. That was easier to do fifty years ago in the small town where I grew up than it is today. Even there, where still there’s really not that much to do, taking a rest, stopping activities is nearly impossible.

Brueggemann argues for the need to stop so that we can reorient ourselves to the Author of our lives, so those lives aren’t subsumed by the demands of the economy. The first commandment given at Sinai to the Israelites was clear: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before

me.” Orienting our lives to satisfy the demands of the market—constantly producing, earning and consuming—throws us back into slavery. It’s a form of idolatry. Stepping back from it all, bringing it to a halt, is God’s answer to our restlessness, to our fatigue; it’s how we remove the yoke from among us.

For Isaiah, though, there’s even more to it than that. We’re not just called to engage in worship and relaxation on the Sabbath. We’re also called to make fundamental changes to our lives and the lives of those around us. Isaiah describes what can only be understood as a cynical, entitled approach to Sabbath-keeping among the Israelites. Earlier in this chapter the voices of the people are mocked: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” They’re not getting what they want from God, even though they’re going through all the motions of worship. God rejects what they’re doing, sees right through them, and calls them to a higher standard.

Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked is the fast God wants from them. Removing the yoke from among them, unburdening the poor and removing the burden of oppression from themselves, is how Israel can keep the Sabbath. So, Sabbath, the time of rest, isn’t just about doing nothing. It’s meant to accomplish something profound in the lives of those who practice it and throughout the society in which they live.

I think a misunderstanding between Jesus and the religious leaders over the purpose of Sabbath is at the heart of this story in Luke’s Gospel. It’s worth pointing out, by the way, that the woman in the story did not go to the synagogue that day seeking healing. The leaders there, in a sort of backhanded way, accuse her of it, but the story doesn’t say that. She was just there, as I suspect she was every week. In fact, I imagine she was used to being overlooked. After eighteen years maybe she was resigned to her condition as her fate. There’s so much suffering in the world, why would she expect anything better? Maybe she felt it was her duty just to show up, hear the words read and say the prayers. What more could Sabbath be for her?

Over and over, though, Jesus insists that Sabbath is meant for more than religious piety. He shows them when he heals, when he eats and celebrates with his followers, when he casts out demons and confers forgiveness that the substance of Sabbath is more important than keeping it in a particular form. And recognizing that can open up some possibilities for us.

The whole system around Sabbath was in response to the commandment, “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—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.” So, that’s the prohibition on working; undefined, but it seems to have to do with work needed to make a living. It’s been left to generations of scholars and rabbis to figure out what exactly is “work.” In practice, the rule in Jesus’ day was essentially, “when in doubt, don’t.”

But there were also all kinds of exceptions, as Jesus points out. You have to feed and water your animals on the sabbath. In another gospel, when confronted by this, Jesus asks, if your donkey falls down the well on the sabbath, don’t you do what’s needed to rescue it? His point is the needs of our neighbors should be at least as important to us as the needs of animals.

When someone is suffering, we have a responsibility to relieve them somehow. And what better time to do that than the Sabbath?

So, when it comes to our observance of Sabbath, maybe we should start not by looking up to God but looking out and around. We can ask ourselves, what do we need to stop doing that's distracting us from being engaged in God's work and what do we need to start doing so we're providing for those around us? Jesus stands with Isaiah when he heals the woman bent over for eighteen years. He doesn't see this as a violation of Sabbath, but its fulfillment. Sabbath is meant for healing—body, mind and spirit. When we use it for that purpose, when we allow our piety come to life through acts of compassion and justice, we give Sabbath the substance it deserves. We honor God's presence among us when we extend God's love to people in need.

Today we're invited to discover the depth of healing Sabbath can bring to us and to the world through us. We're challenged by Isaiah and Jesus to move beyond our devotional practices and be engaged by the needs of the world that are standing right beside us. When we discover the true substance of Sabbath, we can begin to repair the breach that cuts people off from healing and wholeness. God can use us to repair what's broken in our world and restore our sisters and brothers in need to dignity and purpose, so no one is left out and we all can live unburdened in the joy of God's kingdom.

Amen