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June 3, 2018

Texts: Exodus 20:8-11, Mark 2:23-3:6

Proper Rest

Last summer, my older brother made a career change. After ten years of an unpredictable schedule and constant travel, he decided to take a few months as a stay-at-home dad with his three-year-old son before starting a new job. About halfway through October, he made a confession to me over the phone. “You know I don’t go to church,” he said, “but this Sabbath stuff makes a lot of sense. If we don’t take a day to relax once a week, it catches up to us. My son gets cranky, and then we all get cranky. Before you know it, none of us are having a good time no matter how fun the activity. We just need the downtime.”

As it turns out, my brother and his family are not alone. Americans are tired people.¹ Approximately 47 million Americans do not get a restful night’s sleep. Businesses lose 18 billion dollars each year in productivity from tiredness. 1.2 million car accidents annually are the result of a sleepy driver.

The potential causes of our collective tiredness are manifold. For most of us, we pack too much into our family’s schedule, work too much, and spend too much time scrolling through alerts on our phones. With the exception of the most spiritually balanced among us, we all wish we had just a few more hours to recharge and rest.

Rest is central to Sabbath, the holy day of rest God instituted in the Ten Commandments. The need for rest is rooted in our identity as being created in the image of God. The 3rd or 4th commandment—depending upon how you count—makes the Sabbath an extension of God’s rest at creation: God created “heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.” It is also a response to the history of the Jewish people: the Israelites’ toiled in slavery in Egypt for generations and God delivered the Sabbath imperative after delivering them from Pharaoh. Keeping the Sabbath reminds them that rest itself is a holy gift from God, an act of resistance to a culture of overwork.

The act of keeping the Sabbath is most common in observant Jewish communities. For them, the Sabbath begins with ritual prayers and a meal at sundown on Friday night and continues through Saturday evening. Some Jewish sects have strict regulations to ban work and encourage rest; others are more fluid about rules, focusing on fellowship and the spirit of rejuvenation instead. For even the most observant, it is permissible to forgo the Sabbath and work if the situation is dire.

¹ The following statistics were found in Jerome Groopman, “The Secrets of Sleep: Why do we need it, and are we getting enough?” *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2017.

Christians have always had a complicated relationship to Sabbath. While there are some Christian communities that observe a Saturday Sabbath, most of western Christianity has designated Sunday as their Sabbath to pair it with day of Christ's resurrection. Our tradition is directly connected to the Puritans, who were ardent supporters of a Sunday Sabbath. Some remnants of Puritan restrictions remained until recently in Connecticut's "Blue Laws" restricting certain business from opening and certain products, most notably alcohol, from being sold on Sunday.

As an observant Jew, Jesus understood the history and holiness of the Sabbath in his own tradition. Frankly, that is what makes this interaction with Pharisees so puzzling. The disciples pluck the heads of grain and Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, both in direct violation of Sabbath rules. A part of Jesus' defense is that such actions are acceptable in life or death situations. While this is true, there seems nothing urgent about either situation: the disciples are not described as famished and no reason is given why he could not heal the man the next day.

What Jesus does do is reframe the debate. Per usual, the Pharisees represent the most natural instincts of religious people. We experience something holy and then seek to protect it with the hard boundaries of tradition. We strive so eagerly to guard that little bit of transcendence that we fall in love with our tradition and lose track of God's initial gift.

Jesus reframes the situation by drawing the Pharisees back to the true purpose of keeping the Sabbath. He declares, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." As he so often does, Jesus then invites us to a deeper understanding of his words through his actions. When he meets the man with the withered hand at the synagogue, he has compassion for him and heals him. In doing so, Jesus breathes new life into an old tradition.

If you haven't noticed, a traditional Sunday Sabbath is not gaining a lot of traction in our culture. For many families, Sundays are filled with sports events, chores around the house, and preparation for over-scheduled weeks. For others, constant busy-ness is a matter of survival. It feels as if there is no time for Sabbath because their jobs demand their availability at all hours of the day. The need for Sabbath is rest is obvious, but how can we do it without withdrawing from the culture is less so.

In preparation for this sermon, I did some research about how Christians are breathing new life into this old tradition of Sabbath. I started reading MaryAnn McKibben Dana's *Sabbath in the Suburbs*. It is a memoir about how a couple with three young children experiment with Sabbath for an entire year. They try different ways of structuring their holy day as a family, sometimes celebrating on Saturday and other times on Sunday. They make meals together, go on low-key outings, and sometimes just try to do what they always do a little bit slower. Dana discovers keeping the Sabbath is a lot like creative

processes and even worship: the practice requires boundaries to guide her. Yet instead of a fixed and immovable wall, she prefers the more flexible boundary image of a coastline.

She writes:

“There is constancy in the coastline, but it also changes. The beach constantly shifts under the power of the wind, waves, and tides. Sand washes out to sea and is redeposited by the surf. Dunes are formed, unformed, and reformed. The beach is the same yet is never quite the same. The image honors the unpredictability of life, especially with children.”²

While Dana’s practice hardly ever looks the same twice, she finds moments to relax, enjoy time with her young family, and ultimately accept her own limits. At times, the smelly laundry piles up, her kids miss a few activities, and lawn care is left unfinished. To stay ahead of it all would require sacrifices her family is unwilling to make. By carving out a time each week where that is OK, the ethos spills over into the other days. She finds herself more open to whatever delights the day has in store. The small victories that come from living life more deliberately begin to snowball.

When we consider how to find a Sabbath practice that gives rest to our weary selves, we should look to Jesus’ compassion for the man in synagogue. The truth is, we are the ones in need of healing, and we can only find true Sabbath rest if we begin with compassion for ourselves. There are some things we simply cannot accomplish, even if we could squeeze more hours into the day.

If this all sounds too scary and you are unsure how where to begin, the communion table is the natural starting place. At Christ’s table, you can come as you are, brokenness and all. You can count on God feeding you, nourishing you, restoring you as a member of a whole greater than yourself. Slow down just enough, and you can taste Christ’s compassion, breathing new life into you.

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² Maryann McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family’s Experiment with Holy Time* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 36.