

Practicing Our Faith: Keeping Sabbath

*A sermon preached on Deuteronomy 5:12-15 & Mark 2:23-3:6 on Sunday,
September 20, 2026, by Emily Hull McGee
with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

I've told you before that throughout the 20th century, prognosticators of the future and experts in the field of labor increasingly predicted shorter workweeks. In the 1920s, Julian Huxley called the two-day workweek "inevitable," because, as he said, "the human being can consume only so much and no more." The 1930s saw John Maynard Keynes naming "when we reach the point when the world produces all the goods that it needs in two days, as it inevitably will... we must turn our attention to the great problem of what to do with our leisure." That's what people were predicting would be the great existential crisis of the future: what in the world would humanity do with our abundant free time?¹

Boy, they hit the nail on the head, didn't they? We're just drowning in free time over here! What in the world would Julian Huxley and John Maynard Keynes do with cable news, and the internet, and Amazon, and 24/7 access to work for many, and the reality that Americans are more stressed by their jobs than ever before?² What would they say for those who see free time as a luxury of the privileged rather than a right and responsibility of the created? What might they do with a culture who struggles to find freedom in any sort of time at all?

II.

¹ Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*.

² <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx#ite-393248>

Questions about how time is defined and the freedom to define it were on the mind of the Pharisees in our gospel text for today, sabbath time in particular. You remember the Pharisees – everyone’s favorite rule-followers, those pious Jewish leaders known for their love of the law. To the Pharisees, the law of their faith was a gift rather than a burden, for virtuous living was at the heart of what made their faith come alive.³

So when Jesus and his disciples were making their way through a field that day plucking heads off the grain, or when Jesus entered the synagogue and healed a man whose hand had withered, or any of the other times Jesus healed on the sabbath, the Pharisees had sure reason to be offended. For in their eyes, Jesus wasn’t just breaking a law buried in some obscure code of ethics – paragraph 17 of code 247, part b – but rather he was breaking a big one – one of the top 10, even! *Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy!* For a people whose existence had been defined by the enslaved work they’d done in Egypt under Pharaoh, this commandment was at the center of their faithfulness to the God who set them free. “Six days you will work and labor,” the Lord commanded them, “but the seventh is to lay down the work and rest, just as God did in creating the world.” For the most observant Jews, this wasn’t just about their obedience; it was about their identity! Abstaining from work on the sabbath reminded them of who they are: that they belonged to God, that there would be enough, that no labor - however worthy - should define every part of their existence. Sabbath meant resisting, divesting from the lie that productivity was their idol, and experiencing an alternative way of being – as frequently as once a week.⁴

³ William Placher, *Belief Theological Commentary: Mark*, p7-8.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*.

But let's be clear: technically, Jesus did no work — the 39 classes of prohibited labor on the sabbath didn't include plucking grain. And technically, Jesus didn't do anything with that hand — he didn't spit or speak, mix a serum or apply anything to the wound. All he asked was that the man stretch out his hand, and as Mark tells it, "his hand was restored." Here, Jesus wasn't suggesting abolishing the sabbath or the law! Rather he was inviting the Pharisees to refuse the *letter* of the law that sabbath is only about restrictions, and instead embrace the *spirit* of the law that sabbaths are a gift of God's abundant life! His authority as God's son conveys God's sabbath grace so amazing it was disorienting. So agitated were the Pharisees at Jesus's actions, the gospel tells us the Pharisees "went out and immediately conspired ... against him, how to destroy him."

III.

Who knew that a reimagined sabbath practice could be so threatening?

The word sabbath means — quite literally — "the time of rest, for taking a deep breath, for reverie," for what Jews call *nefishin*, which means "the time for air," "time cleared-for-play."⁵ So then to keep sabbath "is to be in step with the way God intends the world to work, participating in an act of 're-creation' in which we are put back in touch with the way in which God intends for life to be enjoyed."⁶ The great rabbi Abraham Heschel reminds us that the first holy thing in all creation was not a people or a place but this resting day! Time and time again in creation, God made and then pronounced good... but when

⁵ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, p115, 298.

⁶ Stanley M. Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, p57.

God rested on that seventh day, God called it holy, modeling for all creation the time, space, and rhythm for sabbath.

Sabbath purpose expanded with the giving of the Ten Commandments, which came as gift and direction to the Israelites fresh from a miraculous release from slavery in Egypt. Remember, the Lord said to them, that you were a slave to Pharaoh's relentless and suffocating system of domination, authoritarianism, absolute power, frantic productivity, threats, violence, exploitation, opulent wealth for the few and abject poverty for the many. So observe the sabbath day and keep it holy.

With the significance of sabbath in their ancestral stories, it's no wonder that the Pharisees were skeptical of Jesus's posture. Yet as one scholar says, "Jesus insists that nourishment, restoration, and preservation of life **fulfill** rather than violate the Sabbath."⁷ In turn, it's no wonder that Jesus was so grieved that the Pharisees couldn't understand this. For Jesus came that we may have life in abundance! Even so – especially – on the sabbath.

As scripture shows us, sabbath is a practice of creation, of freedom, of abundance, but most of all, sabbath is a practice of trust. It softens us, inviting us into a different realm of being – not because work is bad, but because the interplay of work and rest is so good. Sabbath takes the oppression of the clock, the sharp angles and lines of work, the relentless drumbeat of productivity, the rules of routine, and relaxes them, makes them more tender and pliable and quiet, **so that** when we practice sabbath, we can hear God's voice and feel God's presence in a wholly new, life-giving way.

Wayne Muller once said, "Sabbath is not dependent on our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we

⁷ Nathan T. Stucky, *Wrestling with Rest: Inviting Youth to Discover the Gift of Sabbath*, p139.

complete our phone calls, finish our project, get through this stack of messages, or get out this report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it is time to stop.”⁸ I wonder – if you make room for a sabbath practice to soften you to a stop in doing, what might you start being instead? What might you hear from God when you do?

IV.

As I have attempted to become a half-decent plant parent over these adulting years, I figured that in order to shed my track record of “accidentally killing all the plants that enter my house except for that one Christmas cactus from 2016,” I’d better learn a thing or two along the way. I’m proud to say that I actually keep most plants alive and thriving in my house, but I’m most deeply moved by the life lessons they offer.

Because tending my plants is a sabbath practice of mine. I turn on some music, pick up my watering can and my shears, and let my mind meet the work of my hands. Several years ago, I came upon a problem that one of my plant teachers named “the gap of death.” The gap of death, she says, can develop over time when the soil becomes so dried out, that it shrinks together and pulls away from the inside of the container leaving a gap there in between. The plant has become *hydrophobic*, meaning no matter how much water you give it, that plant will reject it, causing the water to flow right through the pot’s drainage holes and never touch its roots. But let me tell you what I’ve learned: don’t give up on that hydrophobic plant! Instead, you have to insist that the plant receives water, doing so by putting the whole container in a larger container, watering it and letting it soak. Once the soil is rehydrated and happy, the plant is ready to be placed back in its spot.

⁸ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, p27-28.

The metaphor for life just writes itself, doesn't it? Because around the same time I learned about the gap of death when I spotted it in the pothos plant in my church office window and, angry at myself for my ineptitude in tending the easiest plant there is, let it sit in the sink in a bowl of water, I was ignoring a gap of death of my spirit. It had been a frustrating stretch of weeks, feeling like the tasks were far too numerous and my capacity was far too lacking. I had stressed about this and that, worried about this relationship and that goal, all while a bout of anxiety flared up and surprised me with its immediacy. I had worked when I was supposed to be resting, stressed about work when I was supposed to be off, numbed my ruminating mind when I was supposed to be enlivening it.

But the spirit catches up, doesn't it? Over that weekend, I'd finally insisted on some margin, some breathing room to tend to my spirit. I spent time with things I knew would settle my soul: reading, hot yoga, time outside in my tiny garden listening to the birds, time inside tending my plants and puttering around the house, praying in prose and questions, long walks with good podcasts, unstructured time with my family, exchanging an open laptop for a snuggly pup. Sabbath time, you see. And wouldn't you know it, that anxiety loosened its grip on my chest, and my perspective shifted. I was kinder, less apt to snap at a family member, less distracted or stressed, more deeply known and knowing. The gap of death in my spirit had loosened. Some of the endless loops in my mind finally found pathways forward. My spirit had soaked in the good waters of life: nurture and attention, rest and trust in God. My roots hydrated once again.

That Sunday, I came back to my office, no longer dehydrated of spirit. And wouldn't you know that I found water droplets hanging on every leaf of

my pothos, almost as if the abundance of the soak couldn't be held captive by veins and blades. Sabbath nourishment – for my plant and for me – had led to life abundant.

V.

So how do we do it, this keeping of sabbath, when, as Octavia Butler said, “there is no end to what a living world will demand of you.”⁹

Our country's old blue laws would have us believe that sabbath can only be practiced on Sundays, but modern work schedules and travel sports and church meetings might suggest a more expansive understanding. (The irony is not lost on me that our builders are working today as I preach about sabbath-keeping!) “The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath,” Jesus says to us with love. If Sunday isn't the day for your rest, find another day and keep as regular a rhythm with it as you can. Our Jewish neighbors begin and end their sabbath practice at sundown, when the sun is at rest. So in that wise spirit, perhaps find ways to mark your sabbath's beginning and end. Maybe it begins with a special meal at home, or curling up on the couch with a book or a dog or a friend instead of your phone.

You might hear this and be thinking, “a whole day?! I couldn't possibly.” Particularly for caregivers who work full time, your efforting never has an off switch. You work all day and come home to work all night. The dog is sick. The kids need baths and bedtime stories. The teens have sports and homework and relationship drama. The aging parent needs help with mail and meals and life. The person in your house struggling with their mental health is absorbing every ounce of your energy and then some. For you, a whole sabbath day may be out of reach right now. That doesn't mean you don't need it, or that you

⁹ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

should abandon the idea altogether. Put a sabbath morning or afternoon on your calendar. Block it off. Call a friend at church for help with your caregiving responsibilities if you need. For that stretch of time, rest in the delight of your identity as beloved child of God – not you as parent, spouse, child, neighbor, sibling, friend.

Some of you are carrying the burden of despair about this present moment. Pick your poison: wars and rumors of wars, gas prices that tick up by the day, a warming climate, AI chatbots run amok, elected leaders acting like corrupt fools, human rights stripped and trampled every way you turn. All of it burdens you, such that you can't look away because something might happen when you unplug! For you, perhaps your sabbath could be a quieting of your media diet and a limiting of what information your heart and mind can metabolize. Not because it doesn't matter to stay informed, but because it matters just as much to rest and be renewed. Maybe you reserve the day as one without buying something, or one without using any technology at all. What if you had one day a week where you left your phone behind, or turned off the TV, or let the washer and dryer be still?

You see, sabbath doesn't just liberate us from the clock, the rat race, the labor. It frees us for being, not just doing. For loving and being loved. For delight and relationships and rest and being fully human in God's created world. For our limits, remembering that God is God and we are not, and trusting, as Meta Herrick Carlson says, "the terrible and wonderful news—that God is still here, making things new, even and often without our help."¹⁰

¹⁰ Meta Herrick Carlson, "For Sabbatical,"
<https://www.metaherrickcarlson.com/blog/a-sending-for-sabbatical>

You might think that it can't happen. Too many responsibilities, too many people within your care, too many appointments to make and errands to run and clothes to wash and groceries to buy, too many emails to send and news articles to read, too many threats to your job and your bank account and your life to consider taking your foot off the gas. What will happen if I stop? Who even will I be? Will I realize that I'm addicted to striving? How do I measure my worth if I'm not even being productive? (*Spoken like a true Enneagram 3!*) What will I do with the discomfort and even the fear of this time spent differently?

And yet, the God who said "let there be" found it good and right to cease from labor. God did not need to rest, God *chose* to rest. The God who created the world created rest, and made it holy, and called it sabbath, and named it a commandment, not a "lifestyle suggestion," and gave it as a gift to the world – then and now and tomorrow.¹¹

So friends, the question before us is will we receive the gift? Will you?

¹¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again*, p18