

SABBATH, Deuteronomy and Mark, June, 2018

I meet weekly with the 11 year old girl I mentor through the Mentor Duluth program, and in the last few weeks, our meetings have included an update on the big countdown in her life...how many days of school are left before summer vacation. I can't lie, I get this twinge of longing and envy when she talks about this. I so remember how I loved summer vacation as a school girl. I liked school, too, actually, but the contrast of having the whole summer off was something I'd anticipate with a countdown, too, every year. And those summers off, as a child, were magic---not old enough for a summer job yet, but old enough to run around with neighborhood kids, stay up later in the long, light evenings to play hide and seek, go on camping vacations with my family, and spend long hours reading Nancy Drew mysteries. Time you could spend as you chose to, free of many of the usual responsibilities and obligations. I miss those days. Don't you?

It's not just kids who seem to have that kind of discretionary time, apparently. The other day, my husband, facing a heavy work day and week, said to our mini dachshund who was blissfully asleep in his lap, "Meg, I wish I could change places with you for a while." Pets also have discretionary time, at least ours do. They seemingly have all day to move from one vantage point for looking outside to the next, one comfy cushion for sleeping in the living room to the one in the bedroom, and so on. Their responsibilities and obligations seem relatively few. Yes, we may find that we envy both school aged children and our pets. And what does that tell us about us?

I think that may tell us that as adults in this world, we do not get the kind of down time, the discretionary time, the refreshing and relaxing and restful time, that we need. And we *do*

need it. Bad things happen when we don't have time to step back, take a breath, and gain a wider perspective on things. One mantra I learned during my pastoral care courses has remained with me as a helpful reminder: "Under stress, we regress." I cannot even express how true I have found that to be, both for myself and those around me. Under stress, we regress. When I am stressed, overly busy, and anxious, I *absolutely* regress. I take myself too seriously. I adopt a defensive posture towards others and see antagonism or hostility where it doesn't exist. I turn ordinary things into urgent things. Everything takes on an emotional reactivity and intensity. When I consider our culture at large right now, those things I just described seem to me to be the status quo. It's as if every one of us needs to take a deep breath, step back, lighten up, look at the stars, say a prayer, and let go and let God. Individually, and communally, we do not function at anywhere near our best when we don't take sabbath time.

Our lessons today obviously focus on Sabbath. The lesson from Deuteronomy commands us to observe a Sabbath, a day set apart for rest and reflection, for connecting with God and other people. A day in which we do not work or stress about work. This is not, by the way, a *suggestion*---it's a *commandment*. And our Gospel lesson explores what it means to keep the Sabbath holy; what is and is not an appropriate way to observe Sabbath time, honoring the spirit of the Sabbath without being rigid and legalistic about it. Jesus is pushing back at the inflexibility of how Sabbath was observed, but make no mistake....Jesus and his disciples and the early Christians *all* kept the Sabbath and thought it important to do so. Which most certainly challenges us to ask ourselves how adept *we* are at Sabbath keeping.

Consider these words from author Wayne Muller, written nearly two decades ago:

“In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between action and rest. The more our life speeds up, the more we feel weary, overwhelmed and lost. Despite our good hearts and equally good intentions, our life and work rarely feel light, pleasant or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: “I am so busy.” We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath – this has become the model of a successful life.”

Muller continues, “Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that show us where to go. We lose the nourishment that gives us succor. We miss the quiet that gives us wisdom. Poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through tireless effort, we never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger.

How have we allowed this to happen? I suggest it is this: We have forgotten the Sabbath.”

Forgotten the Sabbath? Is that what has happened? And that is precisely what the commandment from Deuteronomy, also found in Exodus, forbids us to do. “Remember to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy”, God instructs Moses. Again, not a suggestion, but a command. “For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” Here’s where it gets really

interesting, because who is to observe the sabbath? Here's the list of those who are NOT to work on the 7th day--- "you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." That's a radical listing of those who are to rest rather than work! Not just the rich, who can afford to, but the poor. Not just men, at the top of the hierarchy, but women. Not just free people, but even those who are enslaved. Not just Hebrew people, but resident aliens. And not just people period, but working animals. Everyone is to keep the Sabbath! And why? Because everyone needs the benefits of Sabbath keeping---the unstressing, the deep breath, the connection with God, and the world, and others, the wider perspective. The whole community is healthier when everyone has a day of Sabbath observance. We struggle with these issues to this day, don't we? If convenience stores stay open on holidays, those workers don't get a holiday. And how do our regulations about labor apply to immigrants or migrant workers, or in the bad old days, to children? It's actually somewhat impressive how we can turn something as simple and straightforward as a mandatory day of rest from work for everyone into a morass of rules, exceptions, regulations, and problems. But that's human nature---part of original sin, perhaps---because we are hardly the first to find this commandment difficult to keep.

Look at our Gospel lesson, and you will see how the Jews struggled to keep the Sabbath. At one time in our history, we had "blue laws", which attempted to enforce the keeping of the Sabbath by closing down businesses on Sunday. For better or worse, those are mostly gone now. But they paled in significance when compared to the body of rules and laws that the Jews had evolved over time in order to protect the Sabbath. And that *was* the

intention---a *positive* intention to obey God's command and preserve and honor this need for rest for all. However, the rules *themselves* became burdensome, weighty, and needlessly restrictive. They were much easier for the well off to keep than the poor majority of peasants. And Jesus, although he honors the Sabbath, pushes back against the pharisees and their legalism in regards to Sabbath keeping. In the first section of our Gospel lesson, the pharisees are unhappy with the disciples, whom they discover walking through grain fields and plucking off heads of grain to eat. The issue is not one of private property or stealing, but rather of Sabbath keeping. The number of steps one could take on the Sabbath was restricted; observant Jews did not travel on the Sabbath. Nor did they prepare food. The idea was that in order to preserve this Sabbath day, any necessary travel and food preparation was done the day before. For this reason, they criticize the disciples, and Jesus responds by noting that the Sabbath is a gift from God intended to bless humanity, not a burden God is imposing, particularly, again, on the poor, who were less able to observe a strict Sabbath than the wealthy.

The second section of our text relates to what kind of activity is appropriate on the Sabbath. Not only activity related to travel or food that is needful, as the first story suggests---but also activity that is life giving in general. Such activity is always lawful, even on the Sabbath. *Especially* on the Sabbath. In this instance, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, another action considered to be unlawful "work" by the pharisees. Jesus points out the obvious, that the Sabbath is for doing good and saving lives. The pharisees are a perfect example of how, even with the best of intentions, our religious rules and rituals can become ossified; rigid; inflexible in a way that defeats the spirit of their original intention.

And what again, was that intention? It was to provide a much needed opportunity to step back from regular work and routine, to take a break and a deep breath, to connect with God and nature and dear ones, to gain a broader perspective. Doing so enables us to not be reactive out of stress and busyness when making important decisions or relating to other people. It enables us to find peace in our souls and foster peace in our families and communities. Keeping the Sabbath creates in us a *Sabbath keeping perspective*: we can see the rhythms of work and rest, and we can understand the need for balance—not only for ourselves, but for others.

To again quote Wayne Muller, “Most spiritual traditions prescribe some kind of Sabbath, time consecrated to enjoy and celebrate what is beautiful and good – time to light candles, sing songs, worship, tell stories, bless our children and loved ones, give thanks, share meals, nap, walk, and even make love. It is time to be nourished and refreshed as we let our work, our chores and our important projects lie fallow, trusting that there are larger forces at work taking care of the world when we are at rest.”

He concludes, “Sabbath time is a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork because it honors the wisdom of dormancy. If certain plant species do not lie dormant during winter, the plant begins to die off. Rest is not just a psychological convenience; it is a spiritual and biological necessity. Perhaps this is why, in most spiritual traditions, “Remember the Sabbath” is more than simply a lifestyle suggestion. It is a commandment, an ethical precept as serious as prohibitions against killing, stealing and lying.”

As I ponder Muller’s words and these Scriptural passages, I am aware that while I envy school children and pets their summer vacations, their lazy days at home---their Sabbath kind

of times, I nevertheless easily feel guilty about taking my own. That really doesn't make sense.

Summer is more or less upon us, and this is a time when we may be more aware of the importance of keeping Sabbath time, both on Sundays for worship and family and fun, but also at other times---to promote balance in our lives and in the life of our community. As we do so, we might do well to recall that to keep the Sabbath is to obey a commandment of God, one of the 10 commandments in fact; we're not just being self-indulgent or following up on a divine self-help suggestion. God commands us to honor the Sabbath; that's how important it is.

There is no reason for guilt or envy. Sabbath keeping is a crucial part of the life of every person of faith, and everyone else, too, for that matter. God doesn't look for us to be stressed and exhausted; God created us for service and pleasure, and God intends for us a Sabbath keeping spirit. Amen.

**Excerpts from an article in USA Weekend - April 2, 1999,
by Wayne Muller: *Remember the Sabbath?***

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The more our life speeds up, the more we feel weary, overwhelmed and lost. Despite our good hearts and equally good intentions, our life and work rarely feel light, pleasant or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: "I am so busy." We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath – this has become the model of a successful life.

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How have we allowed this to happen? This was not our intention: this is not the world we dreamed of when we were young and life seemed full of possibility and promise. How did we get so terribly rushed in a world saturated with work and responsibility, yet somehow bereft of joy and delight?

I suggest it is this: We have forgotten the Sabbath.

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Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is a day when we partake of the wisdom, peace and delight that grow only in the soil of time – time consecrated specifically for play, refreshment and renewal. Many of us, in our desperate drive to be successful and care for our many responsibilities, feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. But the Sabbath has proven its wisdom over the ages. The Sabbath gives us the permission we need to stop, to restore our souls.

The point is not to return to some forced, legalistic Sabbath. We rightfully chafe against the dreary and humorless Sundays that obscured the more traditional healing prescriptions of companionship and laughter.

Much of modern life is specifically designed to seduce our attention away from Sabbath rest. When we are in the world with our eyes wide open, the seductions are insatiable. Hundreds of channels of cable and satellite television; phones with multiple lines and call waiting, begging us to talk to more than one person at a time; mail, e-mail and overnight mail; fax machines; billboards; magazines; newspapers; radio. For those of us with children, there are endless soccer practices, baseball games, homework, laundry, housecleaning, errands. Every responsibility, every stimulus competes for our attention: Buy me. Do me. Watch me. Try me. Drink me. It is as if we have inadvertently stumbled into some horrific wonderland.

So, I make a plea for renewed Sabbath-keeping. Let us take a collective breath, rest, pray, meditate, walk, sing, eat and take time to share the unhurried company of those we love. Let us, for just one day, cease our desperate striving

for more, and instead taste the blessings we have already been given, and give thanks. Religious traditions agree on this: God does not want us to be exhausted; God wants us to be happy. And so, let us remember the Sabbath.