

## “SABBATH”

A Sermon Preached at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts  
on October 22, 2000  
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You arrive for a meeting, and the other person is late. You haven't brought any of the work you could be using the unexpected time to accomplish, nor have you a cell phone. You don't even have a paper to read. What you have instead is time. Time on your hands. Time in your hands, to use to ... what? What is there to do, darn it?

Well, you could rest, take that time in your hands and squander it, toss it around like a ball, pull it up over your consciousness like a blanket, let it lead you wandering off down trails of no particular purpose or likely destination, or let it just sit sleeping in your lap. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing but ... rest.

Of course, you could choose to fidget instead. Getting increasingly annoyed is a popular option. I'm pretty good at both of those myself. But now and then I manage to treat an unexpected moment of inactivity as a kind of present from the day, a gift of time with nothing to do in it, nothing but rest.

It's not that you have to fall asleep, though that's one way of resting. But rest can also mean, more broadly, any "freedom from work or activity," especially any activity that relates to your usual work, whatever that may be.

Sometimes, we get given these moments by the hour, even a day now and then, a weekend, a vacation. Most people wish they could find enough such time that their lives were in balance between their work and their rest and recreation.

Thousands of years ago, Jews came up with the bright idea of building that balance right into their religion with the institution of the Sabbath, a twenty-four-hour period every week, beginning at sundown on Friday, when everyone had to stop working. The very word Sabbath itself derives from the Hebrew word for rest.

It was built right into the sacred set of rules, the Ten Commandments. It is the longest of the commandments, the fourth: "Keep the sabbath [sic] day holy as the Lord your God commanded you. You have six days to labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; that day you shall not do any work, neither you, your son or your daughter, your slave or your slave-girl, your ox, your ass, or any of your cattle, nor the alien within your gates, so that your slaves and your slave-girls may rest as you do." [Deut. 6:12-14]

As John Dominic Crossin has noted, in a tape that Shirley Pollitt kindly lend me, the Sabbath was thus an egalitarian practice. Almost everyone stopped working, though they were sensible about it. Emergencies were attended to, some work could not be set aside. But nearly all work could be, and the Bible itemizes the restrictions.

For instance, Moses tells the people during their exodus from Egypt to Palestine, “This is what the Lord has said: ‘Tomorrow is a day of sacred rest, a sabbath holy to the Lord.’ So bake what you want to bake now, and boil what you want to boil; put aside what remains and keep it safe till morning.” [Ex. 16: 23] Many centuries later, this would still be the practice among the Puritans who worshiped in this congregation, though among Christians the timing of the Sabbath had shifted to the Holy Day of Sunday. But they still baked their beans the evening before to bring to church with them the next day for lunch, so they wouldn’t have to bake on their Sabbath.

More than the date had changed by then, though. This is another point highlighted by John Dominic Crossin: with Christianity – and, I would add, especially with the Protestant Reformation – the meaning of Sabbath went from rest as worship to rest for worship.

Now it’s hard to draw that line too sharply, for even in the Torah, the most sacred books of Jewish scripture, God says through Moses, “On six

days work may be done, but every seventh day is a sabbath of sacred rest, a day of sacred assembly, on which you shall do no work.” [Lev. 23: 3]

But it can and has been argued that the Christian Sabbath, focused on communal worship – and around here at the outset they worshiped most of the day – misses a central part of the day’s significance to Jews, which has been that rest itself is worship, it is holy behavior, it is an imitation of God’s own behavior.

A third and final point from Crossin: a God whom one would hope to emulate is a distinctly Jewish innovation. The classical pagan gods were to be worshiped, placated, feared, and a lot of other things, but one did not want to try to be like Zeus or imitate Apollo. But the God of the Jews was not just a god of justice, he [and he was a he] was a god who expected his people to pursue the ways of justice as well.

And that god, the Lord your God we’ve been hearing about, the very creator of the universe in the Hebrew cosmology pictured in the book that we call Genesis, is a god who rested after six days of work. In six days God conjured up everything that is, and then he took off. I don’t know who he thought was going to run things in his absence, but he took off.

And so in Genesis we read, “Thus heaven and earth were completed with all their mighty throng. On the seventh day God completed all the work

he had been doing [I told you God was a he, he just was then in their eyes], and on the seventh day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day he ceased from all the work he had set himself to do.” [Gen. 2:1-3]

Imagine! On day one, God had created ... well, existence, heaven and earth, plus light. But God didn't figure that made the first day, Sunday, worth blessing. By the third day, God was creating the continents and seas, and plants and trees, and he even began noticing what good work he was doing; but he did not bless Tuesday.

No, the only day God ending up blessing, and commanding his people to honor as well, was the day that God accomplished nothing, the day God ceased from all his labor, the day God got to rest.

Through the ages, Jews have honored this commandment with varying degrees of observance, just as Christians have, the latter having inherited the Fourth Commandment but transferred its obligations to the first day of the week, Sunday, the day that Jesus is said to have risen from death.

At times, like two thousand years ago, restrictions have been so prohibitive that one young Jewish man named Jesus had to remind his times and especially the religiously righteous that “The Sabbath was made for the sake of man and not man for the Sabbath.” [Mark 2: 27]

In Christianity, that restrictive tendency is known as Sabbatarianism, which led to our local blue laws, closing most stores on Sundays, laws only fairly recently repealed. One suspects that in Massachusetts they might still be on the books, as they are for alcohol -- except at Christmas time (!) -- were it not for the willingness of New Hampshireites to sell almost anything, almost any time, the Ten Commandments notwithstanding.

Perhaps this is as good a moment as any to note one more time the hypocrisy of those who use the Bible to crusade against practices like abortion or homosexuality, which barely show up in its pages, while ignoring very clear and repeated biblical injunctions against practices like charging interest on loans or working on the Sabbath.

Me, I don't want to outlaw either interest on loans or Sunday openings. I don't pretend to take my ethics verbatim from the pages of holy writ. But I do see sacred scripture as a source of guiding insight in matters of the spirit, at least at times, and the ancient Jewish attitude toward the Sabbath -- rest as worship, in Crossin's phrasing -- has a persistent charm.

Rest as worship. Perhaps in your own view of life, it would better be put, rest as restoration, as therapy, as spiritual renewal, as a chance to reconnect with our deepest selves and our deep ties to the fundamental

nature of life. These are the sorts of benefits recently cited by Wayne Muller in his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Life*.

Though he is not Jewish, Muller thinks the ancient Jews were on to something important in placing such emphasis on balancing work and rest. Not that there is anything wrong with work. No, he says, “Sabbath time is not spiritually superior to our work. The practice is rather to find that balance point at which, having rested, we do our work with greater ease and joy, and bring healing and delight to our endeavors.” [8]

For Muller, find time enough to rest is nothing other than restoring a natural balance, as natural as the plant’s life as dormant seed before it grows again. “Many scientists believe we are ‘hard-wired ... to live in rhythmic awareness, to be in and then to step out, to be engrossed and then detached, to work and then to rest. It follows then that the commandment to remember the Sabbath is not a burdensome requirement from some law-giving deity ... but rather a remembrance of a law that is firmly embedded in the fabric of nature. It is a reminder of how things really are, the rhythmic dance to which we unavoidably belong.” [69]

“We are blessed with these inner rhythms,” he says, “that tell us where we are and where we are going.... If we stop, if we return to rest, our

natural life reasserts itself. Our natural wisdom and balance come to our aid, and we can find our way to what is good, necessary, and true.” [73]

Boy, it would be hard to beat that. Still, one has to admit that rest is not the easiest thing to come by at many stages in our lives, as when a deadline looms, or when one is home alone with toddlers, or when one project runs into unexpected problems while another one impatiently waits. I would not be one of those who say, if you’re not keeping up at work just now – whatever your work may be -- you should feel doubly guilty if you’re not celebrating the Sabbath, too (although actually, just by being here, you are).

But wouldn’t it be great if all the busy people among us could find ways, however small at first, of creating islands of restorative calm amid the sea of obligations? A start, says Muller, would be to get the time; and if it means we earn less, so be it, says Muller. “Happiness grows only in the sweet soil of time.” [124] “The Sabbath is a revolutionary invitation to consider that the fruits of our labor may be found in the restful and unhurried harvest of time. In time, we can taste the sweetness of peace, serenity, well-being, and delight. The truth must be told: With all the money in the world, and no time, we have nothing at all.” [101]

That time is enhanced by whatever appeals to the senses. “Sabbath time is a sensual time, a feast of pleasures and sensations. The journey from work to rest, from action to Sabbath, is first felt in the body. During Sabbath time we sing with our mouths, we pray with our hands, we light candles, we smell the spices, we eat warm bread, we touch one another as we give and receive our blessings.... We feel the tangible presence of spirit and creation directly with our body.” [147-8]

But there are a lot of other ways of achieving a Sabbath state, and Muller gives a lot of examples, some as obvious as communion with nature or prayer, others newer to most of us, like the Sabbath box, a practice of some Jewish families, in which people put those things they do not want to use in the sacred time they seek to create: car keys, for instance, or the television remote, or something symbolic, like a floppy disc to stand for the computer you won't use for that while.

Then there is his friend who practices a spiritual discipline he named “slotha yoga,” in imitation of the names of traditional forms of yoga. In slotha yoga, you meditate by not getting up in the morning, but using that time to think about your dreams, your daydreams, the light in the room, whatever. [138]

However you arrive at your restful state, your Sabbath time, it is important to use it to appreciate things and not to nurse your complaints. Think of what you have, says Muller, not what you need [202], what has been given, not what's missing. [128]

Because Sabbath is not about the past and grievances, but about the future and hope. It “invites endless beginnings,” [189] says Muller, who adds that Sabbath “implies a willingness to be surprised by unexpected grace, to partake of those potent moments when creation renews itself, when what is finished inevitably recedes, and the sacred forces of healing astonish us with the unending promise of love and life.” [37]

I think rest does have the power to heal and surprise us, though I confess, as much as I do like to linger in bed when I can, Muller's rosy view of things is little much for me, not to mention his overheated prose, with all those nouns that cry out to be capitalized, in nineteenth-century fashion: Unexpected Grace (capital-U, capital-G, don't you think?), Potent Moments, Creation, Sacred Forces, Love, and Life. Me, I'm still remembering how nice it is if I can enjoy a few moments when somebody's late to meet me.

But I know the Sabbath and Muller are right in urging me and you toward healthier balances in our lives, where we have more times of *menuha*, which ancient rabbis said was what God created on the seventh

day: “tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose – rest, in the deepest possible sense of fertile, healing stillness.” [37]

I like to think that this church provides you a measure of *menuha* on many a Sunday, as it often does me. In fact, I like to think we offer here what Muller calls “one of the most precious gifts we can offer” – “to be a place of refuge, to be Sabbath to each other” [119] – both on the one hand as a church, as a place of Sunday worship, as a staff on call to comfort, and on the other hand, as a congregation, as individuals who each have to power to create times and places of rest and renewal for each other.

“At our best,” says Muller, “we become Sabbath for each other. We are the emptiness, the day of rest. We become space, that our loved ones, the lost and sorrowful, may find rest in us.... Not fixing, not harming, not acting. Quietly empty, we become Sabbath, where the sorrows of the world are safely poured and gently dissolved in the unfathomable immensity of rest, and of silence.” [183]

We all need that at times. May we find that Sabbath here, and among one another. Amen.