

“A Sigh of Relief”
Reverend Mary Cunningham Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Lesson: Mark 2:23-28

²³One sabbath He was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way His disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷Then He said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Second Scripture Lesson: Exodus 20:8-11

⁸Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.



Sermon: *A Sigh of Relief.*

Have you heard it? This week it took place between 2:30 and 3:30 on Thursday. If you were anywhere near the city, it was a collective sigh of relief! That sound of rushing wind that one pushes out of their lungs in a short, almost exhaustive burst. It is often heard when one finishes a long and sometimes time-consuming task. I myself have heard it in our house around midnight of Christmas Eve when two pastors finally sit and reflect on what has been a particularly lengthy day with multiple services, family dinner, and lots of last minute wrapping; it may be what one hears when three youth advisors gather with seven high school youth in the VERY early morning at the airport to begin their mission trip and then help them navigate TSA and the airport (some of them for the very first time) and then collapsing exhausted with their well-deserved cup of coffee at the gate to wait for boarding. But it most certainly was what could be heard – collectively – around 2:30 p.m. on Thursday as Columbus Public Schools joined the many other districts to officially begin Summer Break. That collective sigh of relief came from happy students, exhausted teachers, and anxious parents as it inaugurated in 10 weeks of freedom from daily homework, standardized tests, lunchroom mayhem, and early morning alarms. Yes, that collective sigh of relief announced with authority, Summer Break is here!

For most of us, that sigh is a welcome sign of all that summer offers: a change of schedule, opportunities for vacation, different activities, and friends and family, and clubs and sports; a time to slow down, change the pace of the school year and regain one’s focus. For many, summer seems to provide a nice respite from the busy that permeates the rest of the year.

We often hear today’s passage nestled among the other nine commandments from where they come. Remember that the Hebrew people had spent years as slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh. Their lives were difficult and conditions harsh but, God called Moses and sent him to lead them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the freedom of the Promised Land. Only once on the other side of that river, there was a delay. The Israelites found themselves wandering around the desert as the Promised Land was a significant distance away – both geographically and metaphorically. So, God provided structure and teachings while they

wandered. And perhaps God's most famous was the giving of those 10 Commandments to Moses for the people of Israel. They – the 10 Commandments - form the basis of a covenant between God and God's people. They offer structure and boundaries and a guide on how to live in community with one another all while being obedient to God who has saved them. The Commandments provide balance and order in a world that the Israelites are finding often is permeated with chaos.

Like much of the Old Testament, the Exodus passage contains language that recalls the Biblical story of the Israelites: Six days of labor followed by the seventh day of rest recalls the creation story in Genesis where God creates the world in six days and then takes the seventh as a day of rest. Layer that with the emphasis that EVERYONE rests – not just the wealthy but everyone in the household and in the community – the children, the servants, the animals and even those who reside in your community and are foreigners or aliens. This 4th Commandment clearly states EVERYONE is to rest on the seventh day. While in Egypt, the Israelites worked – non-stop; Pharaoh allowed no time for anyone to “rest”. But with the giving of the 10 Commandments – God shows that it is God's will that all take time for rest.

Through this understanding of Sabbath, God reminds us that even time is holy. God models for us time to rest and calls us to do the very same. Sabbath calls us to make deliberate time to celebrate our relationship not only to God but also to God's creation which includes everything God created in the world and our relationship to it.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters interpret Sabbath through their practice of Shabbat. From sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday evening, devout Jews do not do work or require others to do work. The beginning of their Sabbath or Shabbat, is a short family centered worship, then a meal together and then a day that is practiced in a variety of ways but centers on the idea of rest.

Our early Christian brothers and sisters shifted that practice to Sundays. It is a response to that first Easter morning when the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive having conquered death. Sunday mornings begin with worship in a local congregation thus sabbath practice would naturally fall after worship happens. We can see evidence of this in the places where stores are still closed on Sundays – Chick fil a, Hobby Lobby, here in Columbus – Cuco's – all closed on Sunday to protect the Sabbath. It used to be businesses did not compete for that sacred time. But for a variety of reasons, that has changed.

Today we live in a culture that is completely driven by time. We measure our success by how many hours we can work, how much product we can make. More hours worked equals more product equals more money equals more success. Involving our kids and our families in more activities seems to mean we are better parents. We are so busy we often are forced to schedule time for exercise, for dates with a spouse, for meals, for bedtime, for just about everything. There are full aisles in stores dedicated to organizers and planners. Google Play and the Apple store have multiple apps for calendars that are full of more than any of us can even use to schedule our lives away. Computers, Ipads, tablets, cell phones – they are all created to “save time” and a by-product is that we are now accessible and often scheduled 24-hours a day. And yet we constantly lament there is never enough time to get it all done. When I think about it it just makes me sigh, not in relief, but in exasperation!

Today, the larger Church is all about resurrecting old rituals. Reclaiming spiritual practices from the early church and identifying how they speak to the Church of today and in our time today. And surprise – one of those reclaimed spiritual practices is Sabbath!

Now Jesus was certainly Jewish and would have practiced Sabbath, but he also helped redefine what Sabbath meant. Throughout Scripture we see Him healing people on the Sabbath and claiming the importance of people over practice. We also see places in Scripture where He pulls off from the crowd to rest – to rejuvenate

- sometimes alone and sometimes with His disciples but almost always for what appears to be time much shorter than 24-hours. In Jesus, we see that Sabbath does not have to be ruled by the specific time of 24-hours, nor does it preclude the importance of work when it is for helping those in need. But we also see that Sabbath is necessary, important and intentional time that refocuses and reorients us back to the center. Intentional time that helps tip things back into the balance God intends for all of us.

Sabbath keeping is not something we do in order to please God; it is something we do because God knows it will make us whole, restore our spirits, and renew our lives.ⁱ It is not that schedules and work are bad...it is that they often become their own idols that lift up the world's morals of success...not God's. Schedules and calendars and work often rule our lives and block us from being able to slow down and recognize the sacred in the ordinary that is all around us.ⁱⁱ They block us from being able to see God.

So how do we do Sabbath? What is it that determines what is Sabbath and what is not? Is it taking a nap? Maybe. Is it spending a weekend in silence in a monastery? Could be. Is it taking a picnic to the park with friends? Possibly. The good news is there are no rules. We know it does not follow a minute-by-minute schedule or a set agenda. But we do know it is focused on being present where you are. The point is to intentionally stop the busy-ness of our lives – the constant checking of emails and updates and photos. To take a break from the errand running, the rush from point a to point b, the constant scheduling of every possible hour and make every effort to be present – truly present – with those in the world around us.

In her book Sabbath in the Suburbs, Pastor and Author, MaryAnn McKibbon-Dana shares her stories and learnings from a year of weekly Sabbath practice with her family of five. In it she shares this story:

They were at the zoo with several other families which meant there was a lot of hurry up and wait and lots of compromise. About mid-way through the trip, their middle child has had enough. She tried multiple strategies but for the middle, it was time to go. MaryAnn and Margaret were to go on home and the rest of the group would follow later, but the car they needed to take was parked quite some distance away which meant MaryAnn and her Margaret would have to walk. Now MaryAnn's policy is that she won't carry her children but she will allow them to go at their own pace and take breaks as they need. Well – that 20-minute walk turned into an hour. Dana writes: "...going at a child's pace is hard work all its own. It's tough to keep breathing normally and not get snappish when they request a break, having taken one only sixty seconds before. I sense that they do it to test me, to see whether I'm really serious about letting them take as long as they want. Margaret exploits this practice with particular relish. At one point we are stopping every fifty feet or so. We stop so she can try out the bench or perch on a handrail for a while. We slow down so she can walk on the curb, balance-beam style. We stop for a photo on the big ZOO sign at the entrance. We stop to make friends with a little dog in the neighborhood. I wish I could say it is enjoyable, but it is frequently excruciating. Let's just get there! I yell in my head. But as promised, we stop every time she wants. And wonder of wonders, she suddenly doesn't seem so tired anymore, and she's forgotten about her wet shirt. She wasn't tired in the sense of physical fatigue. She was tired of having to conform to an entire group's pace, interest, and schedule. It is so rare that she gets to be completely in charge of our agenda.... That weekend, the walk from the zoo to the car is my most significant Sabbath moment. It isn't easy, and it doesn't always feel good. Like many Sabbath times I've had this year, it is beneficial and uncomfortably itchy at the same time. But there is a certain wonder in glimpsing Margaret's pace without outside forces intervening."ⁱⁱⁱ

What Dana hits on here is Sabbath can happen in the unlikeliest of places. It isn't some grand elaborate thing we plan or do. Rather it is something for which we make space and invite in. It is an attitude or mindfulness that turns the ordinary into the sacred. For most of us, Sabbath is not a natural part of our lives. In fact, our world seems to do everything to make it unnatural. But it is possible. To do so, we must let go of the schedule, of the agenda, of the expectations and allow ourselves to stop and just be present. We must let go of the rigid control and be open to the "yes" of the unknown. And yet sabbath must be intentional as it doesn't happen organically. So yes, at first, you will have to plan to have sabbath! I don't mean plan how it will happen – but at least block-off the time. For most of us this is hard, for some of us, it is excruciating but for all of us, it is important to help us restore the balance that God intended for all of us from literally the very beginning of time!

So guess what? You knew it was coming – my challenge to all of us this Summer is to make time for sabbath each week. Now, I don't mean take-off every Sunday from church and call it sabbath – remember, sabbath grows out of our connection to God and if we don't practice regular worship, we lose that. It is helpful to remember that it is called "practicing sabbath." Like an athlete learning a sport or a pianist learning new music, we have to practice over and over and over again. It will likely feel very awkward the first few times we try it. In fact, we will likely bumble along trying to figure out "are we doing it right", but like anything you practice, it ultimately becomes easier and more ingrained into your muscle memory.

So where do you even start? First – set a time – Sunday afternoons would be great...but that may not be possible for some of us. Maybe it is a weeknight – from dinner Monday until bedtime; maybe it is an early morning; and then just do it – go out back and laying your hammock and watch for cloud shapes with your child; say yes to the last minute invitation to head to Hocking Hills for a hike with friends; Snuggle-up on the couch reading a good book; eat dinner with family or friends and leave your tv and tablets off and your phone tucked into your pocket THE WHOLE TIME. It will be uncomfortable at first – but who knows what will come from it?

At the end of her family's year-long Sabbath experience, Dana summarized their learnings. Practicing Sabbath did not transform us into perfect disciples with a perfect life. Life still happens. But she is quick to say she found deepened relationships with family and friends; she found herself to be more patient and flexible and definitely more present every day – not just on the Sabbath. Her family was kinder to each other. They were kinder to those they met. They found life was not as anxiety producing and they approached the rest of their days of the week with more patience and understanding and found themselves one step closer to the life God intends. And – they are still practicing Sabbath!

Who knows what will happen when we practice Sabbath? But a little more kindness sounds pretty good right now. I'm not sure about you but I can always use more patience and flexibility. And being closer to God – well count me in. And maybe, just maybe, at the end of the summer instead of an exhausted sigh of relief ... we are able to hear a collective sigh of contentment. From each other and from God.

All power, glory, and honor are Yours, O God, in this world and the next. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/3/31/why-do-we-keep-sabbath/>

ⁱⁱ Dana, MaryAnn McKibben. Sabbath in the Suburbs (The Young Clergy Women Project) (pp. 93-94). Chalice Press. Kindle Edition

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*