

Natalie W. Bell
 2nd Sunday of Lent
 March 5, 2023

Sabbath as Celebration and Delight
Matthew 11:28-12:13

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are **weary and are carrying heavy burdens**, and I will give you **rest**. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is **easy, and my burden is light**.”

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” ³ He said to them, “**Have you not read what David did** when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ How he entered the house of God, and they^[a] ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple **break the Sabbath** and yet are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is **lord of the Sabbath**.”

⁹ He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰ a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “**Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?**” so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² **How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

What words do you associate with the **word Sabbath?**

Sunday? Worship? Church? Judaism? Rules? Blue laws?

Do you have a **positive or negative** idea about Sabbath in your mind?

I know for me I don’t think of it as rules and regulations,

But I do think of **fear and guilt—fear** that I won’t get everything done in 6 days, and **guilt**—for not being available for work or church members 24/7!

In the PW Horizons Bible study entitled “*Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God’s Gift of Rest and Delight*”, Carol Betchel talks about how much we need Sabbath, but ***how much we resist it!***

I wonder, how often ***do you resist the idea of Sabbath?***

I wonder ***why?***

What are you resisting?

What feelings or experiences are you ***avoiding?***

Norman Wirzba, in his great book “*Living the Sabbath*” talks about how the average American enjoys a high standard of living, but we don’t seem to be enjoying it very much—because of our ***frantic pace***. He writes:

“Many of us submit to daily schedules that keep us moving at a soul-blistering, exhaustion-inducing pace, and .. to-do lists that invariably leave us stretched or stressed to the breaking point” Norma Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), pg. 19

A soul-blistering pace.

That’s pretty serious, isn’t it?

Last week we talked about Sabbath as a time for ***soul-care***,

And soul-union with God.

Wirzba declares us ‘***soul-sick***’ and says that the cure is Sabbath.

Jesus says he will give us rest in Matthew 11.

What do you want ***rest from***---right now?

What ***heavy burdens*** are you carrying?

And, what would it mean for you to ***receive*** that kind of rest?

Ever had a doctor say to you: ***‘You may be dehydrated and not know it’?***

The thing about dehydration is that by the time we’re thirsty, we are already getting dehydrated!

The ***first signs*** of dehydration may be fatigue, or even hunger, but what we really ***need is water***.

We don’t often think about dehydration, unless the weather is hot, or we’re working outside, but the truth is we can be dehydrated at any time.

What if the ***same is true for our SOULS?***

Bradley P. Holt, in his book, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, writes about ***soul-dehydration***.

Holt says that we might feel restless, anxious or depressed “*and try to **satisfy our needs** with retail therapy, a chocolate fix, or unhealthy relationships, when what **we really need** is to know that we are loved, that we belong, that we are not ... alone and without resources, that **God is with us.**”*

Just like the Israelites in the wilderness got thirsty,
and God provided water from a rock,
we too get thirsty not just for water, **but for God.**
We do thirst for God.

Like the woman at the well in Samaria,
Who said to Jesus, “**Sir, give me this water**”.

Teri McDowell Ott says that **thirsty people are in our pews**, “*Jeniah has had a recurrence of breast cancer. Her body is thirsty for healing, her heart is thirsty for hope. Doug knows his drinking is out of control. His thirst for alcohol disguises the reasons he turned to drink in the first place, the stress off his job, the grief of his broken marriage. Anya’s a working mom of twin toddlers. Her social media algorithm knows her thirst, offering up life hacks and....meals delivered to her door that she can’t afford...*”

<https://pres-outlook.org/2023/02/third-sunday-of-lent-march-12-2023/>

What are **the signs that YOU are thirsty for God?**

What are your signs of **spiritual dehydration?**

And what **might help quench** that thirst?

What if Sabbath could help our thirsty souls?

Sabbath, as we heard last week, is known in Judaism as the ‘crown of creation’,
and a ‘bride’ that we welcome each week.

Carol Betchel says that Sabbath is not a day
that we just **keep, observe, or honor.**

It is a day we **celebrate! A day of delight!**

Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God’s Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-2023, pg. 15.

What does it **mean to YOU**, that Sabbath is a day to **celebrate?**

What **keeps you from celebrating** Sabbath?

Ruth Haley Barton says in her book, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, that Sabbath starts in creation with God, and then acts as a bridge in the 4th commandment, between our relationship with God,

and our relationships with one another.

Sabbath then becomes about *rest and remembering God's deliverance*.

Sabbath becomes *a day of worship* because God made it a *holy day*.

Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 65-69.

Sabbath started as a Friday-Saturday observance for Jews,

but after Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the empire, Christians started worshiping and observing Sabbath on *Sundays*.

Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-2023, pg. 33-34.

The question for us is--

how do we *encourage people to celebrate the Sabbath on Sundays?*

I remember reading years ago that more Americans are in a home improvement store on Sunday mornings than in worship.

I think the same could be said for any number of activities, other than church.

Blue Laws used to keep people from shopping or working,

But today people do *everything* on Sundays.

It is *no longer different* from other days of the week—*unless we MAKE IT SO*.

So how do we encourage *individuals and families to celebrate Sabbath?*

I think we can start with offering a space for people to be *fed spiritually*.

If people know they will leave worship with something for their *souls*, that makes a difference.

And then we *educate one another* about Sabbath.

Especially the part about *celebration and delight*.

For Sabbath is about *saying YES to God, to life, to relationships* more than it is about saying NO to work.

And we realize that Sabbath *may not be on Sundays* for some people or their families. The important thing is to *celebrate it*, not be legalistic about it.

Barton says that Sabbath is an opportunity for God to '*mend our lives*'.

She admits that Sabbath rest can be *challenging*,

because we are bringing our lives and hurts to God.

Sometimes Sabbath brings up *feelings of sorrow* or sadness or loss.

But that's *ok*.

Sabbath is the time to find the *healing and wholeness* that God wants for us.

Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 71.

This is why celebrating Sabbath in our families and our church family is so important—because then we *see that we are NOT ALONE*.

God is with us, and we are with one another on this journey of Sabbath rest!

Jesus says to each of us, *Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* ²⁹ *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* ³⁰ *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”

Sabbath is *more than just a time to stop*.

Jesus is serious about giving us *HEALING and wholeness through Sabbath rest!*

What kind of healing and wholeness *do YOU need* right now?

Sabbath is a YES to rest.

What do Jesus’ words about rest mean to YOU?

What would it take for you to say *Yes, Jesus!*

I will give you my burdens and receive your rest!

Think for a moment about *how you could do that!*

For some, this is going to involve *unplugging* from technology, to truly find the rest and delight of Sabbath!

This may sound like *blasphemy* to modern ears.

But not only do we need to *shut down our minds and REBOOT* on the Sabbath, *We need to UNPLUG.*

Barton suggests a *‘tech Sabbath’*,

and even a special *“Sabbath box”* where you can put your phone and computer during the Sabbath time!

She talks about the freedom of life without a phone beside you 24/7.

How even a phone on silent *disconnects* us when we are with others, and *distracts* us when we are alone!

Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 56.

We’ve all been in a *restaurant* and seen whole families on their phones, right?

We know that even a phone *turned down*, is still a distraction!

Our technology truly takes away from *real conversation and quality time!*

Barton quotes Dr. Larry Rosen, a psychologist and computer educator, who has written the book *iDisorder: Understanding our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming It's Hold On Us*. In it he suggests that our technology is strongly connected to things like narcissism, OCD, ADHD, depression, anxiety, panic, and even mania! Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 55.

I always found it interesting that some of creators of the most innovative technology ***don't allow their children*** to spend much time on it!

Barton also cites Ed Cizewski—and how social media apps are actually designed to become invasive, habit forming, and compulsive...

They are designed to be ***toxic, addicting, and manipulative***, depriving us of choice and free time through those habit-forming feedback loops of reactions and notifications!

Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 54.

Yikes!

That is not a description of ***rest, celebration, or delight, is it?***

So, how do we find ***freedom?***

What if we start by taking a true Sabbath!

Sabbath is a YES to life.

In Matthew 12, Jesus' disciples are plucking grain on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees are angry about it.

Jesus responds by saying look, David and his companions even ate the bread from the temple on the Sabbath!

And priests work on the Sabbath!

In other words, there are always exceptions because Sabbath is first and foremost about saying ***yes to life***, not just a no to work.

Jesus goes even further to ***heal the man*** with the withered hand, on the Sabbath, in the synagogue. The Pharisees ask him:

"Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him.

And Jesus says if one of your sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath, you pick it up!

How ***much more valuable are we?***

Of course it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

And then he heals the man, right in front of them!

Sabbath is a Yes—to life, healing and wholeness.

Jesus says that he is the ***Lord of the Sabbath.***

Jesus is the YES.

This week I was thinking about why the Pharisees were after Jesus.

They clearly saw him as breaking Sabbath law,

But what if realized ***they needed to reevaluate their OWN Sabbath practices?***

What if, ***like us,*** they realized they needed to ***find that Yes in Sabbath?***

Sabbath is about Celebration and Delight.

What would that look like in ***Your life?***

How can you ***celebrate*** life and faith?

How can you enjoy creation?

How can you enjoy time with friends and family on Sabbath?

Sabbath is NOT a new job or task for our long to-do list!

Sabbath is about—rest.

And it's ***not always easy.***

But we shouldn't approach it as a ***task***—

because Sabbath is more about ***BEING*** than doing.

Remember that the word Sabbath means—***stop.***

So, we should ***stop trying to AVOID Sabbath,***

And we should ***stop trying to make Sabbath a PROJECT or a job.***

Instead, Carol Betchel suggests we set a 'boundary' around the time we will use as Sabbath—whether that is a few hours, or a whole day.

And then within that ***'sacred circle'***

we stop our work, and rest--we celebrate, and delight.

Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-2023, pg. 17.

That's the meaning of the Play-Do you received today!

It's a reminder of the ***celebration and delight*** of Sabbath!

How Sabbath is time to rest and rejoice, to delight in life!

For me, Sabbath is the time for God's Word, and prayer,

And, time to quilt and sew, hang out with friends and family.

I often take a walk with a good friend,

and enjoy good conversation, and God's creation on the Sabbath.

Poet Wendell Berry writes about *leaving our work behind* on the Sabbath:

*I go among the trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
Around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
Where I left them, **asleep like cattle.***

Wendell Berry, *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013, pg. 7.

A few minutes ago, I asked what *words you associate* with Sabbath.

I wonder if you can now hear these words:

Rest

Healing

Celebration

Delight

Friends, hear the Good News of the Gospel today:

We have been given a *great gift* in Sabbath rest—

May we *surrender* our work,

And receive the *rest, healing and wholeness* of Jesus.

And may we see Sabbath as *Celebration and Delight!*

For the gift of Sabbath, all God's people can say together: Amen!