

12 February 2017

Finding Joy . . . Through Sabbath

Isaiah 58:13-14; Mark 2:23-27

During their years in exile in Babylon, the Israelites looked back at their heritage to find ways to be God's people even without a temple or capital city. They found the commandment to observe the sabbath, and it became one of the cherished marks of their faith. We read now these words of the Prophet of the Exile, found in Isaiah 58:13-14:

*¹³ If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honourable;
if you honour it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

The commandment to observe the sabbath remained a distinguishing mark of the Jews even after they returned from exile and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple. It was still a topic of conversation in Jesus' time, in fact. Here is one of those conversations, from Mark 2:23-27.

²³ One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; 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.'

Looking for life rules in scripture can be problematic. The books of our Bible were composed over a span of at least a thousand years, by the hand of very different personalities, so there are few rules that are presented consistently. Take treatment of foreigners: the Torah repeatedly tells Israel that they must treat immigrants fairly, granting them the same justice and privileges as Israelites. If anything, Israel is to be especially compassionate toward immigrants. After all, Israel too was once a stranger in a strange land. But then, elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, we see divine commands to wipe out all foreigners. We see people like Nehemiah, who became Governor of Judea and immediately began building a wall and excluding foreigners. Finally, though, in the New Testament, we have Jesus and Paul reaching out to people of all backgrounds and tearing down walls. So, as I said, scripture isn't always easy. A good rule of thumb, which works in this case, is to give precedence to the example and teachings of Jesus, but you still have to deal with the Holy Wars and Nehemiah somehow.

So it's a relief when you actually find one rule that is affirmed uniformly throughout scripture. And here's one: Honor the sabbath. Set aside one day in seven to do no work. And yes, it is *all* through scripture, starting with the theological poem of Genesis 1, where God creates the heavens and the earth in six days and rests on the seventh. Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, but it was actually given to the Israelites before the others, when God began to provide manna in the wilderness. Even before they received the big ten, they were told only to gather the manna on six days. The sabbath command received a new life in the days of the great prophets, for whom it became one of the premier signs of faithfulness to God's covenant. Finally, Jesus himself affirmed the sabbath. Yes, he thought the scribes had taken it too far in some ways (more on that later), but in both his words and his own actions, he honored the original idea of sabbath rest. So we have one! A consistent rule that is woven throughout the whole of our Bible!

Which we consistently ignore. Actually, there are two of the Ten Commandments that we like to pretend don't exist. One of them is the one about not coveting what belongs to our neighbor, which we *obviously* can't keep inasmuch as our entire economy depends on our coveting things we don't have. The other one is this one: sabbath. It just feels . . . un-American.

You see, we value hard work and success, making diligence a religious virtue, and we always have. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the sociologist Max Weber wrote about how the early Puritan immigrants to America took hard work (and the resulting material success) as marks of God's favor, signs of being God's elect. That attitude toward work has been transmitted to us ever since. Ben Franklin: "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise." Thomas Edison: "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." No insult is worse than "lazy." We are suspicious of anyone we suspect of not working as hard as we do, which is why Americans frown at government assistance and even church benevolence as "handouts" to "freeloaders" and "welfare queens." (By the way, those of you who have volunteered at the Community Meals or Personal Needs Closet know better: our typical guest is someone who works two or three jobs and still doesn't make enough, or maybe a single parent who works part-time because she can't afford child care.) But the point is that to us, work is a moral business, and the idea of spending a whole day not working can feel a little bit like taking a whole day of not being virtuous.

So we work. A lot. And by American ingenuity, we have innovated our way to a place where we can and do take our work with us everywhere we go, all the time, on our laptops, tablets, and phones. Even on vacations, when we remember to take vacations, we are likely to start out each day answering work emails. Our work is how we know who we are, how we define ourselves. This used to be especially true of men, but increasingly women are breaking through that glass ceiling and achieving the same level of unhealthy workaholicism as men, which I think we can all agree is progress. Plus they do it for less money, so really impressive.

Well, you get my point. From the perspective of *the entire Bible*, this is a deeply rooted sickness of our society. Last week I started a series on joy, and I talked about clearing away the barriers to joy that we tend to put up. I talked about de-cluttering our lives from our focus on possessions and our obsession with politics as a bloodsport. I called for perspective, stepping back and asking ourselves, "Do I need that big screen TV? Or that newer model car? Or more

clothes?” Or the perspective of asking ourselves, “Will this latest action by the political party I oppose *really* destroy democracy in America? Given that the last three things that I was told would destroy our nation actually haven’t done so?” We need perspective, because living with fear and anger destroys any chance of knowing the joy that God intended us to experience. Well, sabbath is like perspective – but deeper, more fundamental, and harder, because it involves not just changing your mindset but your behavior. Sabbath is stepping back and looking with perspective on one of the things most likely to consume our lives: our need to be busy, our obsession with being productive, our belief that driving ourselves to exhaustion is admirable. Sabbath is saying, “Stop.” Sabbath is living apart from earning a living. Sabbath is learning to define ourselves by who we are in the eyes of God, instead of just by what we do at the office.

Of course it’s not quite that easy. Just saying, “Take a sabbath” doesn’t mean we know how. And we do need to get over some misconceptions. Sabbath does not necessarily mean doing nothing. Yes, it starts by cutting out some things. As our passage from Isaiah 58 puts it: stop *pursuing your own interests on my holy day . . . going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs*. Sabbath is putting aside the things that we do in our own interest, especially those things around our business. This might mean turning off our phones for a time. (Did that idea cause panic? If so, ask yourself why.) Or sabbath might require getting out of town where your boss can’t find you. But it isn’t just about what you stop doing. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if you empty out a sabbath time without putting something else there, all your job-cares will just come rushing back in with a vengeance. No, sabbath involves putting aside the self-serving job layer of your life so that you can acknowledge and practice more important things. One of those things should be prayer. Another should be time spent with someone you love. After that, what you fill your sabbath time with will depend on you. What restores you? What are the things you do that make you forget to check your email? Go on a walk in the woods. Plant flowers. Cook something. Go for a five-mile run. (Hey, I said it would be individual. There really are people who find joy in that.) Build something in your garage. Read something that will not help you in your career. Go out with people you love for a meal, if you can a place to eat that doesn’t have a blaring television in every corner. Good luck with that, by the way. Sabbath is clearing out a clean, well-lighted space for things that matter. In those things, perhaps, joy can catch up with us.

One caution here. As you seek meaningful things with which to fill your sabbath, it’s probably best to avoid things to do with church. And yes, it hurts me to say that. Do include prayer in sabbath, but the truth is that institutional religion is *terrible* at sabbath and always has been. In Jesus’ day, the leaders of the temple had filled sabbath with a list of rules to be followed legalistically or face sanctions. When Jesus’ disciples grabbed some kernels of grain to eat on a sabbath, those religious leaders went into full tizzy. “That’s agricultural labor!” And Jesus replied, “Are you crazy? Why do you think we even have sabbath? God gave it to us for our own well-being. You think being hungry is a good plan for that?” The scribes had completely missed the point. The American church is even worse: we’ve forgotten that there ever was a point. We have made church a beehive of activity, another place to channel our dysfunctional approach to life and work. We measure out our religious lives in meetings, calendar sessions, and task-forces. (And why is it, by the way, that we only have *task-forces*? Why are there no *relationship-forces*?) We have scheduled ourselves out of sabbath, out of silence, and effectively out of prayer. There’s a whole series of books available for American Christians called: “One Minute Prayers,”

designed to help us to pray without ever slowing down. But that's old hat. Who has time for books now? You can get prayers sent to you daily on your phone. Yes, there's an app for that.

God help us. We are busy beyond reason, and there is no joy in busy-ness. Yes, it is possible to find joy in your job, and I hope you do, but even if you do, if that work is all that you do, you will kill whatever joy it brings. We need sabbath. So start small. Set aside a block of three or four hours each week where you are away from work and away from any access to work. Include a time of prayer in that block. Call or write or simply talk with someone you love. Find the thing that restores you most, whether it is in nature, in a quiet room, or in a crowd. Don't be legalistic about it – that kills joy as well – but stick with it, and over time, you may find it possible to have sabbath for a whole day.

What a concept. Somebody should write a book about that.