



STOP IT!

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Glenda Simpkins Hoffman
Mark 2:23-28

July 3, 2016

A month ago, I returned from a CenterPoint Discovery journey to Ireland. I expected it to be a wonderful time traveling with 25 people from our church, but honestly, it far exceeded my expectations. I have spent a lot of time thinking about why it was so wonderful and why I had such a deep experience of the presence of God all of that time we were there. I think part of it was that the journey provided a delightful change of pace. It was more than a vacation or a tour; it was a sacred time that opened me to God.

Like you, I have many varied responsibilities and tasks that I engage in at home and at work. They are good things that I enjoy and am called to do. But while on the trip, I had the chance to just stop it—stop my normal routine to make room for other things. While I had some responsibilities, I stopped being a leader in the way I am at home and at work and enjoyed being led by others. I stopped using and receiving words in ways that are normal for me. I stopped reading, journaling, watching TV, listening to the radio, and answering some e-mails. I hadn't planned this, but I sensed this was not a time for words. In essence, I stopped *doing* and enjoyed *being* present—to God, to community, to what was happening in the here and now. For many reasons, I was really ready for that.

"You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing total contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God"

John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping*

Being in Ireland was a spiritually rich time for me that God used to ignite my passion for Him. I am truly grateful for this gift of grace, and I came back wondering what this might mean for my life back at home here in Vienna. Is it possible to experience God's presence with me as I did in Ireland? One of our daily devotions while on the trip challenged me again with words from Dallas Willard that I had read a year ago: "You must arrange your days so that you are

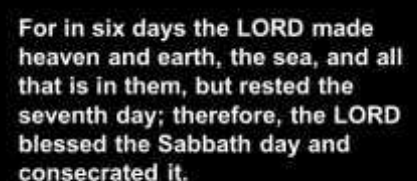
experiencing total contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God" (John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping*).

I'm grateful that we are now in our summer sermon series exploring practices and rhythms that help open us to God so He can do what only He can do in igniting our passion for Him. He wants to do this. He longs for us to experience contentment and joy in our everyday life with Him. The only question is whether we want it, too.

We live in an interesting time when there is more to know, more to do, more to have but seemingly less time to enjoy life as we envision it. How do we get away from the constant pressure of more to do than we have time to do, the exhaustion that results from our endless busyness, and the lack of joy that results from trying to manage all the details of our lives and maintain some sense of control? I think I know the answer, and it is as old as time itself: Sabbath. It's not just a good idea, it's actually the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

In Exodus 20:8-11 we read:

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work.... For 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.”



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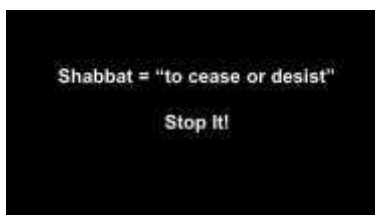
Exodus 20:8-11

After creation, “God took a break, like an artist stepping back from her easel and admiring her painting. God took a breather, like a weary factory laborer stepping out for some fresh air. And we are invited to do the same” (Don Postema, *Catch Your Breath*).

Please understand that work is good. We were created for work. We are called to work. And when we do our work to the glory of God, it is a form of worship. But, we are called to work for six days a week. On the seventh day, we are to stop it. This rhythm follows the model of God in creation and his instruction to the nation of Israel.

While in Ireland, we had the great joy of hearing Celtic music and seeing Irish dancers. I noticed that the dancers were rarely all dancing at once; they were constantly rotating on and off the stage. Because of the intense aerobic nature of Irish dancing, it was necessary to stop—to stop dancing in order to catch their breath before beginning again. That speaks not just to dancing but to life.

Most of us are engaged in intense levels of activity related to our lives and work. The problem comes when we don't stop it. We keep going, and going, and going, in our 24/7 culture as if we are the Energizer Bunny. But we're not. We are human. We are living creatures. We have limits. Sabbath is an invitation from God to stop it!



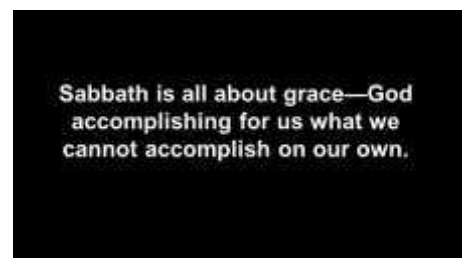
The word *Sabbath* comes originally from the Hebrew verb *Shabbat*, which means “to cease or desist.” It is a word about our work. Our work is not meant to rule us. We are to rule our work. The way we do that is to stop it! Stop working.

Eugene Peterson, insists, “Nothing less than a command has the power to intervene in the vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busy-ness.” He goes on to say that “Sabbath is that uncluttered time and space in which we can distance ourselves from our own activities enough to see what *God* is doing. If we are not able

to rest one day a week, we are taking ourselves far too seriously.”

Think about what it would have meant to the Israelites who had lived as slaves. For centuries, they had been told what to do, when to do it, and how long to do it. Their burden was heavy and never-ending. They were valued by their oppressors for what they could do or produce. Think about what a relief and joy it would have been for these former slaves to hear the words that one day in seven they were free to stop it—stop their work.

Sabbath was a sign of their covenant with God. They were not to be defined by what they could do or produce. They would be defined by God. When we stop our doing on the Sabbath, we are free to remember God, what He has done for us, and who we are in Him. Our value rests in this truth: We belong to God. We are unconditionally loved by God and saved by His amazing grace. You see, Sabbath is all about grace—God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish on our own. And so we are free from the patterns of this world to live a new and different kind of life—a rhythm that reflects the created order and the command of God.



Sadly, the passage Steve read earlier from Mark makes clear how humans can take a very good thing like the gift of Sabbath and turn it into rule-keeping. The Pharisees were serious religious people. They were strict Sabbatarians who were against doing work on the Sabbath. So when Jesus and his disciples plucked grain, the Pharisees were not happy. They cared about obeying the law and doing the right thing, but they missed the point. Sabbath is so much more than being against doing work on a certain day. It's about living the essence of what life was created for. It's about grace.

"The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Mark 2:27-28

As we can see from our New Testament passage, Jesus clarifies the intent of the commandment: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." God's design of the Sabbath rhythm was never meant to impose a legalistic duty, but to provide a gift that is to be received regularly with joy and enthusiasm. Jesus is Lord, even of the Sabbath.

One Hebrew scholar insists that the basic meaning of the biblical Sabbath is an "acceptance of the sovereignty of God." We always try to be in control of our lives, but the seventh-day observance reminds us that *Jesus* is the Lord of all things—including time.

The legalism of the Pharisees is not our problem today. Most people—even Christians—don't practice Sabbath at all. Why? Why don't we stop our work?

An answer came to me a few weeks ago at my son's end-of-the-year strings' concert. Before each selection, the teacher would explain what element of music she had been working on with the children and how it was highlighted in that particular piece of music about to be played. Before one of the pieces she said enthusiastically, "We have been working on rests, which is one of the hardest parts of music, but also one of the most exciting."

That resonated deep inside me. Resting is hard. Practicing Sabbath is hard. Why? It's hard to stop because we tend to find our identity more in our *doing* rather than *being* in relationship with God. Our ability or inability to stop our work to keep the Sabbath reveals what we believe—about God, ourselves, and our lives. If we truly believe our value comes as a result of God and His grace, we can stop working

one day a week and enjoy being a beloved child of God. This is not rigid legalism; this is about receiving and relying on grace. What does it look like?

We need to stop it! Stop working. I've been fairly good at not working since my college days. As a perfectionist, I struggle with knowing when enough is enough. I have found true freedom in setting a boundary, stopping my studying and writing and planning and working. I can say, "Good enough is good enough."



But the command goes much deeper than the legalistic sense of not working. We also must stop needing to achieve and produce. I can stop my work—my vocational job—but still feel the compulsion to accomplish something else—cleaning, yard work, or any number of home projects. I'm a list person, and tasks never end. One of my great pleasures in life is reading, but even that can become a list to get through. I'm learning to let go of my to-do lists and let God take care of me—not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up my feeble attempt *to be God* in my own life.

We also need to stop being anxious, worried, or tense. This is even harder for me because my mind is always churning, thinking, analyzing, planning, and often worrying. It's hard to stop the hamster wheel of my mind. I have to be very intentional about taking control of my thoughts.

Some important practices include putting down my phone and not turning the computer on for a day. I don't read e-mails that might cause me to start thinking about work. I also try to get my house in some semblance of order so I'm not focused on all the cleaning and the endless projects that need to be done at home. If anxiety still continues to plague me, I

try to write down my concerns as quickly as possible and give them to the Lord in prayer.

I have to confess I have been struggling with quieting my mind on my Sabbath day. So I have started watching a movie to distract myself by getting engaged in another story rather than my own. There is nothing wrong with watching a movie. However, the problem for me is that though I may have stopped working, I may not have really stopped worrying. I've only delayed it.

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Understand that Sabbath is not running away from problems, but the opportunity to receive grace to face them. To celebrate the Sabbath is to rejoice in God's presence with us. I'm seeking to be more intentional in what would help me not only turn from work and worry but to turn to God. This includes more time in silence and solitude, meditation on Scripture, journaling, and spending intentional time with family and friends. I have even received renewing prayer to help me get at the false belief behind the anxiety that keeps my mind churning.

Some here may find it difficult to stop striving for things and being possessive. Just as the Jews were forbidden to gather manna on the Sabbath, so we try to stop needing to provide for our future. We stop buying so we can also stop thinking about what *we* want and instead focus on what *God* wants. As we keep the Sabbath, instead of our possessing things or space, the holy time of the Sabbath possesses us. As Abraham Heschel says, "We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things."

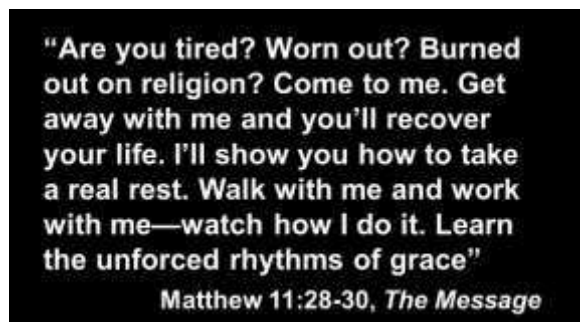
I believe Sabbath is one of the most exciting parts of the spiritual life because “Most of the things we need to be most fully alive never come in busyness. They grow in rest” (Mark Buchanan, *The Holy Wild: Trusting in the Character of God*).

Sabbath provides the time and space to truly rest—physically, emotionally, intellectually, relationally, and spiritually. This is the complete resting of our whole being trusting in God and his grace.

Jesus extends one of the most beautiful invitations to those who follow him. It is a welcome relief to frazzled, preoccupied people.

“Are you tired? Worn out?

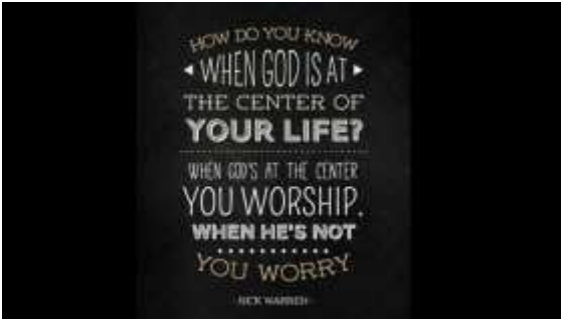
Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*).



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Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*

This passage could be the theme verse for our entire series on spiritual practices, but it is certainly true of Sabbath. Sabbath time is an opportunity not just to stop our work to enjoy a day off filled with recreation or doing whatever we want. It’s an opportunity to get away with God as we learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

What are these unforced rhythms of grace? They are life-giving practices that connect us to God and help open us to receiving and relying on His grace. Sabbath helps us to make time for many of the practices we are talking about this summer, including reading the word, prayer, silence, and solitude. But I want to highlight one in particular. First and foremost, Sabbath is a day to worship God. Rick Warren



asks, “How do you know when God is at the center of your life? You worship. When He’s not, you worry.”

Worship was the center of the life of the nation of Israel and continued with the early Christian church, though the Sabbath day was switched from Saturday to Sunday in honor of the Lord’s resurrection. As followers of Christ, we are called to embrace the value of worship as we gather weekly as God’s people.

Unforced rhythms of grace also include life-giving relationships. When we stop our work, we have time for such *inefficient* things as sitting quietly together and enjoying one another’s company, writing letters or making phone calls to distant loved ones, taking a walk with your spouse or a friend, and thinking about others and spending extra time in prayer for them or making gifts for them. The freedom of Sabbath time always makes us feel able to express our love, and it opens up our own creativity to discover new ways to be more connected with friends and family. We also have time to enjoy the blessing of Christian community—not only in worship but perhaps a small group, a meal, or some other shared activity.

Finally, the unforced rhythms of grace include life-giving experiences. We are free to do what brings joy, delight, and rest. I have friends who enjoy gardening, doing yard work, cooking a big meal, and sewing. For me that’s work. But I do enjoy walking in a park or garden, visiting a museum, or attending a concert. We are free to do whatever restores and renews us and helps us to connect with God and to others in life-giving ways. Sabbath provides time and space to experience the joy of being blessed and being a blessing to others.

After the wonderfully refreshing time in Ireland, I knew I needed to make some changes in my approach to life here in Vienna. Part of that means renewing and refreshing my practice of Sabbath, knowing it is a way of arranging my days so that I experience total contentment, joy, and confidence in my everyday life with God. I want that. I need that. Sabbath helps me.

In his book, *Catch Your Breath*, Don Postema writes, “When I wake up in the morning and look around, the world looks like a Renoir painting, everything a little

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blurred and out of focus. Then I fumble around, find my trifocals, put them on, and my world is back in focus. I can see more clearly what I'm doing and where I'm going. Sunday Sabbath time does that for my inner sight. It's an invitation to wake up and to focus on God through the spectacles of a Sabbath attitude.... Not that I completely forget about God during the week. But often the vision of God's presence gets blurred, my priorities get jumbled; my commitments seem unclear. My perspective narrows to the mundane. I'm often influenced by a *this-is-all-there-is-there-ain't-no-more* secularism; Sabbath helps me celebrate a *there's-more-than-meets-the-eye* reality.... It is a chance to lift our gaze to the sacred, to readjust our minds, realign our hearts, reset our priorities, clarify our commitments, and enlarge our perspective. We realize that there is another reality beyond the ordinary, eager to break through.”

I know that times are different, and that Sundays have become another day of obligations, and so the practice of Sabbath may look very different for many of us. You may be wondering how you can make this happen. Please don't leave feeling burdened. “Do as you can; not as you can't.”

Be realistic and start where you are, even if that is 30 minutes on a Sunday, then expand that time little-by-little.

Trust the Lord to show you each step of the way. You don't have to figure this out on your own; Jesus wants to show you how. Remember his invitation: "Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace" (The Message).

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Matthew 11:28-30