

“Bus pass to Eden”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
June 11, 2017

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

If I say the word *Sabbath*, what comes to mind?

Ask my wife Jenna, and you’ll hear about a small college town in rural Iowa, a fiefdom of Dutch Reformed theocracy, where it is literally a crime to pick a tulip. While in decline in most places around the United States, Sunday blue laws are still very much in effect in Orange City. Jenna could never figure out why so many men were installing floor drains in their garages until one day she realized they were all secretly washing their cars on Sunday—hidden from the Sabbath police who were determined to make you rest even if it kills you.

Chances are that’s what Sabbath is for many of us: boredom. A tedious, restrictive relic of the past.

In the American context, Sabbath always comes back to the Puritans. For them, Sabbath was a stern marathon, sweating the sin out of you. You went to church at 9 a.m., summoned by drums or horns. There, you sat through two services that went into the evening, listening to a pastor preach for upwards of four hours (twice) while sitting in an unheated meeting house on a pew without a back. And if that wasn’t enough to keep you awake, there was the tithing man, who carried a long wooden staff and would smack you in the head if you fell asleep.

Even positive images feel naive. Does today’s on-the-go lifestyle really have room for the old American Sunday—when time slowed down enough for church, family barbecues, and baseball in the sun? Who can afford to give up work, chores, and technology for 24 hours, debating the nuances of the Torah over candle light?

And, for that matter, who wants to? Sabbath means rules and limits to our freedom. It stands in counterposition to the American credo: do what you want, when you want.

Besides, didn’t Jesus violate the Sabbath, curing people, plucking grain, and generally criticizing the Pharisees for their religious legalism? If Jesus didn’t need the Sabbath, why do we?

Yet, this Sabbath mattered so much to Christian Sabbatarians that they chose to die alongside their Jewish brothers and sisters in Auschwitz at the hands of the Nazis rather than reject the Sabbath.

It matters so much today that we still don’t get mail on Sunday. A whole cornucopia of simplicity movements are now encouraging people to take technology sabbaths, consumer sabbaths, and carbon footprint sabbaths.

We need a sacred day of rest more than ever. Our schedules are overloaded, our minds are frenzied with work, our lives are rushed and divided, our communities and families are

disconnected, our phones constantly light up with demands for attention, and even our attempts to relax and escape prove ultimately unsatisfying.

In response, we keep trying to fill our time with more media, more things to buy, more vacations, more fried foods, more freedom. And it just keeps getting worse and worse. Because we don't need "more" of what we already have; we need something different.

Consider the analogy to vacation. I've tried the staycation, but I've found that I continue to think and stress about work; I end up doing chores and answering emails. It's a break, but it doesn't replenish me. If I want a true vacation, I need a change of scenery.

What applies to location applies also to time. We need what Jewish author Judith Shulevitz describes as "a different order of time."

To find that different order of time, we have to go back to the very beginning of time, to the creation of Sabbath—long before it became one of the 10 Commandments.

If we look again at the creation story in Genesis, we realize that God's resting on the seventh day isn't just tacked on at the end; it isn't just God plopping on the couch after a long week of work. It isn't just a "break" from creation.

Now you are probably accustomed to thinking that *you* were the goal of creation. But what if I were to tell you that Sabbath, not humanity, is the pinnacle of creation?

Look back at each day in the story. Each day brings—at least in the eyes of an ancient Hebrew priest—a more complex and important creation, progressing from plants to fish to birds to land animals, and then to humans. But God creates something after us. God creates Sabbath.

The reason I say God *creates* Sabbath is because of a pesky problem in the text, which says that on the seventh day, God "finished God's work" and *then* rested. In other words, for a short while, God continued working on the Sabbath.

Rabbi Genibah suggests that this is here to teach us that there is something profoundly active about Sabbath.

God isn't violating the Sabbath any more than Jesus ever did. Look back at those texts involving Jesus and the Sabbath. He observes the Sabbath. He discusses Scripture in the synagogue; he partakes in the Shabbat meal; he rests. But when he has an opportunity to help someone, to do good, or even just to enjoy life, he does that too.

Sabbath isn't about doing nothing. It's about living. It's about whatever brings together creation—whatever brings God, us, and the earth closer together.

What Jesus wanted the Pharisees to understand is that Sabbath, as God experienced it, in the moment of creation, wasn't a demand for sacrifice. It was a gift. It was mercy (see Matthew 12:1-8: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'). It was a window into life as it should be.

According to some rabbis, creation continued on the Sabbath. But this time, God wasn't creating objects or living things or even time; God was creating the reason for time, the reason for life itself. It was what God had been working toward since the very first spark. This is why the seventh day is the only day God blesses and makes sacred.

Because Sabbath is life as it was intended. It is Eden, paradise.

It is the goal of life that it be lived, that it be shared justly and universally, that it be returned to God, relished, and loved in every detail.

Sabbath is time to appreciate the goodness of creation, to say and affirm with God, "It is good."

We know we cannot dwell in this beautiful, holy place permanently. We exist outside Eden; we toil, we strive, we reach. But, one day each week, we are given a gift—a bus pass, if you will, back to Eden, back to creation. And we call that bus pass Sabbath.

Judith Shulevitz writes, "If adult life is divided, the Sabbath is when we become one—with our family, with our community, with our God. The Kabbalists say that on the Sabbath each of us is granted an additional soul, a *neshama yeterah*. I imagine that oversoul as a big, fleecy blanket."

What we're talking about is more than a break, more than a skiing trip, more than a Netflix binge. It is renewal. It is a sacred and different way of living outside of time. It is an invitation to feel joy and awe. It is the difference between distraction and life.

On Sabbath, in the mindful and prayerful presence of God, the whole world becomes church: here, the woods, the soup kitchen, the family dining table, a good book, a museum, an opera... *maybe not the mall.*

Jenna and I are trying this out. We want to know if there's a way to hold onto this gift despite all the modern pressures of life.

So this is what we have come up with: at least two days each month we will share a Sabbath. If an activity brings us closer to God, to each other, to ourselves, to the community, or to the earth, we can do it on the Sabbath. If it doesn't, if it's about accomplishment or work or mindless entertainment or profiting off others, then it's not Sabbath. If it doesn't get us talking with one another and with God, then it's not Sabbath. If it doesn't elevate the mind and expand the soul, then it's not Sabbath.

What falls under that rubric will look differently for each person. For some people, gardening is a chore, in which case it would not be done on the Sabbath. But for others, the act of digging their fingers into the soil and growing life evokes intimacy with God and creation, in which case it would be perfect for the Sabbath. For us, it means hiking, reading, taking an afternoon nap, praying, worshiping, talking over a meal, volunteering, definitely avoiding social media, email, phones, TV, and work.

Of course, even as I say that, you may be coming up with excuses for why you can't do this. But there will always be excuses. If you have kids, make it a family day. If you have elders you have to care for, involve them too. If you have to work seven days a week in order to survive, then help us change a corrupt economy that forces you to work too much for too little, and in the meantime, find half a day, or even just a few hours.

Because this gift of a different, unhurried order of time is for you too. It has to be for you too. Because it only works if it's for everyone, if it brings us together as a community, one with God.

Don't miss the bus. It's rounding the corner. It's sounding its horn and opening its doors. Jump in. You won't regret it.

Amen.