

The Rhythm of Life and Love

By: Meagan McLaughlin

June 2, 2024. Pastor Meagan preaches on the Sabbath, how it's not just another rule to follow but instead shows us that rest and play are essential to us, and all of creation.

Readings: [2 Corinthians 4:5-12](#), [Mark 2:23-3:6](#)

*** Transcript ***

Those of you who are parents, or have parents, or are children, or have children, or were children, have probably all heard it, or maybe you've said it at one time or another: “First do your homework. Then you can have screen time.” Has anybody heard that? Or TV time, or you can go outside and play, whatever it might be. So, the other "or" you might hear: “Clean your room, and then you can go outside.” So you do the work, and then you've earned some fun or rest time. I'm sure that sounds pretty familiar to all of us. And I admit, although I am an adult now and I don't have anyone setting those expectations for me, I still do this for myself. Housework, or yardwork, or homework, or work-work comes first, and then I can do something just for rest or for fun. I will have earned my down time.

And let's be honest, it can feel really good to accomplish that task, can't it — just like the major garden project we worked on this week — and then sit on the patio under the umbrella, admiring how good it all looks as the cats romp around in our yard around us. But this has its downside too, I think. This simple principle of earning our rest or fun guides the way we navigate our most basic human needs sometimes, without our even realizing it, and that's where we can sometimes get into trouble. We defer rest, or food, or fun, or even taking care of an aching back or a desperate need for water, until we've finished that “one more thing,” or just “ten more minutes, ten more minutes and then we're gonna take a break” until we feel like we've done enough to earn giving ourselves what we need. Karen and I have come to call this “opening cans of worms,” this phenomenon of doing one thing (dust and vacuum the sun porch), and then one more thing (organize the cat basket), and then one more thing (wash the windows and wipe out the sliding glass door tracks), until we're more ready to collapse than relax! Does that sound familiar to anybody?

We hear echoes of this principle in other ways, too. Although leaders in the synagogue in our gospel today don't say anything to Jesus about the man with the withered hand, we can easily imagine what they're thinking. “He shouldn't have come here. He should go to the doctor instead.” “This is the Sabbath. Why is he interrupting us today? He needs to come back a different day.” Or even, as was spoken aloud in several other gospel stories, “I wonder whether he sinned, or if it was his parents, to cause his withered arm.” You get the good you earn, right? And the man, others think, has not. Clearly.

And for the disciples, who are hungry on the Sabbath at the beginning of our story, the command to honor the Sabbath becomes a weapon used against them. They should have worked harder sooner, so that they would have the food they need on this day when God commanded us to rest. Sabbath rest is enforced on them, even if it means they will go hungry that day.

Through ministry at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis, I saw how this principle shows up even in well-meaning efforts to help those experiencing homelessness, hunger, and unemployment. Most support for permanent housing, for example, requires that a person be in successful recovery from addiction and mental illness, have stable employment with a steady sustainable income, and have documentation proving all of this in order to qualify. This means appointments with doctors, housing

managers, benefits coordinators, and others, all while keeping track of the required paperwork and getting it to the right place at the right time, which is challenging enough when you aren't staying on the street or in shelter. And if you have a criminal record, none of the rest of that seems to matter.

A person seeking food, or shelter, or heat, is told, "It's not the right time or day to ask for that. You'll need to come back." Or, "You need to get a job and provide for yourself." A parent bringing their child across the border to save them from violence and starvation in their home country hears, "You're not doing this the right way. You need to go back and wait. Go through the process."

The disciples, according to those who criticized them, should have gone hungry rather than gather grain on the Sabbath. The man with the withered hand, who was truthfully more disabled by the assumptions people made about him than he was by the hand itself, should have worn the label people gave him, rather than allow Sabbath healing that violated the law.

Jesus, as he so often does, challenges this whole notion — not once, but twice — in our gospel today. Faithful Jewish teacher that he was, he does not throw out the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Far from it. But puts it in its rightful place, reminding us (although he doesn't quite use these words today) that the greatest commandment of all is love. And love is the fulfillment of the law. The law always leads us to compassionate relationship with God and others, and Mark tells us that it was out of anger, and grief at their hardness of heart, that Jesus restored the man to the community. The Sabbath, Jesus claimed, was meant to serve creation in its relationship with God, not to be used as an excuse to judge those who are already struggling to fit in.

Sabbath practice, at its best, is not just another rule to follow. We celebrate baptism today with Mabel, and we're reminded that in our own baptisms, we're invited into a rhythm of creativity and rest that God, the creator of all things, lives out. Creation itself flows from day, to night, to day, and through the seasons that call for sowing and planting, then tending, then harvesting, then putting the earth to bed for the winter so it can prepare itself for another spring. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection shows us, as Paul wrote so eloquently, that even death brings us into closer relationship with Christ, who died and rose again that we might share the life that he came to give us. God made everything that is, called it good, and then rested on the seventh day. Baptism reminds us of that.

The command to practice the Sabbath teaches us that rest and play are essential to us, and all of creation. So whether you're satisfied at completing the work of the day, frustrated at things that did not go as planned, weary of the struggle and feeling that you will never earn the rest you so desperately need, enter into Sabbath rest today. Another day is coming, and all will be well. The Sabbath really is for us.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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