

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian church
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Luke 13:10-17

“Spiritual Practices: Keeping the Sabbath”

Good morning! It is so good to be back with you. I again want to thank all of you, the staff, and the session, for everything that you did for me to allow me to take the time that I needed to recover.

So, My original plan for the summer was to do a sermon series on spiritual practices based on Dorothy Bass’s book *Practicing Our Faith* and Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *An Altar in the World*. Both authors remind us that spiritual practices aren’t limited to prayer or Scripture reading. They can be found in everyday life—if we’re willing to slow down and notice God’s presence.

Friends, from time to time we all need some tools in our toolkit, we all need practices, to help us with our faith. We live in a challenging time. News comes at us constantly, alerts pop up on our phones, and crises happen halfway around the world. Sometimes we can feel helpless. This summer, I certainly did.

But I also had tools in my toolkit—practices that helped me get through. Over the next three weeks, I will share three practices that were most instrumental to me in my recovery. My hope is not to talk about me, but to give **you** a window—and some tools—to help you through your challenges.

The first practice is twofold: it’s the big umbrella of keeping the Sabbath, and under that, the smaller umbrella practice of saying yes and saying no. In other words: what do you have to say no to in order to say yes to God? What in your world is crowding out God? What do you need to make space for in your life so that you can say yes to God and not that which is sucking the life out of you

I spent the summer with a speech therapist. Who did not help me with my speech. But who helped me retrace those pathways in my brain that died When I had my stroke. She helped me with what she calls my executive level functioning skills.

Skills that, as you can imagine, I use a lot in my day-to-day life and here at the church. And she had to help me heal those pathways so I could regain those skills. Here was the trick though. After I would meet with her for an hour, My brain was exhausted. And the only way that I could recover from that exhaustion was to come home and nap. Which sounds wonderful on the surface. But I am not a napper. Preachers like to joke about their Sunday afternoon naps. I have never been one of those preachers that goes home and takes a Sunday afternoon nap. I do go home and watch re-runs of Law and Order and sit on my couch. But I don't nap. But this summer, I had to nap. I had to take brain breaks, As my speech therapist like to call them. And at first, as silly as it may sound. I felt guilty about that, like I should be doing something more. But I don't think it's all that silly because we are wired to do more. We are wired to be productive people. We value our worth, whether we like it or not, on how busy we are; especially we Protestants with our Protestant work ethic.

When I told my therapist how much I was sleeping, she said something that stuck with me: “Annie, the only time your brain has an opportunity to recover is when it sleeps. You have to nap in order to heal.”

So I did. And I stopped feeling guilty for not being productive. Because I was doing something—I was healing. I said no to my constant need to do more, and yes to the act of healing, so that I could let God in and get back to what I feel called to do.

Friends, this week you have homework. All I want you to do is think about what you need to say no to in order to say yes to God—to say yes to those things you are called to do.

I’m reminded of that beautiful quote from Frederick Buechner: “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

And if you think you cannot say no, remember even God rested. So certainly we can say no from time to time—to those things that are crowding out God and eating away at our time, and sucking the life out of us.

Which leads me to today's story From Luke. This story may sound a little familiar to you. Because it was covered in late August during one of the ponderings on a

passage. At first glance, this seems to be a straightforward story about healing. But I think it's a story about keeping the Sabbath. Jesus heals someone, he's criticized by religious authorities, and rebels against their strict rule-keeping. prompting Jesus to call them hypocrites and justify himself for doing the right thing. The authorities are put to shame and the crowd cheers Jesus for standing up to them.

Ok, got it. Jesus good, religious authorities bad. End of sermon.

But I'm going to play a little bit of devil's advocate here. And suggest that maybe those religious authorities were not as bad as we make them out to be.

And like, I get it. If I have a medical emergency on a Sunday and need to go to the emergency room, I do not want to see that it is closed. They are not Chick-fil-A. If I go to Chick-fil-A on a Sunday to go get a chicken sandwich and they're closed, that's one thing, but the ER. I expect them to be open. But, To be clear, Jesus is not being anti-Jewish in this story. He's in the middle of a very Jewish argument. And he's resetting it to the proper view that Sabbath is a day of liberation from what ails us. A holy interruption, a reminder of rest, and a sign of God's abundance.

In Exodus, God rested after creation, blessed the Sabbath, and made it holy. Twice in the Old Testament—Exodus and Deuteronomy—God commands the people to remember the Sabbath. Yet it's often the commandment we ignore the most. It's the cute, quaint commandment. No lying, no stealing, no killing: all of those make sense. But not working for an entire day? Who's got time for that?

In Jewish tradition, two candles are lit on the Sabbath: one to remember that God blessed the seventh day, the other to remember that God freed the Israelites from slavery. Rest and freedom are bound together.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote: "A being is free only when it can determine and limit its own activity." Think about that. Living life on the treadmill of constant activity, always in motion, moving from one thing to the next. We praise that lifestyle as good work ethic, as just what we're wired to do. We take pleasure in pointing out how full our calendars are. That's just the way it is: I must do these things to have the life I desire, to please others, to give my children what they need and want.

But Deuteronomy says it plainly: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” Commanded you—to observe the Sabbath.

One of the ways we deceive ourselves into thinking we can ignore the commandment is to think that, well, I can work hard now.

I can push myself to do the things I need to do. And later, eventually, I can do the things I want to do. I’ll rest later.

We think in a timeline of years, even decades.

I’ll work hard until I’m 50, then maybe I’ll have enough to rest.

When the kids are out of school, I’ll have more time.

Or I’ll work hard until I’m 65 then I’ll rest.

Or 70, or 80, or whatever number we attach to it. Friends, one of the things that hit home for me after my stroke is that I couldn’t keep a timeline of “later” anymore. Terry and I have been married for 30 years, and during most of those years, we’ve talked about how much we would like to travel. For 27 years, we told ourselves we’d travel after our kids were grown, after college, when we had the time and money.

This summer, we realized: we better do that while we can, while we have our health, and while we love our children, it’s time to think about ourselves . . . and that’s OK!! So, our timeline has changed.

God also operates on a different timeline: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...”

If you hear nothing else today, here this: we are more than we can produce --- which is a message everyone needs here, both those who work too much and those who worry they aren’t doing enough (because now that I’m feeling better and can be more productive, to be honest with you, there are days I don’t want to be productive. Turns out, I grew to like my rest! So, if you hear nothing else today, hear this— we are children of God, and because of that, we can rest securely in the freedom of God’s arms. So, Test the premise that you are worth more than what you can produce—that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight—and when you get anxious because you are convinced that

this is not so, remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. Because you are a child of God, worthy of resting in the freedom of God's arms.

Knowing this, all of us can afford to take one day a week to enjoy one another and enjoy God. We can honor the Sabbath and remember that we are more than enough; we do enough; even God rested; and we don't need to defend our existence by how busy we are. It is enough to be a child of God.

Keeping Sabbath is about more than physical rest and self care. At its heart, it is about rest for the soul, the brain, the body, the mind so that you can be liberated from what ails you.

The poet Wendell Berry writes:

*"When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."*

Or as David writes in Psalm 23:

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul.
My cup runneth over."*

Sabbath rest frees us from the presumption that by our labor, efforts, or good works, we are the authors of our spiritual health.

God is sovereign over our lives. Jesus paid it all. In that we can rest. Jesus calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord of rest: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

We all need that rest—for our bodies, for our brains, and for our souls.

The bent-over woman in Luke is a metaphor for the things we carry around that weigh us down, bending us over. She was healed on the Sabbath, stood up straight, liberated, and praised God. Freed of her chains, she danced in the streets.

Give yourself permission to take time for recreation that refreshes you. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

"At least one day in every seven, pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home, not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch."

Rest in the knowledge that all we have and all we are, and all we will be, is a gift from God. In that, we have freedom from bondage and can rest in the grace of God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

Amen.