
Sabbath: Why Is It So Hard To Rest?

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 4 – Year B

The Sabbath commandment has always struck me as odd. “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy,” the Exodus version reads. “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—you, or anyone who works for you, or your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.”

Really?! Why is this even a commandment? Who doesn’t want to rest, or take a day off work or school? Who isn’t already anticipating their next weekend or vacation?

Vacation. It’s summer, and many of us have vacation on our minds. So let me tell you about my last one. I went to the San Francisco with my family for spring break. It was a long-awaited trip and much-needed break, and I had great expectations for it.

In the six days we had, we’d have a lot of quality family time, doing wholesome things together: hiking, playing games, sharing leisurely meals, experiencing new things together. And, because it took a lot of effort (and money!) to get there, we would make good use of our time, taking in as much as we could of this part of our country. I wanted my children to see the Golden Gate Bridge, and Fisherman’s Wharf, and Chinatown, and Point Reyes, and redwood forests, and the beach—and, because my son is a rising senior, a couple of colleges. We would find some sights that were off the beaten path, too. I wanted our trip to be *unique*, after all; and we *did* want to get away.

Of course, we would also just relax, and return to Atlanta renewed and well-rested.

So, pretty much every morning started with me poring through guidebooks and pestering my slower-moving family about what they wanted to do. The kids were relaxing (which *was* on my agenda!), but they weren’t doing it in the way that I’d envisioned. “If we don’t decide and get moving,” I’d helpfully remind them, “it will be too late, and we’ll miss out!”

With all the skill of a high-strung overachiever, I nearly turned our vacation into business, or busy-ness, as usual. I was much more comfortable, it seemed, being busy and in control, than I was just being.

And I’m not the only one thus afflicted! In the early 1900s, a Hungarian psychologist named Sandor Ferenczi observed that many of his patients around their Sabbath day experienced headaches, stomachaches, nausea, increased anxiety, and dejection. Viktor Frankl later gave this phenomenon a name: “Sunday neurosis.” And he made a couple further observations about it. For one, it seemed related to an existential vacuum—a fear of emptiness or meaninglessness—that people sensed when they were alone or still. Second, he noted that they tried to fill this vacuum with various excesses and compensations, like worry, avoidance behaviors, binge eating, drinking, overworking, overspending. (Sounds like many a vacation!)

Clearly, this isn’t just an issue for 21st-century Americans. Which begs the question: why is it so hard to receive the Sabbath gift of rest and freedom?

Well, fear plays a big part. Fear of the emptiness Frankl talks about. Fear of falling behind or missing out or feeling your

emotions. Fear of what you'll feel or hear, if you slow down long enough to pay attention. Fear of what you'll find, or not find, beneath all of your activities and masks.

There's pride, too, which tells us that we're too important to really unplug, that the world would never make it without us holding it up and steering it.

And there are real external pressures: the needs of family; increasingly superhuman expectations of what you can accomplish; workplaces that are never quite finished with you; and a society that says you never have quite enough. There are all the institutions and people who claim to be the arbiters of our worth and our salvation.

No wonder God *commands* us to observe Sabbath! And no wonder the Pharisees had so many rules to protect it! Because Sabbath is so countercultural and seemingly counterintuitive, we *do* need structures and disciplines to protect it; and to protect ourselves from the many ways we have of getting around it; and to protect the right of all people, all creation, to rest.

It's just that we don't want the rules to become a sneaky way to stay in charge or to judge or oppress others. That was Jesus' beef with the Pharisees, I think: not their respect for the Sabbath or for rules, but the way that they used the rules to reassert control and to avoid being present to the moment and to the person in front of them.

The good news is that God knows all about our Sunday neurosis, and the pride and fear and pressures that drive it, and our tendency to wriggle out of it—which is perhaps why God gives us the Sabbath to begin with, and why Jesus calls us back to it and reminds us that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around.

If the Sabbath is made for all humankind, then it's for you, too! Just because you work seven days a week to make ends meet, or play a Sunday game or heal someone or pluck grain on a Sunday, don't think that you can't observe the Sabbath. Sure, your Sabbath discipline may look different from others'. But the *real* discipline is not pulling off the perfect or the prescribed Sabbath. The real discipline is simply trusting and resting in God.

Sabbath is an obligation, and it is a gift. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy"; *and* remember that "the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."