

“On the Sabbath”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 31, 2021

Luke 6:1-11

One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?” Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

The British writer Katherine May has published a new book called *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*.

I was struck by the way she captures the cyclical nature of life—
that of plants, animals and humans too—which leads us into seasons of winter.
[Katherine May describes](#) “wintering” as “a time of withdrawing from the world”.
“It’s a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment,
for putting your house in order. Doing these deeply unfashionable things—
slowing down, letting your spare time expand, getting enough sleep, resting—
is a radical act now, but it’s essential.”

I’ve been enchanted by these descriptions of winter because of course
that’s where we find ourselves right now, at least in the northern hemisphere.
In this season of the natural world, everything has slowed down—
creatures stay close to the nest, the sap in the trees moves only as needed,
and even people ourselves aren’t moving around much outside.
The pandemic too has forced us into a whole year of “wintering”, of changing our ways,
hunkering down, spending extra time at home, and reflecting on the value of life.
Such a difficult year-long winter is not necessarily marked by rest and renewal.
It has forced extraordinary, exhausting effort from essential workers in great risk,
from health care professionals working every day for months on end to save lives,
from those who are homebound (battling anxiety, depression, isolation, and addiction),
from teachers forced into the new skills of distance and hybrid learning,
and from parents who are now adjunct teachers in addition to full-time work.
People in every situation, race, place and income level feel wrung out.

Yet in the midst of the complete interruption of life,
we can form practices of healing and renewal for life.

That was the intention of the Sabbath commandments in Scripture, as well.
From the very first chapters of Genesis on, the Sabbath is envisioned as a time set apart.
After the work of creating the world, God rests on the seventh day,
so humanity is called to do likewise, resting and delighting in the “very good” creation.

Theologian Norman Wirzba [says](#) that

“what we learn from the Sabbath as the culmination of creation
is to realize that the whole point of it all is to be able to rest
in the goodness and love of the world that God shows in creating it.
And that requires us first of all—first of all and always—to slow down.”

By the time of Jesus, though, God’s law of Sabbath had come with a whole new set of rules.
“Rest from labor” got more and more codified into law, until some Jewish teachers
decreed that it was illegal to make food, light lamps, or offer healing on the Sabbath.
The Pharisees had decided that even rolling kernels of wheat between your hands
was a violation of the law, deserving censure.

Though established with good intent, the rules of the past
had become a means of enforcing social conformity,
showing none of the compassionate care that God first intended.
Obedience to the letter of the law had overtaken the spirit of the law.

But then Jesus comes in to do a new thing,
which revives the original spirit of God’s command to its first importance.
Exemplary King David disobeyed the rules governing temple obedience,
Jesus tells the Pharisees, because preserving life is the truest fulfilment of the law.
And rather than shrink from a blessing because it might look like work on the Sabbath,
Jesus asks the man with a withered hand to receive healing, right then and there.
Jesus advances the spirit of Sabbath—freedom and healing—
even though it’s in a different form than what the Pharisees had taught.

In all the centuries since, Jews and Christians have continued to interpret and refine
what the Sabbath means and how it is defined.

In his book on the Sabbath, 20th-century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
describes how Sabbath practices invite us from the daily work of *doing*
into a reminder that we are also meant for simply *being*,
existing in the eternal presence of God, even as we continue in time.

[He says](#), “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be,
not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”
Elsewhere he adds that “Strict adherence to the laws regulating Sabbath observance
doesn’t suffice; the goal is creating the Sabbath as a foretaste of paradise.
The Sabbath is a metaphor for paradise and a testimony to God’s presence.”

Sabbath practices interrupt the everydayness of life, much like snowfall in winter.

[During a recent interview](#) with Krista Tippett’s public radio program *On Being*,
Katherine May says, “what I love about snow is the way that it makes a clean break.

It transforms the landscape. Everything's different. Everything sounds different.
The quality of light is different. The light kind of sparkles off it.
You know, before you open your curtains, that snow has landed.
And for me, I just think that's such a gift. ... You can't go about your normal business.
...you get to see your world in a different way. And it's beautiful."

This is what Sabbath offers to those who practice it too, opening our eyes to see
and hearts to understand that ([in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins](#)),
"The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

The Sabbath, like snow as Katherine May describes it,
creates a "liminal space, a crossing point between the mundane and the magical."

How might we keep Sabbath now, as people living in a rushed American culture,
exhausted by pandemic responses and never-ending to-do lists,
and mostly untethered by the day-of-the-week Sabbath practices of our ancestors?

Gathering here for worship

is one such way we step out of the everyday to search for the eternal.

Saying prayers before meals is another way, pausing for a moment to recognize the gift
rather than seeing food as a utilitarian fuel for yet more "doing".

Our member Karin Miller gives other household examples

in her book coming out this spring: *Laundry Love: Finding Joy in a Common Chore*.

Making or listening to music can open our ears to beauty in the air.

Getting enough sleep, going for walks in the fresh air,

holding a warm cup of tea or coffee and breathing deeply of its comforts—

these are all ways that the eternal goodness of God can be present in every day.

Creating a whole day free of labor every week would be splendid,

but it's not required for us to be restored by Sabbath.

Caring for bodies, their feeding, and their health—as Jesus taught the Pharisees—

can be a simple, intentional way to celebrate the goodness of life in God's care.

This is why Jesus uses the everyday, elemental things of water, food and drink

to teach us about divine grace, through the symbols of baptism and communion.

Practice Sabbath then this very day, as soon as your next meal.

Assemble whatever you have, perhaps just something simple, like soup and bread.

Chew each bite with mindfulness and gratitude, celebrating the goodness of the world.

Give thanks to God for such moments of pause, however brief within the bustle and hustle.

Let the enforced slowness of this pandemic winter work whatever it will

in the course of these days,

like sap beneath the frozen surface moves with the energy of life.

May this time of wintering and Sabbath lead us to heal with the timeless grace of God,

and extend such healing to others too, in the name of Christ.

Amen.