

Mother Lynn Finnegan  
Church of the Holy Faith  
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost  
Proper 16  
Is. 58:9b-14; Heb. 12:18-29;  
Ps. 103:1-8, Luke 13:10-17  
August 24, 2025

### Sabbath. Preach About the Sabbath.

I really dislike it when the Holy Spirit calls upon me to preach on a topic I with which I am uncomfortable. I breathed a sigh of relief when last week's scriptures focused on judgment and Fr. Robin was the assigned preacher. This week? Every time I thought about what to preach this week, a persistent voice kept saying, "Sabbath. Preach about the Sabbath." Really, God? Because you see, the reason I'm uncomfortable about preaching about the Sabbath is because it causes me to admit that I don't have a great track record with "keep holy the sabbath day." But the Holy Spirit was pretty insistent. "Sabbath. Preach about the Sabbath," I kept hearing. I suspect the Holy Spirit was convinced there might be others who could also spend a little more time reflecting on the meaning of sabbath. What does it mean to us, twenty-first century Christians to "keep holy the sabbath day?" While the answer to that question might look different for each of us, keeping holy the sabbath day, like all of God's commandments, is a gift and a grace and a pathway to the fullness of life in Christ.

Let me begin with what the sabbath is not. It is not taking a vacation when you need a break from work. It isn't lunch with a friend, or a hike, or reading a book, or a nap, or lying on the couch watching television after a busy day. It isn't a decision to avoid Sunday worship because you feel you need a few extra hours of sleep and rest. It isn't even a commitment to attend Sunday worship and then spend the rest of the time relaxing. These are all good, and important, self-care and spiritual practices. But they aren't keeping sabbath.

Scripture reveals two traditions concerning the sabbath. The first is recorded in Exodus, when Moses descended Mount Sinai, and spoke the commandments of God. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.”<sup>1</sup> God then specifically links this commandment to the very first chapter of the bible in Genesis. After bringing into being all of creation, God didn’t merely rest. God did three things on the seventh day: he rested, he blessed the sabbath, and he consecrated it. Rest. Bless. Consecrate.

This is probably the tradition we are most familiar with: God commands, *commands*, us to recognize that our work is not more important than his. He commands, not suggests or recommends, that we stop – stop is the actual meaning of Shabbat, or Sabbath, in Hebrew – stop and recognize the holiness of God’s creative work. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, the book being read by our Spiritual Classics group, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects, “It is hard to understand why so many people put ‘Thou shalt not do any work’ in a different category from ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ or ‘Thou shalt not have other gods before me,’ especially since these teachings are all on the same list.”<sup>2</sup>

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is focused on this biblical sabbath tradition. While the Israelites were in keeping with the letter of the law, refraining from work, and offering sacrifices as a sign of “holiness,” they had no respect for the *sanctity* of God’s creation the sabbath was intended to honor; specifically, the sanctity of their fellow human beings. Keeping the Sabbath and acting justly toward our neighbor are intricately connected. Through Isaiah, God condemns the Israelites’ pro forma observance of Sabbath that is coupled with a lack of justice, such as ignoring the hungry and the needs of the afflicted. God spares no words: the Sabbath is *trampled*

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:9

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, HarperCollins, New York, 2009, p.139.

*upon and dishonored* when it is used to pursue our own interests and affairs. A Sabbath rest is meant for us to take a break from our regular daily routines and work habits. What that rest looks like is up to you, but the word “holy” indicates a sabbath observance that is sacred and beneficial and not mere secular amusement.

The second biblical sabbath tradition is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. Here, sabbath keeping is directly associated with freedom, liberty, and a release from bondage. “Remember,” the author of Deuteronomy writes, “that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched hand; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”<sup>3</sup> This is the sabbath tradition that Jesus upholds in our gospel passage from Luke. Over time, the rabbis had extrapolated from scripture just what “work” on the sabbath meant: identifying thirty-nine categories of activities prohibited on Shabbat, and then adding other categories related to the thirty-nine. Jesus’ healing of the women on the sabbath is liberating, freeing work that honors, not dishonors, the sabbath. Jesus does not use the words “woman you are healed,” but “woman you are *set free* from your ailment.” The power moves the synagogue leaders employ to discredit Jesus backfire. “You hypocrites! Jesus exclaims. “[O]ught not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” In other words, if God has commanded the keeping of the sabbath as a remembrance of his merciful and liberating work for the people of Israel, what *better day* than the Sabbath to unbind a woman held physically and spiritually captive for eighteen years?

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 5:15

The people of God have long struggled with how to keep the Sabbath appropriately. We have consistently missed the life-giving, creation-honoring, liberating intention for the commandment. We have treated it more as an obligation and less like a gift. And in our fast-paced society filled with “must see, do, and be” distractions, filled with keeping up, excelling, serving, acquiring, and accumulating, we have also simply chosen to ignore it. Ignoring it, however, is not the answer. God does not promulgate laws as an act of dominance or control. The commandment to keep sabbath is for our benefit and we dismiss it at our own peril. Both Isaiah and Jesus call upon us to look beyond the words of the commandment and reflect on its purpose. Sabbath keeping liberates us; it is a gracious intrusion. The Sabbath provides a glimpse into God’s eternity, an immersion in which we, like the disabled woman freed of the bonds of her affliction, produce nothing but praise on a regular and consistent basis. Keeping the sabbath reminds us of our dependency on God. We are reminded that God is God, we are not, and that is a very good thing. Amen.