

# Can the Church—and I— Remember the Sabbath?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- Exodus 20:8-11 Good News Translation <sup>8</sup>“Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>You have six days in which to do your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work—neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. <sup>11</sup>In six days I, the LORD, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the LORD, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.
- Mark 1:35-39 Good News Translation <sup>35</sup>Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup>But Simon and his companions went out searching for him, <sup>37</sup>and when they found him, they said, “Everyone is looking for you.”<sup>38</sup> But Jesus answered, “We must go on to the other villages around here. I have to preach in them also, because that is why I came.”<sup>39</sup> So he traveled all over Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We honor God’s gift of life by observing a Sabbath rest in our personal lives and in our life as a church.

During my high school years when my missionary family was living in Indonesia’s capital city of Jakarta, our family physician was Dr. Visioli. He was there serving as staff physician for employees of the Italian Embassy. What do I remember about Dr. Visioli besides his slow, unbelievably thick Italian accent as he spoke English? I remember that he weighed probably 300 lbs., and that he chain-smoked cigarettes throughout every appointment and examination. There was an obvious “disconnect” between what Dr. Visioli said and what he did.

It’s not unusual for people to say one thing but do another. Jesus observed this about the Pharisees. Pharisees were members of a certain tradition in the Jewish faith. Jesus said that what the Pharisees *say* to do is correct, but then accused them of “not practicing what they preach.” Dr. Visioli was the first person I remember about whom it could be said, “He didn’t practice what he preached.” He did so much to keep our family healthy or heal us of our ills. But he treated his own body with complete disregard to his training and skill in the field of medicine.

How well do we practice what we preach when it comes to biblical teachings? For instance, one of the most memorable of the Ten Commandments is “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” The commandment goes on to explain that God fashioned the world in six days, but then chose to rest on the seventh day. The Sabbath is not a break from the work of creation; the Sabbath rest is *part* of the creative process: Sabbath rest completes creation.

Let me give an example of the creative dimension of rest. I like to do the Sunday crossword puzzles. If I find that I’m stumped by one of the clues, I work on other parts of the puzzle, but eventually I have to come back to the “stumper.” After staring at it without success, I’ve learned to put down the pen and walk away. Whether I leave it for five minutes or five days, invariably when I come back, the answer to the “stumper” comes to me almost immediately. See, taking the break—the “rest”—was actually part of the creative process.

In our society, this weekend is regarded as the end of summertime. Churches tend to treat the summer months like an extended Sabbath, “resting from our labors.” The liturgical calendar of church observances doesn’t *require* that churches slow down in the summer. But it’s

the custom for the routine work of many church groups and boards to be suspended for the summer:

- The complexity of the worship experience is simplified during the summer – no choir, for instance, or children’s message.
- Christian religious education tends to get scaled back for the summer – the major exceptions, of course, being Vacation Bible School and mission trip experience.
- Preachers and musicians and other church staff take time off during the summer for vacations.
- Most churches with multiple worship services reduce their schedule – our church is unusual in actually adding a service during the summer.

It’s not hard to see how churches seem to treat the summer months like an extended Sabbath – the church treats summer as a time to rest from the other 9 months of creation.

But now we’re approaching autumn, and at this church, like at most churches I know, autumn presents a challenge to being able to practice what we preach:

- With the passing of Labor Day the rhythm changes, the pace quickens, the calendar starts to fill, and so do the church pews to some degree.
- Choirs begin to gather for rehearsals.
- Teams and committees and groups and boards launch into their programs and pick up their responsibilities.
- Classrooms vacant during the Dog Days of Summer are repopulated with children and adults.

Like the endless series of interstate milepost markers, we see the inevitable approach of the customary activities of the church’s program year:

- presenting 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with their very own Bibles and World Communion and Trash & Treasure and Stewardship reflections,
- a clambake and remembering the saints in our lives and Harvest Sunday and an Alternative Christmas Charity Bazaar,
- and before you know it Advent and Christmas are upon us and we’re worshipping in Fellowship Hall around breakfast tables and *voilà!* the calendar has turned a page to a new year.

Whew! Does it exhaust you just to think about what lies ahead in the next four months? What will the church have done with the whole idea of Sabbath rest? It’s almost like we will have worked ourselves to the bone to enhance our experience of Sabbath.

A minister friend Vicky Curtiss once wrote,

In our culture, resting on the Sabbath is a revolutionary act. Americans are strongly influenced toward a perpetual activism inherent in competitive, production-oriented individualism. Under such pressure we find ourselves subtly working (whether in leisure or at work [or, I would add, at church]) to produce, enhance, maintain, or protect the buildup of self...<sup>1</sup>

...And yet, one of the clearest directions from the Bible is for us to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

As we turn the corner from summer to fall and launch into what I often refer to as a new “program year,” I encourage each of us to take time, to pause, to breathe, to rest, to wait. Let’s contemplate how as a church and as individuals we might practice what we preach: how this church reinforces and supports our desire, our need to remember the Sabbath, the routine of regular rest.... By remembering the Sabbath – by providing space for a holy breath – can we avoid being squeezed by the demands of daily duties and the press of the world’s events?

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Vicky Curtiss, General Presbyter, “Everyone Needs a Sabbath!” in *Keeping in Touch: the newsletter of the Presbytery of the Western Reserve*, Summer 1994, p. 2

We heard an example for us in the excerpt from Mark's gospel this morning. It was very brief—did you catch it? Mark wrote that “Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed.”<sup>2</sup> Even Jesus understood that he couldn't simply rush from one activity to another, whether he was teaching or preaching or healing, or was going from a fish fry to flea market. He needed to create a space for Sabbath in his life.

After all, you know that some supposedly recreational or “restful” activities can actually add to our stress, like trying to keep up hectic schedules of rehearsals or practices or games for our own or our children's recreation. We can actually add stress by maintaining such an active social life that it's almost like we are literally going from party to party, from function to function. Sometimes our leisure activities can wear us out.

On the other hand, you can probably think of some difficult and demanding activities we can choose to undertake can actually feed our souls. For instance, that's been the experience of the six church members who have been serving on our congregation's Vitality & Renewal Team since the beginning of the year. They've put a lot of time and effort and thought and discussion into their research, and yet to a person they will tell you that this “work” has nurtured and energized them, giving them more hope for the future of our congregation's ministry and mission and fellowship.

As the pastor of this church it might sound like I'm shooting myself in the foot, telling you not to get too involved in church activities. That's not what I'm suggesting.

Rather, I'm encouraging us to become more mindful of the need for Sabbath in our lives. What happens—or doesn't happen—to constitute “Sabbath”? Must it be on Sunday? Firefighters and police officers and nurses and physicians and many other people have jobs which have them working on Sundays. But keeping the Sabbath “holy” doesn't have to happen only on Sundays. It can happen anytime we choose to be mindful of God's presence—how God is engaged in our world and in our lives. It's customary to appoint Sunday as the day we set aside for worship and a rest from daily activities.

You may not realize it, but when we gather on Sundays, it's not just to rededicate ourselves to God's service, nor just for an oasis of calm in our hectic lives. Our presence in this community is also a blessing to the others who are here. We are a blessing when we offer greetings to friend or stranger or newcomer. We're a blessing because we may happen to offer words of support or comfort or consolation or encouragement right when they're needed.

Whether it occurs on Sunday morning or at other times, setting aside time and action in order to gift ourselves with Sabbath might start with choices like:

- Resolving not to go into the office over the weekend;
- Choosing not to check any email or social media for a morning or a day;
- Finding a classmate to go for a walk or bike ride with;
- Setting aside an evening when you'll do no household chores;
- Giving yourself time to walk the neighborhood and chat with neighbors;
- Sitting on the porch or patio or balcony and doing a crossword puzzle.

On this Labor Day weekend, this eve of a new program year at our church presents us with a challenge and an opportunity: how can we be about God's work of “Praising God, Teaching Faith, Serving Others” without becoming Christian workaholics? In our personal lives as well as in the life of this church, the activities we choose to engage in can drain us or they can feed us. By observing a Sabbath rest in our personal lives and in our life as a church, we honor the gifts of God's creation: gifts of life, of time, of relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:35 Good News Translation