

***The Gift of the Sabbath***  
**Sermon on Gen. 1-2:4a, Ex. 20:8-11, & Luke 13:10-17 (9/5 & 9/6/15)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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So. It's Labor Day weekend here in The United States *and* the focus of today's worship is the concept of *Sabbath*. This is not a coincidence.

For much of the working world in this country, this Monday is an extra day of rest after the weekend – which is supposed to be *two* days of rest every week throughout the year. In this day and age, however, “work” is done on many and varied schedules...it certainly seems like fewer and fewer of us work on a Monday through Friday, 9-5 kind of plan.

And that is nothing to say for those among us who are retired or who are *unable* to work outside the home or who choose *not* to work outside the home or who choose to work outside the home *part-time*. We are diverse when it comes to our work-related schedules.

There's no way around that and, frankly, we wouldn't change it for the world. Folks who work outside the standard Monday-Friday, 9-5 schedule enable us to do all sorts of things like get medical care...feel more safe and secure in our community...shop...go out to eat and be entertained...and, of course, some such folks even provide evening and weekend opportunities for spiritual engagement. (*Wink.*)

As people who live in this country, many of us have the opportunity this weekend to take a bit of an extra break from work. For that, we are so thankful. As people who follow *Jesus*, however, the delicate balance between “work” and “rest” is something we are meant to keep in mind at *all* times – every week of the year.

*Rest* from work is something we were literally created to do. And, from a faith perspective, true and regular rest is called “sabbath.”

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As Christians, we get our concept of *sabbath* from Judaism. Jesus, who we Christians believe to be our Lord and Savior, was Jewish, and, for the most part, he followed the religious laws and practices of Judaism.

(Of course, our Gospel reading from Luke chapter 13 is evidence that Jesus chose, on rare occasion, to violate particular religious laws if something appropriately urgent emerged. According to Jewish religious law, it's not okay to heal someone on the Sabbath...yet Jesus did just that on rare, though multiple occasions. Some things are that important.)

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The practice of sabbath goes about as far back as you can go: back to the story of Creation...wherein God worked hard for six days to create the universe and God then spent a full day resting.

And isn't it interesting that the story of Creation would be written in such a way that it includes a day of rest? I mean, why bother telling *that* part of the story? When you're reading a story, you want action and you want snappy dialogue.

You want God saying, "I command light to shine!" with its follow-up, "And light started shining." You want God saying, "I command lights to appear in the sky and to separate day from night," with its follow-up, "And that's what happened." *That's* good storytelling. It's snappy dialogue with strong action sequences. You can picture it happening and it's glorious.

What's *not* so great and glorious to picture? Statements like this: "So the heavens and the earth and everything else were created. By the seventh day God had finished his work, and so he rested. God blessed the seventh day and made it special because on that day he rested from his work."

In other words: "*And then God pretty much did nothing.*" Really exciting, right? Great storytelling...right? Not so much. Which means *that* part is there not because it's trying to be a strong, effective piece of the story's plot – but, rather, because it's trying to make an important point.

That important point is that God *worked*...and then God *rested*. And the *rest* was somehow just as important as the *work*. //

In the part of the Creation story about the creation of humankind, the translation we read from today said, "Now we will make humans and they will be like us..." So God created humans to be like himself." Other translations read more like this: "Let us make humankind in our image..." So God created humankind in his image."

The Latin phrase "imago Dei" is taken from these words of Scripture: Imago Dei means "image of God." And we were created in that image... meaning, we humans are, in some mysterious way, a reflection of our Creator God. The opposite is also true: *God* is reflected into us.

And our God is a God who chose to rest for a full day after working hard for six days, creating the heavens and the earth.

We are kidding ourselves if we think we don't *need* sabbath rest – because even *God* seemed to need it. And guess what? Though we are created in God's image, there isn't a single one among us who comes even remotely close to actually *being* God. So, if God took a day of rest, we should, too!

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On this Labor Day weekend, it's appropriate for us to keep in mind the importance of Sabbath rest. Perhaps especially because it has gotten easier and easier – and sometimes more and more expected – for us to work, or to simply stay busy, *all the time*.

But, the model we are given in the Creation story of Genesis chapter one is that of a six-day workweek, followed by a day of rest. A day of rejuvenation. A day of recreation.

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I always love to point out that the word “recreation” is literally *re-creation*: a time to be created anew, a time to restart, to reboot. And it is built into our image-of-God-DNA to experience this special day of rest *each week*. Not only that, but this sabbath day of rest is built-into the Ten Commandments themselves: we are to remember the Sabbath *and* we are to observe it.

Sabbath is literally a weekly holiday...and, like any good holiday, observing it truly and faithfully means doing the things you should do that are the things for which the holiday was designed.

Christians should celebrate Christmas by going to worship and by extending generosity to others as a sign of God's generosity to the world in giving us Jesus. Folks in these United States should celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July by doing something patriotic to show thankfulness for this country and its freedoms.

As a weekly *holiday*, according to the Ten Commandments, *Sabbath* is to be remembered and observed: not only are we to *think about it*, we are also to *do it*.

For Jewish people who closely follow their religious laws – as outlined in the first several books of our biblical Old Testament – *Sabbath* brings with it many unique rules to follow. For traditional, religious law-keeping Jews, the basic laws outlined in the Bible have then been fleshed-out and clarified by religious scholars over the millennia.

For example, modern Jews who *strictly* keep their Sabbath laws are not to engage in the following types of activities on Sabbath: writing, erasing, and tearing...business transactions...shopping...using the phone...driving or riding in cars or other vehicles...cooking, baking, or kindling a fire...doing laundry...gardening or lawn-mowing...and turning on or off anything which uses electricity (if such things are needed on the sabbath, they must be turned on prior to the start of Sabbath and are then left on for the full duration of the day).<sup>1</sup>

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1 [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/95907/jewish/The-Shabbat-Laws.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/95907/jewish/The-Shabbat-Laws.htm)

Such rules likely seem extreme to us...but such extreme rules exist as a reminder of just how important Sabbath is. And, frankly, the more complex, busy, and connected our world gets, the more challenging it can be to remember and to observe Sabbath.

As Christians in today's world, we don't have such strict rules around how we should and should not remember and observe Sabbath. But, Sabbath is just as important for us to remember and observe as it is for very traditional, modern Jews. And how each of us chooses to observe Sabbath is likely a bit different from one person to the next.

In a poll of my Facebook friends on Friday, I learned about many favorite Sabbath practices:

Some of my Facebook friends mentioned worship and prayer on Sabbath...others spoke about Sunday afternoon naps and plates full of waffles or bowls full of ice cream...many mentioned getting outside – canoeing, going for a run, going for a family bike ride or picnic...

others need time to read or watch movies and mindless TV during their Sabbath...one friend likes to paint pottery or on canvas...some need time alone for Sabbath, while others seek out time with friends and family...a couple of McCabe folks mentioned “church and brunch” on Sabbath – and one of them added “football”...a couple folks mentioned gardening...

others need coffee and nothing demanding on their schedules for the day...one Facebook friend was clear that she doesn't do chores on Sabbath and another friend wrote that she does “no work” on her Sabbath – and she defines that as “anything she gets paid to do...not even work she *likes* to do” (which is most of it for her).

This friend is also a friend who likes to watch the ocean's waves as a Sabbath practice. She said, “I can never predict the waves, even though every single molecule is doing exactly what it's supposed to, in very predictable ways. A beautiful [reminder to] myself that *I* am not the one who will always be sure of what's going on.”

Honestly, that right there gets at the core of why Sabbath is so crucially important: because *we* are not in control...we are not the center of the universe...life does not function based on whether or not *we* are working. Observing Sabbath forces us to remember all that.

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In order to observe or to keep Sabbath, the rest of your week has to somehow revolve around it. You have to set boundaries around *most* things so your Sabbath day – or Sabbath *time* –

is filled only with that which relaxes, rejuvenates, and re-creates you.

Over the course of my 14-plus months as the Senior Pastor here at McCabe, we've had some conversations among many of our staff about everyone's weekly day or days off and how we can honor those days off. In order for our church ministries to function as well as possible, staff members leading those ministries need to have Sabbath.

For my part, I do my best to avoid contacting staff members on their day or days off. Or, if there is something non-urgent, I will send an email or simply make a note to myself to connect with them about in on a day we are both working. (Whether we choose to check email on Sabbath days is always in our own control!)

I am beyond fortunate here at McCabe to have other staff who can cover most things that come up on Monday – my chosen weekly Sabbath. On very rare occasion, something extremely emergent occurs on a Monday and my Sabbath gets interrupted. When that happens, it's quite understandable. But you'd be surprised how rare it is for something so urgent and extreme to happen that it can't wait until Tuesday morning.

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Years ago, I discovered my best Sabbath days include several key elements: no setting of an alarm...devotions...multiple cups of coffee in the morning while reading or watching favorite TV shows or movies... exercise of some sort...and time together with dear ones. This last year, I've added some rules to my Sabbath that, most weeks, I'm able to keep:

no social media (I don't go on Facebook or Twitter on Mondays)...no email (even my family knows I won't read it if they contact me by email on a Monday)...and I try to avoid housework. Well, let's face it, I'm not much for housework in general – but the regular things that need doing, I try to get done before my head hits the pillow Sunday nights.

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Practicing Sabbath is about ordering the entirety of your life around the concept of “work for six days, rest and re-create for one.” Or, if you are someone who doesn't work full-time outside the home, another version of this could be “stay busy with meaningful volunteer work or other activities for six days, rest and re-create for one.”

I said it a bit ago, and I will say it again: *In order to observe or to keep Sabbath, the rest of your week has to somehow revolve around it. You have to set boundaries around most things so your Sabbath day – or Sabbath time – is filled only with that which relaxes, rejuvenates, and re-creates you.*

Practicing Sabbath is also about graciously allowing everyone else to operate this way as well. Because, if Sabbath is any one thing, it is a gift to us from God –

a gift that reminds us we are literally not designed to go non-stop all the time.

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As many of you are aware, this summer at McCabe, we began a year-long worship- and sermon-related focus on *generosity*.

We began this focus on generosity earlier in the summer and it's my prayer that, through it, we'll be ever more aware of how *God* is generous toward us and how we, in turn, are called to be generous toward others – generous with our thoughts and words...generous with our actions... generous with our resources of time, talent, energy, and money.

Again, Sabbath is a *gift* to us from our generous God: a gift meant to remind us to slow down...to let the world go on without us for a day...to work hard and well when we're working, of course, but to trust that our work will be done *better* when we intentionally take a break from it for a time every week.

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We were created in the image of a God who valued rest so much that rest was built-into the very rhythm of the universe.

Sabbath is, truly, a gift from our generous God. Observing Sabbath well and faithfully is how we say “thank you” to God for this great gift. Amen.