

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Pay (No) Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain”

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Isaiah 55:3-6 and Luke 6:1-11

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BOY, is it good to be with you again! It’s fitting that our reunion be in worship, because it’s certainly God that unites our hearts in Christian love. My summer Sabbatical, generously recommended by Session, refueled me to be able to eagerly serve again. It met all my expectations and exceeded them. It was: delightful to spend extra time with family (green pastures & still waters), fun to have extra elbow room to be spontaneous with some favorite activities, inspiring to consult with rabbis, monks, and seminary professors about Sabbath, and freeing to take off the shackles of worrying about what is next on the calendar, enriching for my soul attempting new spiritual disciplines.

God richly blessed me. My family and I feel like “our cup runneth over,” as the Psalmist says. Thank you for prayers and blessings in my time away, and thank you to the staff, especially Jay, for holding down the fort!

In May, I thought, "I am going to be the best **rest-er** there ever was. I'm going to **Sabbath** like nobody else in history. I'm going to **refresh** and **relax** so hard that it'll be gold-medal worthy!"

How wrong I was in my thinking. I frankly didn’t deeply understand what God intended for Sabbath. I was blind, yet now I see some of what God can create through this gift. I wasn’t exactly confident about how to listen to God, to come before God, to seek God with ALL I had. In starting out, I realized how short I fall in attempting to seek God. I hadn’t paid much attention to “the man behind the curtain,” to borrow a line from the *Wizard of Oz* movie when Dorothy and her friends came before the one they thought could help.

In my Sabbath observances, what was lacking was focus on the Lord of the Sabbath; I wasn’t paying enough attention to God behind his healing mysteries. Obviously, from the outset, I had it wrong. It wasn't about me, nor what I could get out of it, nor was it about an award or thing- as much as a person. Sabbath rest is embodied in a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

Like all things in life, I needed God’s merciful guidance. I needed a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path. God provided, as a loving, gracious Sustainer. Scripture opened my eyes and showed me how Jesus taught us to Sabbath. In Luke 6:1-11, we hear questions and advice about the Sabbath. Listen now to God’s word.

“One Sabbath while Jesus was going through some grain fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ³ Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ How 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?” ⁵ Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.””

⁶ On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against Jesus. ⁸ But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand in the middle." He got up and stood there. ⁹ 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?" ¹⁰ After looking around at all of them, Jesus said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus."

Luke 6:1-11

When it comes to honoring Sabbath time, we note, in the Genesis 3 creation story, on the 7th day God finished work, rested from work, blessed it, and made it holy. It's as if God says, by actions, that creation is not even completed until it is: enjoyed, admired, appreciated, highly favored, and set apart as different. It was made to take pleasure in, for God and all of creation.

Building on this, we note in Exodus 20, that as part of the 10 Commandments, God gives more detail about the Sabbath, the 4th commandment. According to Scripture, the Sabbath is still a big deal to God, despite what culture has evolved to make us think. These commandments are for our own good. They were initially given for God's covenant people to live a *better* life; to be more than a strangling list of what NOT-TO-DO in a confining way. They are how to experience the life intended- both with God and with one another. This 4th one specifically prompts us to "remember the Sabbath and keep it holy."

Why exactly were these commandments given to Moses in that deserted place in the Middle East called Mount Sinai? God had heard his people's cry and provided hope and guidance. God led the Hebrews out of Egypt from enslavement in the pivotal event of the Exodus.

It is key to understand the difference between the law the Egyptian Pharaoh was demanding, in contrast to what God was inviting. Whereas the Hebrews had been told to endlessly work, God said, for a day, NOT to work, nor let anyone in your family work, nor your animals, nothing. Whereas Pharaoh wanted things to be produced, God counters with savoring what has already been made by God.

Our Savior frees and invites us to resist "the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Rom. 12:2) In such liberation, we know whose we are and what we are created to BE rather than just DO. In Sabbath, we lay down the drive to produce or perform. With this, God helps us to **breathe deeper**.

In July, while revisiting my seminary in Richmond, VA, I read a refreshing take on this. Someone said the very process of breathing can be an act of faith because the word for the Hebrew name of God equally compares to the sounds of breathing... Yah-Weh. Breathing in sounds like "Yah," breathing out sounds like "Weh"... meaning Lord is with us.

When you or someone you know is going through a storm, remember God is with you... helping you, even if all you can do is breathe. Be still and know the breath of God is in you. Try it as a prayer; saying God's name as you

breathe deeply in, and deeply out. Try it now- “Yah...Weh.” Again... Friends, that’s Sabbath! That’s an act of *trust* that God will make your lungs work and provide air for them, after exhaling. That’s making time holy.

But, keeping Sabbath and making time holy can be a challenge. So, let’s consider two things that may help us make time holy so we can rest with God and be like Jesus.

First, holy time needs to be a part of the week that’s different and especially spiritually lifting. It’s something we get to do/experience. It is intentionally providing chronological space to receive Sabbath openly and with gratitude. It is to experience the Spirit’s renewal by yourself but then together... for the common good. Sabbath time cannot look like the rest of the week, otherwise, it closely resembles work, production, and sometimes competition (where there is always a loser).

In Sabbath, we are not to lose, but to win! To be edified and inspired! We make time holy by dedicating it to and with the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ. It’s only by putting our total confidence and full weight in the person of God that we grasp the true Sabbath rest. Jesus did repeatedly break the Sabbath rules, as defined by the religious leaders by healing on the Sabbath and walking through grain fields. But, on the Sabbath, Jesus went to synagogue and rested. The so-called “work” Jesus did on the Sabbath was to respond with compassion to people in need and to administer God’s healing. God invites us to do as Jesus did.

How do we join in God’s resting? Beyond “breath prayers” we just experimented with, maybe we join God’s resting by exploring various edifying practices for Sabbath. This could include asking ourselves thoughtful questions: what feels holy, gives lasting joy, truly renews? What Scripture am I drawn to? Instead of a 24-hour period, maybe engaging in miniature Sabbaths can help time be holy. It can be beneficial- as in moments in the day when we pause to remember God’s goodness and gracious acts. On days other than Sabbath, Jesus often withdrew from the crowds and went to “lonely places” to rest, pray and enjoy his love relationship with our heavenly Father (Luke 5:16). Whether it’s a lot or little time, work out a God-pleasing balance. Let yourself be overcome with thankfulness to God for God’s presence.

In June while at Montreat Conference Center, I tried turning clay on a pottery wheel. I got lost in time, and it seemed holy. It was so refreshing, and I learned many theological lessons from shaping the clay. I realized: 1) God, the Potter, is purposeful and molds us gently with loving hands, 2) We don’t have to be perfect, 3) We can delightfully join in what God is doing... just by being a willing vessel. We’re to live the gift of Sabbath by engaging in simple acts where God can easily break through. It’s not limited to playing with clay, but it involves choosing to rest.

The types of edifying activities can be nearly endless. Whatever we do, we know we're making the most of our Sabbath when the things we do are grace-filled. We would do well to hear and accept with joy God’s invitation of those kinds of activities that can transform and renew us. We don't have to be married to a new practice, discipline, or activity. Simply date it. You don't have to keep it forever. Just try something new. Experiment with something God may be leading you to do for a while and in the end, it may be found to be spiritually helpful to keep, or maybe toss.

Secondly, making time holy involves examining and amending spirit-draining patterns. We first thought about what we COULD do, now think about what to STOP doing. God invites us to stop. Just stop! Stop. Stop. Stop! Let

yourself stop the regular things of the week, even from well-meaning volunteerism and church work. Our spirits need to rest. Stop and ask yourself: What gets in the way of my relationship with God? What is it that you are worried about that you need to lay down? God wants to take that! Jesus said, "Come, all who are weary and heavy laden." Stop, my beloved, and give me your burdens. Let me replace that with abundant life.

What other things may need to be stopped? Most would admit, as we look around at society and maybe even in our home, the addictive, ultimately unsatisfying, excessive phone use. Give them a rest, so you can rest. Turning off devices reminds us of who we ought to be accessible to. Sabbath can be about stopping *something* in order to hear *someone*, or THE One! God stopped at creation and God stopped at incarnation. As Jesus died on that cross, you may recall the temple curtain was torn in two. What had blocked the entrance to God's presence was no more. Henceforth, God was fully available. Jesus overcame all barriers, even death! The whole purpose of this stopping with the fourth commandment is not simply to add another to the list of religious requirements and obligations that *drain* the soul and spirit. It's to be life-giving, to cure, and do empathetic good for ourselves and others. Jesus is about fulfilling, restoring, healing, and saving human life. Time with Jesus is about being whole, healthy, and free living.

In July, when I was at a Kentucky monastery, doing a silent retreat, walking along nearby wheatfields, I was stopped in my tracks. It occurred to me I was unintentionally imitating Jesus with his disciples, just like in today's NT reading. Our Lord was sharing some food from the fields. It was innocent and perhaps childlike. It was fun and nurturing food for the body and soul. He was helping them to playfully have a good time as they walked along. I imagine them casual and carefree in the fields, rubbing heads of grain within their hands, letting the wind carry away the needless broken shells. Then, the wet-blanket Pharisees misguidingly interpreted that this was work. In essence, they were making a mountain out of a molehill. In my stopping, I was able to deeply reflect on God's provision, God's priorities, God's goodness, and God's presence. It was so rich!

In conclusion, as we rest, I pray we pay attention to the One behind the former curtain. God wants to bless us... maybe with more courage for your walk; courage like that of a lion, maybe with more heart like that of a passionate hardworking tinman, maybe with wisdom for the one who feels like they're made of straw, maybe with just breath to carry on, or maybe with food from God's table for your spiritual journey.

When we make Sabbath a regular part of who we are, we witness to an exhausted world that God has more to offer than what they have experienced. There is life abundant, delight in creation, compassion for more than just yourself, and fulfillment of God's intentions. Amen.