

Experiencing God Through Sabbath

Theme

The theme for this gathering is "Sabbath." Why is Sabbath rest important for us, even though the concept is a countercultural one? Why don't we take time to slow down and just be with others? How can we take time to relax and play? How can we adopt the spirit of Sabbath living? How would our lives be different if we were able to find time for rest, renewal and delight in God on a regular basis?

Life Issue
*Why is Sabbath
important
for us today?*

Community Building & Opening Question

- Tell about the most relaxing and refreshing vacation that you have ever had. What makes that particular time stand out in your mind?
- What's your favorite thing to do when you have a few hours of "free" time? How does that activity (or inactivity) refresh and renew you?

Opening Prayer

Lord, you called your followers together in Christian community when you walked the earth. Gather us together today, so that we may grow closer to each other and closer to you. Be present with us, as we are present to one another. Guide us and renew us with your love and grace. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Genesis 2:2-3

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

What do others say?

A common response to the question "How are you doing?" is often, "Oh, I'm really busy. I don't know how I'm going to get everything done!" It's almost a badge of honor to take pride in how busy we are because busy-ness and productivity are highly valued in our culture. We are what we do. We gain worth and self-esteem, and material goods, by being productive and accomplishing as much as we can. We work harder and harder, live faster and faster, and are "on" 24/7/365.

While productive work and activities are a central part of who we are, the danger is that we get out of balance with the need to rest and be restored. God created us to live in the sacred rhythm of work and rest. The creation story in Genesis reminds us that God's work to create the world ended with a day of Sabbath. "The seventh day... God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." (Genesis 2:2-3) The third commandment (Exodus 23:12) reminds us to remember the Sabbath day. In Mark 2:27, Jesus tells his followers "The Sabbath was made for

humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” And in Mark 1:32-35 we see that even Jesus needs to rest and be restored after a busy time of healing and ministry. So surely it is not a sign of weakness to admit that we need to stop our work so that the healing power of Sabbath rest can restore us in body, mind, and spirit.

When I worked at St. John’s Abbey I remember looking out the window on the monks’ gardens. There I would see the tall figure of Father Godfrey Diekmann bent over the vegetable plants, pulling weeds and watering the plants. He was a brilliant, busy, productive professor who somehow found time for gardening. For him, gardening was Sabbath living. He lived in the Benedictine rhythm of “ora et labora”: pray and work.

God’s wisdom for commanding us to remember Sabbath time is that we stop what we’re doing and producing so that we remember God’s presence and the holiness of life. Sabbath time of deep, nourishing, effortless rest helps us to remember that we are dependent on the powers of God’s healing grace that are beyond us and hold us up. When we cease work in holy rest, we are able to listen to the voice of God’s spirit moving in us, loving, comforting, guiding, and prodding as we are strengthened to live in the world with hope, creative energy, and self-giving love.

It *is* possible to practice Sabbath time in the midst of busy life, and it will be different for each of us. Here are several suggestions:

- Admit the need to rest. It’s not a weakness.
- Find a regular time to shut down your busy-ness. Walk. Be silent. Read meditations. Pray. Listen. Attend worship. Say thanks. Start in small doses and slowly add more time for these practices. Get up early and spend an hour reading something you’ve been wanting to read.
- Take regular days off and vacation time to do things you really enjoy, such as biking, gardening, reading, and spending time with people you like.
- Set aside an evening as a family night. Take suggestions from all family members on the activities you’d like to do together. Take some time to talk with one another.

When I find it hard to put Sabbath in my life, I remind myself of a prayer I learned years ago: *Help me Lord to leave my hurried life behind. Help me now the quiet life within thy templed trees and lakes to find.*

Sabbath time restores us so we can return to active living. As St. Teresa says, “the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life.”

Think About...

- Why do you think the creation story includes an account of God resting after completing the work of creation?
- What are some of the things you really need to take a break from?
- What are some restorative things that you might include in your own Sabbath day?
- Why do you think that God included the mandate for Sabbath rest as one of the Ten Commandments? How can we support each other in following this commandment?

- What things in your life make it difficult to get Sabbath rest time? What would you have to change about your routine to be able to take a true Sabbath, even for one day each month?
- What would be the simplest thing about keeping Sabbath for you? What would be the hardest?
- Tony Jones, author of *The Sacred Way*, writes, "Sabbath is yet another spiritual practice that at first blush seems to be about giving things up, but in the end it becomes a gift that is beyond price." What would you have to "give up" to practice Sabbath living? What might be the "gifts beyond price" that you would gain from setting aside a time of Sabbath?
- The provocative message of our society that Sunday is a day to catch up on errands or get in a few more hours of work is so widespread that we don't even recognize it as working against our Christian beliefs. How might life be different if our society recognized the importance of Sabbath rest?

What's my response? *Select one or more ideas...*

- Set aside at least one day in the next month as a Sabbath day. Select activities that are renewing and restorative for you or simply follow your own intuition on that day.
- Set aside 20 minutes for silent prayer, simply being present to God's love, or for prayers of thanksgiving and praise.
- Take a slow, renewing walk. Walk slowly and silently for 30 minutes or more. Let your senses guide you. Take time to look, see, hear, smell, and touch God's creation. Instead of focusing on a destination or purpose, let the walk be simply an open-ended journey.
- Call some friends and arrange for a time of basketball, baseball, football, golf, skiing, snow shoeing, or another activity you enjoy. After the activity, spend some time connecting.
- Designate a Sabbath box and use it to store the things you won't be using on your Sabbath day (electronics, laundry detergent, to do lists, car keys, etc.). If an item is too large, place a symbol in the box. You can also write a particular worry on a piece of paper. At the end of the Sabbath time, reverently open the box and take up your life with a renewed sense that God is with you in the busy-ness of each day.
- Take time to call a friend/family member or write that person a letter – not a quick e-mail!
- Pray that the members of your small group will be blessed with the ability to rest and enjoy a Sabbath day.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for creating the universe and everything in it. Thank you for the many blessings that fill our lives. Help us to remember that even you rested. Forgive us for putting activity before relationships with others and with you. Give us your peace so that we can take time to rest. As we rest, refresh and renew our spirits so we can return with new vigor and hope. Whether for a day or a shorter time, Lord, help us keep your Sabbath. Amen.

Reflection written by Luther Dale

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