

Celebrating the Sabbath

What was it like in your family when you were growing up? You may remember Sundays as a time for going to church, eating a relaxing family dinner, and visiting with relatives or friends. Perhaps your household held a stricter observance, with long church services, no time for play, and prayer or Scripture reading. Maybe Sunday in your family was spent just like any other day of the week, with no special rituals or practices.

For every hundred people, there are probably a hundred ways to “keep holy the Lord’s day” and heal the self-battered by the week’s demands. One friend cherishes a Sunday morning ritual of donuts, milk, and the *New York Times*. Another cooks a huge dinner; a third takes a long walk outdoors. Each person knows from experience what restores energy and peace after a hectic week. In this activity they find...a restorative ritual that in all its essentials echoes the anointing of the sick. Sometimes, too, the ritual resonates with dying: we look back over the week’s losses, great and small. Perhaps we say goodbye to unrealistic expectations: I’ll never be president, pope, or a CEO. The house isn’t immaculate and the bank account isn’t overflowing. We give up our delusions of greatness and ease more happily into who we are: limited but loved. (Kathy Coffey, *Immersed in the Sacred*)

Blaine and Sarah McCormick have been developing a very focused and intentional Sabbath practice for some time now. They write:

Our family observes Sabbath from approximately 6 PM Saturday to 6 PM Sunday. This timing mirrors the Jewish Shabbat, which begins at sundown on Friday, but we have moved the holy time forward to the first day of the week to encompass our Christian beliefs. Our family begins Sabbath time on Saturday evening with a ritual. We light a Sabbath candle for each of our three children as Mom welcomes the Sabbath with a blessing: “May the light of the Sabbath candles drive out from us the spirit of anger and the spirit of fear and the spirit of pride. Send your blessing that we may walk in the ways of your Word and your Light. Enter our hearts this night, O Lord.” (Blaine and Sarah McCormick, *Sabbath: Christian Reflection*)

Then Blaine and Sarah bless each child by reading a favorite Scripture passage, reflecting with them on the previous week, and offering a prayer. They might pass around a pleasant or pungent spice to remind them how their lives are to be a “pleasant aroma” to God, or share a taste of bread strips dipped in honey as they remember how God’s words are “sweeter than honey.” They then share a prayer or story before blowing out their Sabbath candles.

For one family, Sunday is often a day for extended cooking. After attending liturgy, they take the time to make a large dinner, and sometimes a few other dishes to keep for the week. Sunday afternoon offers the space and time to cook in a leisurely fashion, as opposed to the

more rushed preparations during the week. Usually, they will invite nearby relatives over for dinner in the evening, perhaps followed by a movie.

Of course, cooking and/or entertaining others are not necessarily enjoyable activities for everyone. In your house, Sunday may be the time for a meal eaten out, or for sandwiches and juice boxes.

It may be necessary to adjust our lifestyles in order to accommodate a commitment to keeping Sabbath. If you have children, you might ask whether activities that require Sunday engagement are done for the sake of rest and enjoyment—active leisure—or for some other reason. And if you work on Sunday, you will need to be intentional about setting aside time and space on another day of the week for Sabbath practice. This might mean a day during the week devoted to a personal Sabbath or a Friday afternoon and evening for a family Sabbath. Find the right time and practices that work that will help you live your commitment to keeping the Sabbath.

Sabbath practice is the focus and culmination of a life that is daily and practically devoted to honoring God...and to sharing in God's own creative delight. We do not wait for one specified day of the week to offer our thanksgiving and praise, even if one day is set apart to shed a critical and corrective light on all our other days. The goal is rather to arrange our schedules and direct our choices so that they manifest at all times a deep appreciation for the diverse and costly ways of God's grace. (Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*)

Adopting a Sabbath attitude throughout our week can support and nurture all our efforts. It urges us to respect ourselves and others, live in gratitude for the gifts we have been given, and develop a lifestyle that is conducive to our wellbeing. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and a Sabbath mindset forges that image into our everyday life, governing our actions and our choices. It helps us stay open to the possibility of God entering into the marrow of our lives, in countless, intricate ways.

Developing a Sabbath Practice

Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death.

(Dorothy C. Bass)

Sabbath is a discipline and practice in which we ask, consider, and answer the questions that will lead us into a complete and joyful life. As such, the Sabbath is a teaching that has the potential to redirect and transform all our existence, bringing it into more faithful alignment with God's life-building and life-strengthening ways. (Norman Wirzba)

Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is a day when we partake of the wisdom, peace and delight that grow only in the soil of time—time consecrated specifically for play, refreshment and renewal. Many of us, in our desperate drive to be successful and care for our many responsibilities, feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. But the Sabbath has proven its wisdom over the ages. The Sabbath gives us the permission we need to stop, to restore our souls. As part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is already woven into the fabric of our society. Many of us still recall when, not long ago, shops and offices were closed on Sundays. Those quiet Sunday afternoons are embedded in our cultural memory.

(Wayne Muller)

Sabbath is God's way of saying, "Stop. Notice your limits. Don't burn out." It is a day God gives us to remember who and what work is for as well as what matters most. Sunday generously hands us hours to look into the eyes of those we love. We have time for loving and being loved. (Adele Ahlberg Calhoun)

You don't have to change your whole life—yet. Plan for one Sabbath at home to start. Put the date on the calendar and pray that God will help you to honor this Sabbath and keep it holy.

Consider what preparations and planning are necessary for making sure that you set aside all types of work and worry on this day. Gather your family or household together to discuss how to arrange your Sabbath for refreshment, renewal, and relationships. Select one or more of the following questions for reflection.

Reflection

- ◆ **How do you mark the Sabbath in your home today? In what ways are your practices like those in your home while growing up? In what ways is it different?**
- ◆ **In your home and in your life, what are the obstacles standing in the way of taking at least one day of rest each week?**

- ✦ What, if anything, would you like to change in the way you celebrate Sabbath?

- ✦ Do you see Sunday as the best day for keeping Sabbath? Or do you need to keep Sabbath on a different day of the week?

- ✦ What can you learn from the Jewish observance of Sabbath?

Saying “No”: What to Exclude

You can begin shaping your Sabbath practice by deciding what should be excluded from this day and what should be included. There are three categories of things that we do well to exclude from our Sabbath. (The following ideas were developed from *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton.)

Work

What constitutes work for us? We must commit ourselves to not doing these things on the Sabbath. We need to identify the challenge and temptations related to our work and establish clear boundaries to protect Sabbath time.

- ◆ How can you say “No” to work on the Sabbath?

Buying and Selling

If we are out buying, selling and engaging in the world of commerce, it means someone has to work and we are contributing to it. It feeds our consumerism, an aspect of life in our culture that needs rest on the Sabbath.

- ◆ How can you say “No” to buying and selling on the Sabbath?

Worry

The Sabbath is an invitation to rest emotionally and mentally from things that cause worry and stress, such as budgets, major decisions, and planning the week ahead. If we observe Sabbath on Sunday, perhaps Sunday evening after dinner is a time when, from a place of rest, we can engage in some of the decision-making that needs to be done.

- ◆ How can you say “No” to worry on the Sabbath?

Saying “Yes”: What to Include

What is to replace all that we are excluding from our Sabbath practice? The simple answer is, whatever delights you and replenishes you. Consider the following three things to include in your Sabbath practice.

Resting the Body

What are the activities that rest and replenish your body? The invitation of Sabbath time is to replace the time you would normally spend working with activities that you find restorative, such as a walk or other physical exercise, eating your favorite foods, reading, and listening to music.

- ◆ **How can you say “Yes” to resting the body on the Sabbath? What types of activities can you do?**

Replenishing the Spirit

Another invitation of the Sabbath is to pay attention to what replenishes the spirit, and choose only those activities that renew you and bring you joy. Find personal activities that replenish the spirit: silence, reading, dancing, and listening to music. Find activities for the whole family that replenish the spirit: a special meal, recreation, games, sharing stories, gathering with relatives and friends.

- ◆ **How can you say “Yes” to replenishing the spirit on the Sabbath? What types of activities can you do?**

Restoring the Soul

Perhaps the deepest refreshment is the invitation to renew the soul through worship and quiet reflection. This is the part of us that gets most lost during the workweek, which is governed almost completely by the value of productivity. In addition to personal activities, such as silence and prayer, identify rituals or shared activities that create a spirit of reverence for God on this day such as a special meal with a Scripture reading and time to go around the table and talk about where God seemed particularly present with you during the week. Light a candle to mark the Sabbath day.

- ◆ **How can you say “Yes” to restoring the soul on the Sabbath? What types of activities can you do?**

Review Your Sabbath Plans

- ◆ **Do our activities allow us rest in body, mind, and spirit?**
- ◆ **Do our activities nurture our spiritual life in some way?**
- ◆ **Do our activities give us time away from the temporal activities of our lives?**

Practices for a Simple Sabbath

- ◆ *Light a candle.* Set aside sacred time for a family meal, for prayer or meditation or simply quiet reading. Set a candle before you, offer a simple blessing and let the world fall away.
- ◆ *Practice thanksgiving.* Give thanks before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. During Sabbath, we are less concerned with what is missing and more grateful for what has already been given.
- ◆ *Bless your children.* Place your hand gently on their heads and offer your blessing. What do you most wish for them? Self-knowledge, courage, safety, joy? Let them hear your prayers for their happiness.
- ◆ *Invite a Sabbath pause.* Choose one common act—touching a doorknob, turning on a faucet or hearing the phone ring. Throughout the day when this occurs, stop and take three silent, mindful breaths. Then go on.
- ◆ *Take a walk.* Stroll slowly to nowhere in particular for 30 minutes. Let your senses guide you. Stop and observe deeply whatever attracts you -- a tree, a stone, a flower. Breathe.
- ◆ *Pamper your body.* Take a guilt-free nap. Take a leisurely bath with music, special scents, candles. Make love with your spouse. Walk barefoot in the grass. The Sabbath is a day of delight.
- ◆ *Create a Sabbath box.* Put your to-do list, your keys, your cell phone, your wallet—anything you don't need in Sabbath time—into the box. Write down a particular worry or concern and drop it in. Just for now, let it go.
- ◆ *Turn off the cell phone.* Or the computer, the TV, the washer and dryer. Create a period of time when you will not be disturbed or seduced by what our technologies demand of us.
- ◆ *Prepare a Sabbath meal—or a Sabbath cup of tea.* Even if you are alone, you can choose foods you love, put flowers on the table, take time to enjoy every dish, give thanks for the bounty of the earth.
- ◆ *Seek companionship.* One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place of refuge, a Sabbath for one another. Ask for companionship when you lose your way. Give quiet time and attention to others.
- ◆ *Reset your inner compass.* Make a list of the values and principles that guide your life -- both those you follow and those you would like to follow. Speak them aloud, alone or with loved ones.
- ◆ *Surrender a problem.* The Sabbath reminds us that forces larger than ourselves are at work healing the world. Imagine that these forces already know how to solve your problem. Turn it over to their care.

Making a Sabbath Box

In his book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* Wayne Muller writes, “A Sabbath box holds items Jews can’t use on Sabbath . . . anything that cannot be taken into sacred space.” Muller writes,

My friends Zalman and Eve faithfully keep the Sabbath. While I was visiting them last spring, they told me that in some families it is customary to make a Sabbath box to hold all the equipment you do not need on the Sabbath – pens, car keys, wallets, etc. “On Friday,” they explained, “someone stands at the door with the Shabbos box and as people enter the house for the evening meal, they put anything they know should not be taken into sacred space. Then, stripped of all our tools and machines, we can truly pray, *God, there is nothing I can do about these concerns, so I know it is in your hands.*”

When you set aside time for Sabbath – whether it is an hour, a morning, or a day – put in the box those things you do not want to use – a tablet, phone, or something symbolic can serve as a physical reminder of what we leave behind when we enter sacred rest.

You can also use the Sabbath box to hold all the things you feel you have left undone. Perhaps write on a small piece of paper a word or phrase that signifies a particular worry or concern you would like to leave behind for the time being. Then light a candle, alone or with family and friends. Let each of you speak about those things that are left to do, and as the candle burns, allow the cares to melt away. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, said Jesus. The worries of today are sufficient for today. Whatever remains to be done, for now, let it be. It will not get done tonight. In Sabbath time we take our hand off the plow, and allow God and the earth to care for what is needed. Let it be. Then, at the end of your Sabbath time, be aware of how you open the box, and how you respond to what you receive back into your life.

Making a Sabbath Box

Light a meditation candle.

Read Isaiah 58:9b-14.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Pray together.

O Holy Spirit, guide us now and help us name concerns and worries we need to discard to celebrate Sabbath in wholesome, holy ways. Help us discern what responsibilities we need to put away for Sabbath, how to divest ourselves of burdens and open up space for your powerful, enlightening work. Amen.

Reflect

- ◆ What dominates my Sabbath time, activity, thought?
- ◆ What blocks my concentration on, and celebration of, God?
- ◆ In what ways am I sidelined by “shoulds” and “oughts,” by my own striving, or by the demands of others?
- ◆ What can I eliminate from Sabbath time so that I can focus only on God, and open myself to God’s love, power, and joy?

Create a Sabbath box.

A Sabbath box is a place to put the things that you carry around, and deliberately “let go” of their uses. Place the items in the box, close the lid, and be done with them until it’s time to deliberately pick them up again. Remove anything that distracts them from Sabbath, such as a watch, cell phone, etc., and put the items into the box. You can also write on small slips of paper anything you want to leave behind, so it doesn’t distract you during Sabbath. Put the papers in the box.

After all have had a chance to contribute something to their Sabbath box, ask if any of them want to share what they discarded temporarily. Be prepared to share something yourself.

On the Sabbath morning or moment (whatever time you set aside for Sabbath) make a regular practice of divestment and refocusing so that you (or your family/household) can begin the Sabbath — focusing on God and receiving God’s blessings.

Closing Reflection

*If you watch your step on the Sabbath and don’t use my holy day for personal advantage, if you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy, God’s holy day as a celebration, if you honor it by refusing ‘business as usual,’ making money, running here and there—then you’ll be free to enjoy God! (Isaiah 58:14 from *The Message*)*

Participating in Sunday Worship

Worship is an important part of keeping Sabbath. It allows us to acknowledge the gracious gifts of God while celebrating our role as participants in the divine process. Being part of a faith community and regularly worshipping together is an essential part of our Christian faith. In *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes: “We delude ourselves if we imagine we can live the spiritual life in total isolation from Christian community, for it is impossible to be Christian in solitary splendor. To be Christian is to be joined to the Body of Christ....Life in the church teaches us that we are made for communion not only with God but with one another in Christ.”

Going to church on Sunday allows us the opportunity to worship as a community. We stand with others who believe what we do as we take time to pray together, listen to Scripture, and be renewed through our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In communal worship we remember that we are not alone, that as part of the Christian community we share a commitment to following the model of Jesus Christ through the gospels and liturgy.

Sunday can be a time for private prayer and devotion, a practice that can extend our Sabbath to every day of the week. Reading Scripture can help us focus on the week ahead, whether we re-read the readings for the day, look ahead to the readings for the following Sunday, or simply reflect on selected passages that speak to us.

You might want to spend time quietly reflecting on the Scripture readings; perhaps you might talk about the readings with your family or a group of friends. Some questions to consider are: What was Jesus trying to teach through this gospel? What did it mean to each of us? Is there something we could do during the week to keep the theme of the gospel in our minds and hearts?

Singing hymns or listening to liturgical music is another form of prayer that can enhance our Sabbath keeping. However you keep Sabbath, make sure that you take time to acknowledge God’s loving and generous presence guiding the actions and activities of our daily life.

Reflection

- ◆ How can you overcome the obstacles to attending church on Sunday?
- ◆ How can you prepare for Sunday worship or extend Sunday worship in your home?

Living the Practice of Keeping Sabbath

1. Which Sabbath strategies they will adopt to strengthen their practice of Keeping Sabbath.
2. Develop a “script” for your Sabbath practice for a month complete with activities (or lack of activities).
3. Review your one month script:
 - ◆ If you keep Sabbath, how will the rest of your week need to change?
 - ◆ What will you need to prepare beforehand in order to have a restful Sabbath?
 - ◆ How might ceasing from work one day a week reshape your life and attitudes on the other six?
4. Use *A Month of Sundays* to reflect on your new practice of Sabbath. Each week review your experience and seek ways to strengthen your Sabbath practice.

A Month of Sundays: Developing a Sabbath Practice

God of all creation, you breathed us into this world and called us by name to be yours.

Guide our days.

Let our work reflect your glory and promote the good of all humankind.

Show us the goodness of keeping Sabbath, that we may be whole in body, mind, and spirit.

Help us to know the patterns and rhythms of our lives,

and bring peace to the places of chaos in life.

Let us live in your love forever.

Amen.

Exclude: Work, Buying and Selling, Worry

Include: Resting the Body, Replenishing the Spirit, Restoring the Soul

First Sunday – Reflection

Take time at the end of the day to record your individual and/or family activities for the day.

- ◆ Which activities fit in the “exclude” category?
- ◆ Which fit in the “include” category?

Resolve:

- ◆ to attend Sunday worship for the next three Sundays
- ◆ to eliminate one activity from your “exclude” list for next Sunday
- ◆ to add one activity from the “include” list for next Sunday

Second Sunday – Reflection

- ◆ What activities remain in the “exclude” category?
- ◆ How did the changes in your activities enhance your well-being?
- ◆ What activity from the “include” list will you add for next Sunday?
- ◆ How will these choices help you adopt a Sabbath attitude that helps keep your life in balance?

Third Sunday – Reflection

- ◆ What remains to be excluded?
- ◆ What activity will you add or enhance to complete the “include” list next week?

Fourth Sunday – Reflection

- ◆ Have your changes allowed for rest and renewal of body, mind, spirit?
- ◆ How has your spiritual life grown?
- ◆ How have your changes brought you to a new understanding of Sabbath?
- ◆ What changes will you resolve to make a permanent part of your life?