

THE SERIOUS WORK OF REST

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker

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Does this sound familiar?

Alarm clock goes off, it's 5 or 6 or 7 o'clock. Turn on the coffee maker. Turn on the radio or television to hear or see the news. Turn on the computer, check email, read the paper online. Check the cell phone for calls or messages. Go to the gym, get on the elliptical or treadmill and watch more news. Get dressed get ready to leave for work. Check for cell phone, PDA, portable PC, electronic devices of several kinds. Get to work, turn on the computer, check email, again. Work all day. Go home, turn on the computer. Get a couple more things done, check email. Have dinner, turn on the television. Watch a movie or some show with the spouse and kids, or by yourself. Check email one more time before bed. Go to sleep. Get up and do it all again.

Then comes the weekend. Instead of the alarm clock going off, sleep an extra hour or two. Still get up and turn on the coffee maker and computer and check email. Try to get a little work done to get a head start on the week to come. Then try to spend some quality time with family and friends. Sunday morning comes and it's time to go to church. Then off to brunch or a meeting. Home again and check email, yet again. Start preparing for the week to come. Maybe a little relaxation time before bed and then the week begins. And so it goes. And goes and goes.

We live this way week after week, hoping we can make it to vacation time. Then maybe we can have a week or two away from it all. Maybe even Starr Island where there is no screen time.

Life in the age of computers has gotten so much more hectic. When I started working in technology, back in the stone age of punch cards, we told everyone, and I believed it too, that the computer was going to give us tons of more free time. And in some ways it has. Things that took hours to do can be done in a matter of minutes. If you want to know the latest census numbers for say Indonesia instead of going to the library to find it, you can just sign on to the internet and have those numbers in just a few keystrokes. It is truly a marvel what we can do with our computers. Yet somehow instead of having more free time, we fill the extra time with more work. There are fewer and fewer places in the world where you can really get away from work. Cell phones work in the remotest of places. Internet cafes can be found in every country on the globe. And who needs an internet café when you can use your handheld device anyway? Its gotten to the point where only a good old fashioned blackout can stop us from being plugged in if we want.

The key to all of this is “if we want.” We have all these devices that enable us to stay connected but only if we want. To an extent we can choose to unplug ourselves from the connectivity grid. I say to an extent because, for many of us, our work demands of us a certain level of connectivity. Yet there can come a time when we can choose to disconnect our lives from the electronic network and reclaim the sacredness of silence. As many of you know, when I do the announcements I always make sure to say something witty about turning off your cell phones and other electronic devices. I do that not just because it’s annoying to hear a cell phone ringing just as I or Galen or Forrest is about to say the most important thing you’ll ever hear in your life. But also because there should be a time and a place, in our lives, where we may enter into the holiness of sacred time undisturbed by the sounds of the secular world. There should be a time in each of our lives when we let go of the work of the world and embrace the serious work of our rest.

In the book of Genesis, from the Hebrew Bible, after God had made the world and all the animals, plants and people in it, in a mere six days, God finished the work that God had began and rested. And the seventh day was made holy. All the other days God had proclaimed good, but the seventh day, the day of rest, God declared holy. There is something holy in our resting. Something holy when we put down our work and take up the joy of rest.

The joy of rest is something that seems to elude us more and more. There has been report after report in the news lately telling us that we are a sleep deprived people. We need to have eight hours of sleep every night to properly keep our bodies and our minds rested, yet how many of us can say we get that amount of rest every night? I know I can’t. I don’t know many people who can. We know the consequences of not getting enough rest: increased blood pressure, increased stress, weight gain leading to a host of other health issues. And still we wear our lack of rest as a badge of courage. Just ask anyone in New York how they are and the first thing they’ll tell you is how busy they are. Try this – answer someone when they ask how you are “oh I’m well rested, not too busy, managing my time well.” See if they don’t look at you as if you’re some kind of slacker. We give lip service to rest.

It’s not only each night that we need rest. We need a prolonged time every week when our focus turns away from the outward world and turns inward toward the soul. Each of us needs a day during the week when we cease to do the work of the world and do the work of our souls. Each of us needs a sabbath day.

The fourth commandment found in the story of Exodus says to “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” A day where no one should work. Not only are you not to work but not “your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates.” On the sabbath day, everyone is to put aside their work for it is a day to be kept holy.

In Jewish law there are thirty nine categories of things that have been designated as work. From lighting a fire to washing wool, baking bread to transporting any object from

the private to the public domain. From these thirty nine categories we have the modern restrictions on driving a car to turning on a light. It may seem at first that the Sabbath is a time of restrictions, but that is not its purpose. Abraham Heschel tells that the “meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”ⁱ

By restricting us from the “world of creation” we are freed to experience the simple joy of living in world. The Sabbath far from being a burden, filled with rules to follow, is there to remind us of the holiness of the time we are given upon this earth. It is supposed to be both contemplative and joyous. And it is supposed to last twenty four hours every week. Every week we are supposed to give ourselves the gift of a day to celebrate the gift of our lives.

Judaism celebrates the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. But it is not necessary, I believe, for us to follow the tradition of Saturday as the Sabbath. The early Christians moved the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, and called it the Lord’s day. They gave up the rules of Judaism and for a time it wasn’t even a sabbath day. The Protestant Reformation eventually re-established the Lord’s Day as a sabbath day. Muslims gather for a common day of prayer on Friday. And while it is not a sabbath day in the same way as Judaism or Christianity it is a time for the community to stop working and gather together for the spiritual well being of not only the individual but for the whole community. The sabbath day could be any day that you choose, it need not be Saturday or Sunday or Friday.

What is necessary is that we pick one day, each week to keep as a sabbath day. One day each week where we cease to work, for the word sabbath comes from the Hebrew verb *shabbat* - “to cease.” One day where we intentionally give our hands a rest and give our souls some nourishment.

How should we do that? Do we need to follow the thirty nine categories of work that observant Jews follow? No I don’t think so. I am not opposed to turning on a light switch. I do not see that as work. But I do think you don’t turn on your computer unless it’s to play. There is a young woman in Seattle, Ariel Meadow Stallings, who has created a secular sabbath which she calls *52 Weeks Unplugged*. On her sabbath day she does not use anything that has a screen. No television, no computer, no cell phone calls - though she’ll answer if it rings she won’t make a call, no portable DVD player. If it has a screen she doesn’t use it. Of course the next day she writes all about it in her blog, which is an online, open journal.

Her sabbath is a secular one. She does not call it a spiritual discipline, though I suspect without being aware of it, it is indeed a spiritual discipline. In her blog she tells us what she does during her periods of being unplugged. She writes letters to people. Real letters, not just quick notes on email. She plays games with her friends. She’s started dancing again. All things that had been put on the back burner but things that feed her soul.

The reaction to her has been interesting. Quite a few people wrote in their own blogs how this was easier for Ariel. Some have said if she had kids she wouldn't be able to do. Or if she had a different kind of job. I suspect they say these things for a variety of reasons that preclude themselves from following suit. More people, however, applauded her and would like to do the same. She was even on one of the morning talk shows and a New York Times article appeared by someone who had tried it as well. The most amazing part of this isn't that she's doing it but that we have come to a point where it is *news* that someone should actually be taking a sabbath day. It says so much about our society's insatiable need to work, work, work, do, do, do.

Even our church time seems to be filling up more and more with work. Look at our calendar of things to do after services. There's always a meeting of one kind or another. Today the Church Council will be meeting to discuss plans for Fun Day. There's an irony in this. On the day we should be spending time not working we will be working on a day in the future when we will have fun. I know the reason we are meeting today is because it's convenient to meet when people are already at church, but convenience becomes just one more reason we give for not taking a sabbath day.

Sabbath taking is not an easy discipline to start but, once started, is surprisingly easy to keep. In the beginning it may seem like another chore to add to the long list of weekly tasks: go to work, do the laundry, get the kids to soccer practice, take a sabbath day. Approach it as a chore and it becomes one, approach it as a gift and it becomes just that. It takes some discipline to start a ritual of rest, but once you begin one, it becomes an oasis in the desert of your busy-ness.

So start slow if you have to. Pick a day and say to yourself and your family that for these many hours, on this day, we will do no work. Instead we will take pleasure in each other's company and in the simple gifts life has to offer. Go for a walk in the park. Cook a meal together. Invite friends to come over rather than go out. Create a ritual for your family. Light a chalice and say a prayer of thanksgiving before sitting down to share the story of each others lives. Spend time asking your soul how it is doing and then spend some more time giving it what it needs. Take a sabbath day.

We sorely need rest not just as individuals but as communities as well. Every few years a referendum appears on the ballots in towns like Paramus, New Jersey asking the voters to rescind their restrictions on Sunday commerce. Now Paramus isn't any more religious than any other town in America. But the people there understand they need a time when their streets aren't clogged with shoppers looking for one more bargain. When they can have a peaceful day without the noise and pollution of cars. Their streets can be filled instead with the sounds of children playing, people walking and a silence they cannot have the six other days of the week. Each time the ballot has come before the public it has failed. The people of Paramus want a day of rest. Wouldn't it be something special if every community decided to take a day of rest.

I know that rest today does not come easily. There are so many things to keep us from our essential need to cease the whirlwind of work and responsibility. Yet we have the power to say "yes" to a sabbath day in our lives. We need to be intentional but we can create space for the holiness in time. For one day a week the world and its problems can

be set aside. For one day a week we can celebrate the sacredness of our own lives. Rabbi Heschel says that “even when our souls are seared, even when no prayer can come out of our tightened throats, the clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace.”ⁱⁱ

Don't we deserve that peace? Aren't we special enough to give ourselves this small token of time? Yes, we are worth doing the serious work of rest. We have each been loved into existence by a God who made no mistake in our creation. And we deserve a day to honor and celebrate the mystery of our existence. So let us pray that it may come to pass that each of us knows the joy of a day of rest, each and every week.

Amen, blessed be and Shabbat shalom.

ⁱ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1951), p10.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p101.