

The Meaning of Sabbath

Reflection

- ◆ What do you remember from childhood about Sunday activities?
- ◆ What does Sunday look like in your household today?

The Meaning of Sabbath

Keeping Sabbath offers us the God-given gift of rest. It allows us time to look at ourselves and at our lives apart from the everyday world. More important, it offers extended time and space to give thanks and praise to God for the many gifts in our lives.

To function as whole and holy people, there must be a balance between work and rest in our lives. In his book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Josef Peiper writes: “Culture depends for its very existence on leisure, and leisure, in its turn, is not possible unless it has a durable and consequently living link...with divine worship.” Peiper further writes:

Leisure, it must be clearly understood, is a mental and spiritual attitude—it is not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation. It is, in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul, and as such utterly contrary to the ideal of “worker” in each and every one of the three aspects under which it was analyzed: work as activity, as toil, as a social function.

Leisure can be either active—such as recreational sports, games, exercise, or other such pastimes—or passive—reading, watching a movie, daydreaming. In its very essence, leisure is a state of restoration, where the mind and soul are freed from utilitarian ties, from a need to justify one’s activity. Too, intention comes into play with the types of leisure activity we choose. There are times when watching TV offers us rest, a brief time to not think, perhaps enjoying a laugh or learning about something new. But if we are slumped in front of the set for hours on end, mindlessly watching with no real engagement with what we are doing, this is destructive to a spirit of restoration and renewal.

During Sabbath, we switch to “God time,” *kairos*, rather than *chronos*, manmade and regulated time. Kairos is quality time, the appointed time for God’s work; chronos measures the quantity and movement of our day-to-day world.

The difference between the Sabbath and all other days is not to be noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The

Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear. (Abraham Joshua Heschel)

Yet Sabbath is more than simply resting from our work. According to Norman Wirzba, “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.”

Christians have traditionally observed Sunday as the Sabbath day. And while it is good to set aside one day each week for worship and rest, the practice of keeping Sabbath should be an evolving practice for us, extending into the rhythm and flow of daily life.

The custom of the “weekend” has become more widespread, a weekly period of respite, spent perhaps far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political or sporting activities which are usually held on free days. This social and cultural phenomenon is by no means without its positive aspects if, while respecting true values, it can contribute to people’s development and to the advancement of the life of society as a whole....Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a “weekend,” it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see “the heavens.” (John Paul II, *Dies Domini*)

Adopting a Sabbath attitude keeps us balanced throughout every facet of our lives. It allows us to see the work that we do as part of the big picture of our lives, to know that we are more than the job we do, more than our roles as husband, mother, friend, colleague, or confidant; we are God’s blessed creatures, part and parcel of the evolving story of creation.

Reflection

- ◆ What does Sabbath mean to you? To your family?
- ◆ Do you regularly observe a day of rest? Do you do this on Sunday, or does your life necessitate setting aside another day of the week for rest?
- ◆ What activities are most restful to you? Which of these do you wish you had more time for?
- ◆ What is your definition of leisure? Do you see it as an active and essential part of your life?

The Biblical Roots of Keeping Sabbath

Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work—neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. In six days I, the Lord, made the earth, sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the Lord, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8–11)

We are invited to participate in the creative work of God by stepping outside the routine of our daily work. God’s immanent and transcendent being is available to us throughout the created world, and the observance of Sabbath allows us the space to open ourselves to discovering God’s presence more fully in our lives. In his book, *The Family Cloister*, David Robinson writes: “The Sabbath invites us not only to enjoy leisure and recreation. The Sabbath is a weekly invitation to be re-created by our Creator, to have our whole selves refreshed and renewed by God.”

But there is also an aspect of liberation in observing Sabbath. “The God who rests on the seventh day, rejoicing in his creation, is the same God who reveals his glory in liberating his children from Pharaoh’s oppression” (John Paul II). We see this illustrated in a passage from Deuteronomy:

Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy, as I, the Lord your God, have commanded you. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work—neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. Your slaves must rest just as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that I, the Lord your God, rescued you by my great power and strength. That is why I command you to observe the Sabbath. (Deuteronomy 5:12–15)

By the very nature of our humanity, we are bound to the demands of the material world. We are confronted by our imperfection and know that sin and evil are a very real part of our existence in both an individual and communal way. Rabbi Irwin Kula writes in his book *Yearnings*, “We are free only when we break loose from the physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural forces that drive us without our even knowing it.” The practice of keeping Sabbath liberates us from this bondage.

The Jewish Practice of Keeping Sabbath

The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb *shavat*, which means, “to cease.” Thus, for the Hebrew people, the Sabbath was a day of ceasing from work. Even today Orthodox and Conservative Jews refrain from all non-essential activity during their Sabbath, called *Shabbat* or *Shabbos*, which begins at sundown on Friday and lasts until sundown on Saturday. Shabbat is a day of celebration as well as prayer, and many Jews attend synagogue services on Friday night or Saturday morning. Although most Shabbat laws are restrictive, there are also joyful practices that encourage a spirit of celebration. These include:

- ◆ preparing for the upcoming Shabbat by bathing, having a haircut, and cleaning and beautifying the home (with flowers, for example)
- ◆ eating three festive meals: Friday night dinner, Shabbat lunch, and a third meal, eaten late Saturday afternoon
- ◆ visiting with family and friends
- ◆ singing special songs for the Shabbat meal
- ◆ reading, studying, and discussing Torah
- ◆ wearing festive clothing and refraining from unpleasant conversation, including talk about money or business matters
- ◆ engaging in marital relations.

Restricted activities are taken from a list of thirty-nine activities prohibited by the Talmud, such as sowing, plowing, reaping, kneading, baking, sewing, writing, building, demolishing, lighting a fire, and transporting objects. Orthodox and some Conservative branches of Judaism rule that it is prohibited to turn electric devices on or off, as this action is analogous to lighting a fire and extinguishing a fire. Also prohibited is the use of automobiles on Shabbat as a violation against transporting objects, among other regulations.

Generally speaking, adherents of Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism believe that it is up to the individual Jew to determine whether to follow prohibitions on Shabbat or not. For example, some Jews might find writing or other activities (such as cooking) for leisure and social purposes to be an enjoyable activity that enhances Shabbat and its holiness, and therefore encourage such practices. Many Reform Jews believe that what constitutes “work” is different for each person; thus, only what the person considers work is forbidden.

Reflection

- ◆ **Why is Sabbath so important in the Jewish tradition?**

- ◆ **What can we learn from the Jewish observance of Sabbath?**

The Christian Practice of Keeping Sabbath

For Christians, Sunday, the day when Jesus was raised from the dead, has been the traditional day for keeping Sabbath since the formation of the church.

The early Christians were convinced that God's creative activity extended beyond the seven-day week, and so the first day, Sunday, was also the eighth day of God's work. Their dedication of Sunday for gathering and worship grew out of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord....As they gathered in homes and at the Temple on the "first day of the week," the disciples broke bread, prayed, interpreted Scripture, rehearsed the good news, and prepared for ministry. By the end of the first century the designation "the first day of the week," which reflects a Jewish way of reckoning time, was replaced by a uniquely Christian term, "the Lord's Day." (Robert Kruschwitz)

In 321 AD, the emperor Constantine declared Sunday to be a day of rest throughout the empire. This practice was motivated as much out of concern for productivity as for religious reasons. The declaration read, in part: "On the venerable day of the Sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country, however, persons engaged in agriculture may freely and lawfully continue their pursuits because it often happens that another day is not suitable for grain-sowing or vine planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations the bounty of heaven should be lost."

During the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Sunday continued to be observed as a religious and commercial holiday throughout Christianized Europe. (As noted earlier, Jews observe Sabbath on Saturday; the Muslim Sabbath is observed on Friday.) Even with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s, Sabbath observance was a key part of the culture in both Europe and the developing United States.

Today, many of us have lost any sense of Sunday being a day set apart, a day of rest, celebration, and worship. Laws that once regulated what could and could not be done on Sunday have been, for the most part, repealed.

Until quite recently, it was easier in traditionally Christian countries to keep Sunday holy because it was an almost universal practice and because, even in the organization of civil society, Sunday rest was considered a fixed part of the work schedule. Today, however, even in those countries which give legal sanction to the festive character of Sunday, changes in socioeconomic conditions have often led to profound modifications of social behavior and hence of the character of Sunday. (John Paul II, *Dies Domini*)

Despite the trends of declining importance, Sabbath still holds a place of importance for many people that moves them to set time aside to mark this day in a special way, especially by attending a religious service and/or spending time with family.

“I think people really would like to keep a Sabbath, although they may not call it a Sabbath,” said John Fisher of McLean, Va., a retired math teacher and management consultant who belongs to a “Sabbath keepers” group at his church. “They would like to have some private time, some rest, and they’re afraid to do it” because they fear losing productivity. “I think people are looking for permission to stop and think and reflect.” Fisher and his wife light a candle at sundown each Saturday to mark a period of reflection that ends Sunday evening, “just to remind us of God’s presence and of peacefulness,” he said. After a quiet dinner together, they go for a walk, do crossword puzzles, or read—mundane practices that Fisher says help rejuvenate him for the busy week ahead. (Beliefnet.com)

Reflection

- ◆ What new insights into Sabbath did you discover through the activities and presentations?

- ◆ Why did Christians adopt a Sabbath practice?

- ◆ How does this Sabbath requirement of no work or commerce honor God and respect human needs?

- ◆ How is keeping Sabbath more than just attending church worship?