
The Sabbath That Heals

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Proper 16 – Year C**

I wonder which scripture passage about sabbath spoke to you today. Did you notice that both Isaiah and Luke address keeping the sabbath?

I especially love the poetic language of Isaiah: “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath...if you call the sabbath a delight...if you honor it, not going your own ways...then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”

To my ears, that description of sabbath is like a cool glass of water on a hot Georgia day. I want to take it in slowly, letting the icy calm liquid linger on my lips, in my mouth, down my throat. I may even raise the chilled glass to my face, letting the droplets wet my cheek. Couple that with a gentle breeze and a chorus of cicadas, and that’s pretty much how I feel about Isaiah’s description of sabbath. It is something to savor.

And I don’t want to miss what Isaiah says right before this description—really the whole of Isaiah 58 is a text worthy of printing out and taping to your mirror. It is a passage we would do well to read again, and again, and again as a lesson on how to be in right relationship with God and one another.

But where our passage picks up today in verse 9, the prophet tells us that if we care for one another and let God care for us, then we will be, “like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” He says you will be rebuilt and raised up, and you will be one who repairs and restores. You will be called the repairer of the breach! Oh my goodness! How we need breach repairers in this day and age!

And yet to be people who restore and repair broken relationships and a broken world, we must slow down and yield to God’s restoration of us. We cannot do what we are called to do if we don’t take time to listen to and learn from the one calling us. Our good intentions and intelligent minds and go-getter attitude will not be enough. We need rest. Like the God who so lovingly created us and then rested, we need rest. Because we are created in the image of God, if we want to truly be that image of God in the world, we need rest. We need sabbath rest.

As much as I know this truth in my core, as much as I love this truth and love to read about it, teach about it, ponder it, create space for it in our community of faith—I really struggle with sabbath. For me, sabbath is just as elusive as it is important. For that reason, I also resonate with our Gospel passage today. Just like the frustrated leader of the synagogue proclaiming to everyone gathered—you’re doing it wrong! You’re getting the sabbath all wrong! I often beat myself up for getting sabbath wrong—for failing to practice the very thing I cherish.

It’s not that I think other things are more important than sabbath rest with God. It’s just that it’s easier to let myself down, or even let God down, than it is to let others down. And so I feel like the hypocrite Jesus calls out—the hypocrite who praises sabbath with all sincerity, but then fails to see the sabbath blessing of Jesus offering restoration and wholeness right there in front of him.

You see, Jesus doesn’t heal the bent over woman instead of honoring the sabbath. He doesn’t say, sabbath is important but healing this woman is more important. Instead, Jesus teaches us what sabbath is by calling the woman over, extending his hands, touching her, and restoring her to new life. Sabbath is God’s way of restoring us. Sabbath is Jesus calling us to himself, hoping we will slow down long enough to let God touch us and heal us, so that we can stand upright in the image of God once again.

Friends, we need rest. Not just because we are tired, which I'm guessing many of you are. We need rest because we need Jesus. To refuse sabbath rest is to refuse Jesus. And I don't say that to condemn anyone for getting sabbath wrong. I say it simply in the hope that you will see this invitation to let God love you and let God heal you.

My favorite book on Sabbath (which I happen to be re-reading right now because these are lessons I need to learn again, and again and again) is written by minister and therapist Wayne Muller. He says: "If we forget to rest we will work too hard and forget our more tender mercies, forget those we love, forget our children and our natural wonder. God says: Please don't. It is a waste of a tremendous gift I have given you. If you knew the value of your life, you would not waste a single breath. So I give you this commandment—as important as not stealing, not murdering, not lying. Remember to play and bless and make love and eat with those you love, and take comfort, easy and long, in this gift of sacred rest."

Sabbath is sacred rest. It is not taking more naps, though naps can certainly contribute—it is resting in the presence of God. Sacred rest is resting in the awareness that God loves you.

What is it that is weighing you down? What has you bent over, unable to stand up in the fullness of who you are? Some of our burdens are things we'd like to cast off, but it's also true that some of our burdens are a sincere labor of love.

I know that when there is so much to carry, so much on the line, it can be especially difficult to stop moving—much less set your precious burdens down. And yet I can assure you that if you do slow down and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, the burdens you want or need to carry will still be there waiting for you, only now you'll have more strength for the journey.

Jesus saw the woman. And Jesus sees you too. Will you listen when he calls you over? I hope you will. I hope I will. Because you and I were created to be like a watered garden. You and I were created to be repairers of the breach. And you and I need sabbath rest alongside a God who rests, and who heals us in resting.

Amen.