



Take Time to Be Holy

24/6

We live in a world of instant communication. We have the ability to work almost anywhere with cell phones, computers, the Internet, and FAX machines. Many people wear the word *busy* as a badge of pride.

We also live in a work world that is chewing up workers—white and blue collar—and spitting them out. This is work that competes with family life and other relationships, work that leaves many people perpetually exhausted and burned out. It is, in short, a world that spins out of control 24/7!

People of faith have a model for slowing down the spin. It is taking time to be with God, with family, and with self. It is allowing the world to crash upon us only 24/6. It is called sabbath. United Methodist Bishop Linda Lee (Michigan Area) preached recently that relationship with God must be central to doing Christian ministry. She asked, “How can we claim to be in relationship with someone with whom we don’t spend much time?”

More Than a Day Off

Author, pastor, and counselor Wayne Muller writes that sabbath is more than the absence of work. “It is not just a day off. . . . It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true. I invoke the Sabbath for its proven wisdom over the ages. But I also call on the authority that still clings to its name.”

According to Muller, most spiritual traditions celebrate some form of sabbath. “Buddhists use a lunar Sabbath—on the new, full, and quarter moons. Christians and Muslims celebrate their Sabbath days on Sunday and Friday respectively” Most Christians observe Sunday as the Lord’s Day, because of its relationship to Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week. Jews observe the sabbath on Saturday, the last day of the week.

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The Session at a Glance

Many people today seem perpetually exhausted and burned out. Today’s world often spins out of control, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. What can people of faith do to reclaim time with self, family, and God? How does observing the sabbath give Christians time to be holy?

Meet Our Writers

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Permission, Not Legalism

Sabbath gives us permission to stop and rest without feeling guilt or shame for taking the time. Rooted in the Creation story of Genesis, in which God rested on the seventh day after creating the world, sabbath embodies the rhythms of life and of the earth. Other writers suggest it is intertwined with the biblical concept of jubilee in which the earth must be left fallow every seven or 50 years in order to renew it. Humans, created in the image of God, need the same rhythm of renewal in our lives.

In the two versions of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12), one commands humanity to “remember” the sabbath, the other to “observe” it. We are commanded to keep the sabbath holy. As Jewish tradition developed, a lengthy list of rules for observing the sabbath—actually a list of what not to do—developed in Scripture and in the rabbinical tradition. The “don’ts” carried over into some aspects of Christianity in America, resulting in so-called “Blue Laws” that kept businesses closed on Sundays until almost 20 years ago. The Blue Laws may be part of our childhood memories of quiet, even boring, Sundays when play and other entertainment were curtailed. Modern conversation about sabbath has its own list of “don’ts,” but the list also has its own quality of permission-giving: Stop for a day or an hour or even a few captured minutes and be open to God reaching for us.

Celebrate Time

Contemporary writers offer long lists of things to do with sabbath time. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book *The Sabbath*, writes, “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.”

Sabbath also allows us to open our hearts to others. Wayne Muller writes, “Sabbath is not only for ourselves; rested and refreshed, we more generously serve all those who need our care. The human spirit is naturally generous; the instant we are filled, our first impulse is to be useful, to be kind, to give something away.”

Core Bible Passages

**Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 16:4-30;
20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15;
Mark 2:27-28**

In biblical literature the word *sabbath*, from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, means the weekly day of rest and abstention from work. The concept stems from **Genesis 2:1-3**, which describes God ceasing from the work of Creation and declaring the day holy. Remembering or observing the sabbath is enjoined in the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15**).

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, writing in *Sojourners* (“Radical Shabbat: Free Time, Free People”) says, “The Sabbath appears first as a cosmic truth in the creation story . . . but seems to have had no effect on human life till just after the great liberation of the Israelites from slavery. In Exodus 16:4-30, Shabbat is made known, along with the manna in the wilderness. This story of food and rest echoes and reverses the tale of Eden.”

Author Wayne Muller says Jewish texts prohibit 39 specific acts during sabbath. He says that prohibiting some things gives “deep permission” for others to happen: “love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing, rest.”

Jesus always observed the legal requirements of the Jewish sabbath. Jesus also questioned the strict standards of sabbath observance created by the Pharisees. In **Mark 2:27-28**, Jesus chided the Pharisees by saying “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

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How Did We Lose the Sabbath?

Ken Briggs, religion journalist and columnist for *beliefnet.com*, concludes that many churches have helped crowd out sabbath. “Churches are often part of the problem, infusing the day with . . . activities of their own. Church people are consumers, too. As the buying spree intensifies, things like Sabbath observance get crowded out.”

Writing “Rediscovering the Sabbath” in *Christianity Today*, Dorothy Bass cited the 1991 “surprise” bestseller, *The Overworked American*, by economist Juliet Schor. Schor reported that “work hours and stress are up, and sleep and family time are down for all classes of employed Americans.”

Bass writes that more than a day off or quality time with the kids is needed to heal overworked Americans. She writes, “The historic practice of setting aside one day a week for rest and worship promises peace to those who embrace it. Whether we know the term Sabbath or not, we the harried citizens of later modernity yearn for the reality. We need Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it. . . . The practice of Sabbath keeping may be a gift waiting to be unwrapped,” she continues. “For many of us, receiving this gift will require first discarding our image of Sabbath as a time of negative rules and restrictions. . . . relocating our understanding of this day in the biblical stories of Creation, Exodus, and Resurrection will be essential if we are to discover the gifts it offers.”

Rediscovering and Reclaiming Sabbath

Last winter, the United Methodist Clergywomen’s Consultation focused on rediscovering and reclaiming the sabbath. As with spouses, parents, and workers, clergy find it difficult to claim rest and spiritual renewal for themselves, too. A speaker at the consultation, Bishop Charlene Kammerer (Charlotte, NC Area) said, “Most of us live in such a whirlwind of activity that we don’t always hear the voice of Jesus. The sabbath is a time to rest in Jesus’ presence. Jesus says to us to come away by ourselves, and I will be there to renew you, heal you, hold you and bless you. This is an invitation we should not refuse.”

At the consultation, clergywomen were encouraged to take time for consecrated holy leisure. Speakers emphasized that allocating an unstructured day—without meetings, projects, tasks, agendas, or scheduled time with others—provides time for visioning, discernment, listening to the inner self, and acquiring a relaxed alertness about life.

John Wesley . . . on the Sabbath

In his sermon, “On the Sabbath” (#131), Methodism’s founder John Wesley wrote that Methodists should keep the sabbath that “they might be holy as God is holy” and then “spend the other six days as became those who acknowledged their Creator and Sanctifier.”

Written in 1730, this sermon reviews in great detail the scriptural basis for observing sabbath: God ceased from work on the seventh day and then established sabbath-keeping as a commandment and as the way to holiness.

Wesley preached, “The sum of what has been hitherto observed is this: God, who hath an undoubted right to command men what he pleases . . . was pleased to give them this command, ‘Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.’ Nay, and was also pleased to acquaint them with several of the reasons that moved him so to do, the chief of which are these: (1) that man, by imitating one particular action of God, might retain a more lively and lasting sense of God’s being the Creator, of himself and all things; (2) that he might constantly remember who it is that is his Sanctifier as well as Creator; (3) that he might be ever mindful that it is the business of his life to imitate him in all things; to make God’s mercy, justice, and holiness the pattern of all his thoughts, words, and actions.”

Wesley spells out three ways of keeping the Sabbath holy: “We must . . . employ a considerable part of this day in praying to and praising God. . . . We may do works of necessity and mercy on this day. . . . We may not do any manner of work therein which neither necessity nor mercy requires.”

Wesley also allows for “some recreation. . . . because few minds are of so firm a temper as to be able to preserve a cheerful devotion, a lively gratitude without it.”

Roadblocks to Sabbath

African clergywomen attending the United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation reported that the Western concept of sabbath is not a reality for them. "There is no Sabbath for us back home. We work 24 hours a day with little or nothing," said the Rev. Nelly Wright of civil war-torn Liberia. Wright and three other clergywomen from Liberia expressed guilt for being at the consultation, where they could have fun and access to generous quantities of food. They and other African clergywomen spoke of the high levels of poverty, unemployment, and hunger resulting from tribal and civil war and other pandemic problems.

Dorothy Bass writes in "Rediscovering the Sabbath" that "taking on a Sabbath rhythm would not be easy" and that pressures to work and spend are only part of the problem. "Some other obstacles also make it difficult to retrieve this practice. One is figuring out how to make Sunday special when it is no longer protected by legislation and custom. The arrangement of time by society as a whole is political, of course: how time is structured makes someone's life easier and someone's harder."

No Longer "Heart Killing"

The Chinese character for *busy* is composed of two characters: heart and killing. Thomas Merton described activism and overwork as a "pervasive form of contemporary violence." There is little doubt that Americans lead busy lives in a busy society. Reclaiming sabbath is one way for Christians to return to the natural rhythms of rest and renewal, learning to affirm that 24/6 is a gift of God that allows us to treat ourselves gently and lovingly so that we can treat God's world and all God's children with the same gentleness and love.

Books to Guide Your Sabbath Practice

The books listed below are available from *cokesbury.com*.

- ◆ *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, by Wayne Muller (Bantam Trade Paperback, 1999). Muller weaves themes about sabbath with his own and others' experiences.
- ◆ *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians*, by Tilden Edwards (The Upper Room, 1992). Helps readers balance worship, play, rest, work, community, and ministry through an exploration of the historical roots, rhythms, and traditions of the sabbath.
- ◆ *A Day of Rest: Creating Spiritual Space in Your Week*, by Martha W. Hickman (Abingdon, 2002). Explores ways to carve out a spiritual time in the week for renewal of body and spirit.
- ◆ *Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, by Abraham Heschel (Farrar Strauss, 1975). A classic in modern writing about the sabbath.
- ◆ *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, by Marva Dawn (William B. Eerdmans, 1989). In addition to this book, Dawn has written on the sabbath for magazines and journals.

Sabbath "Dos" and "Don'ts"

In *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn develops a four-part pattern for keeping the sabbath:

1. Ceasing not only from work but also from productivity, anxiety, worry, and possessiveness.
2. Resting the body and the mind, emotions and spirit, a holistic rest.
3. Embracing Christian values, our calling in life, and the wholeness God offers us.
4. Feasting, celebrating God and God's goodness in individual and corporate worship as well as feasting with beauty, music, food, affection, and social interaction.

Other suggested sabbath practices include:

- ◆ lighting candles to mark the beginning of sabbath (as Jews have done for centuries to begin Shabbat);
- ◆ praying and reading Scripture; the ancient practice of *lectio divina* is especially appropriate; allow the passage to speak to you at a deep level rather than trying to analyze it;
- ◆ resting without guilt;
- ◆ reveling in solitude or using some of your sabbath time to be with family and friends;
- ◆ spending time in nature, a "no destination" walk, or a bike ride are good choices.

Do not let the telephone or other electronics interrupt your time with God. Be kind to the environment, and do not drive your car. Do not focus on doing; focus on being with yourself and God!

Take Time to Be Holy

How can we find renewal in sabbath rest?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, CONTINUE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan this session.

OPEN With Prayer and Song

A. Sing and Pray (5 minutes)

From *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Sing “Serenity” (499), and pray Howard Thurman’s prayer “For God’s Gifts (489).

CONTINUE With Study

B. Bible Study (15 minutes)

Read “Core Bible Passages” on page 2. Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 2:1-3, which describes God resting on the seventh day. Then read aloud the two versions of the commandment on sabbath (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). What do the two versions tell you about how sabbath relates to rest and work? How are the normal relationships among people, and even

their animals, different on the sabbath? Make a list of contemporary comparisons, noting differences in economic class, employment, and time for leisure. Then review the list of prohibited tasks. Should Christians refrain from all of these activities, or might some of them be part of a holy, healthy sabbath?

Jesus’ conduct may have offended the strictest Pharisees, but he never violated any actual sabbath laws. What sabbath traditions observed by some Christians do not seem relevant to you? Discuss.

C. A Day Off (15 minutes)

Read “24/6” on page 1. Invite participants to share experiences, lifestyle, and obligations that might make them yearn for sabbath time. Discuss how group members usually spend a “day off” from work or other regular activities. Ask: What is holy about the way you are currently spending your time off? What isn’t?

D. Permission, Not Legalism (15 minutes)

Read “Permission, Not Legalism” on page 2. Invite the

group to think about and discuss what it would take for them to feel they have “permission” to take time for themselves, time with God, time for rest? Ask members to recall times in their lives when special times of prayer or meditation resulted in a new or renewed commitment to charity, service, mission work, or social justice actions.

E. Losing the Sabbath (10 minutes)

Read “How Did We Lose the Sabbath?” on page 3. Invite group members to recall Sundays from their childhood. How do these memories compare with how you will spend Sunday today. Do your experiences differ? If so, how?

F. Reclaiming Sabbath (15 minutes)

Read “Rediscovering and Reclaiming Sabbath” on page 3. Sabbath, more and more, is harder for Christians to keep. Discuss how finding sabbath time is difficult. At the recent clergywomen’s consultation, speakers highlighted how it is difficult for clergy to keep sabbath. Ask: How might lay persons help their pastor find sabbath time?

G. Roadblocks (10 minutes)

Read “Roadblocks to Sabbath” on page 4. In discussing different obstacles to sabbath-keeping, Dorothy Bass writes, “One is figuring out how to make Sunday special when it is no longer protected by legislation and custom.”

One of the reasons for sabbath in Israel was to give servants time for rest. Hobby Lobby, a chain store, is closed on Sundays to allow its workers time for worship and family. In Western Europe, most businesses are closed on Sunday, and it does not seem to harm the economy.

Ask: What would happen to low-paid workers if stores were closed on Sundays? How could these workers make up for lost income? How are Christians complicit in demands for 24/7 shopping? How might we influence changes in shopping hours? How

does our financial and lifestyle choice to eat out after church on Sunday impact the sabbath-keeping of the food service workers?

Ask participants to identify groups in our modern world for whom there is no sabbath time. Make a list of ways Christians might contribute to the possibility of sabbath time for those persons, such as the Liberian clergywomen.

H. Sabbath Dos and Don'ts (15 minutes)

Read “Sabbath ‘Dos’ and ‘Don'ts’ ” on page 4. Review the General Rules in *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, pages 71–74 (§103): “It is therefore expected of all who continue (in the Societies) that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, first, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced,

such as: . . . The profaning of the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying and selling.”

Ask: How is this rule helpful to you in understanding your observance of the Lord's Day?

I. A Perfect Day (10 minutes)

Invite group members to imagine a perfect sabbath day for them. Remind them that sabbath observance will differ from person to person and in different seasons of persons' lives. Ask: How would you begin sabbath? What activities refresh and renew you? How would you give yourself permission to rest or play? If you wish, write on index cards words or phrases that represent renewing sabbath-keeping. You might draw the outline of a tree on a chalkboard or posterboard and use paper leaves to write sabbath words, and then attach them to the tree.

Teaching Alternatives

In the biblical tradition, sabbath is often connected with the concept of jubilee. Sabbath and jubilee both call us to examine the relationship between rest and work.

Download either or both of these resources from the Internet:

◆ “God Speed the Year of Jubilee! The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics” and “Jesus' New Economy of Grace: The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics,” by Ched Myers in *Sojourners* (www.sojo.net/magazine/index). Go to May–June and July–August 1998.

◆ “A Call for Jubilee—Part 2,” “Sabbath and Jubilee: Radical Alternatives for Being Human” (www.ceji-iocj.org/English/theology/02/Sylvia.htm), and “Part 3—Re-Engaging the Sabbath: A Look at Work and Leisure” (www.ceji-iocj.org/English/theology/03-MichCote.htm). These papers are from the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative.

Review the biblical witness to economic and social justice. Consider that Jesus spoke more about money and wealth than any other topic.

Center your discussion on the hard questions raised by modern economics, a market-driven economy, and the large and still growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots. Make a list of ways individual Christians and the Christian community can be involved in creating a more just economy.

CLOSE With Prayer and Song

J. Sing a Hymn (5 minutes)

Sing “Near to the Heart of God” (*Hymnal*, 472), “This Is the Day” (657), or “Sanctuary” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2164). Close with Prayer 459 from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Witnessing to Our Faith

What should people of faith be allowed to do in a free society?