

**The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
East Liberty Presbyterian Church**

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“Sabbath For All”

Matthew 11:28-30 | *Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?q1=218096540>*

I wondered how a sermon on Sabbath would be received, if I stood up here and said:

I never quite got my sermon finished because I had a four-and-a-half-hour long lunch yesterday with old friends from elementary school. And, you know, I hadn't seen Roberta or Aly for ten years, and I haven't seen Jill for 26 years, and, well, wouldn't you know it, the time just flew by in what felt like a heartbeat. I actually felt like a kid again, who sat with these same friends at St. Therese's school cafeteria, reading the notes to one another that our mothers left in our lunch boxes.

And then, when I left the restaurant, well, it was so warm out. I couldn't spend another hour inside. I invited my husband for a walk and we talked as we walked from our home up to the reservoir. And as we would pass under trees with leaves that had changed color, I'd reach up my hand to see if I could touch the branches. And we ran into neighbors who were out for a walk or harvesting the last of their tomatoes or waxing their cars, and we stood on the sidewalk and got caught up, about kids starting their new career after college, about my husband's return to work, and we compared schedules so that we could find time to go to the zoo and have our neighbor's kids over, as promised, to play Wii.

And while those were all important components to my Saturday afternoon, and glimpses of the Sabbath reality of which I'll speak, I won't leave it at that. In stead, I'll tell you about someone else:

In 2007, author and journalist A. J. Jacobs published *The Year of Living Biblically*. In it, Jacobs chronicles his year-long experiment of sorts where he strives to obey the Bible as literally as possible, and to write about what he learns from that experience: what works, what doesn't, what is simply outright confusing. He writes about how this experiment might make a difference in his life, and states his intention on the books opening pages: *My quest has been this: to live the ultimate biblical life. Or more precisely, to follow the Bible as literally as possible. To obey the Ten Commandments. To be fruitful and multiply. To love my neighbor. To tithe my income. But also to abide by the oft-neglected rules: to avoid wearing clothes made of mixed fibers. To stone adulterers. And, naturally to leave the edges of my beard unshaven (Leviticus 19:27) I am trying to obey the entire Bible, without picking and choosing.*¹

Jacobs spends months in preparation, figuring out which version of the Bible to use, assembling a team of spiritual advisors, and discerning his approach to following the Bible literally, knowing that this is not as simple as it sounds. He decides to dedicate about eight months to following the commands of the Old Testament, and about four months following the New Testament, to see what changes, if anything, along the way.



On day 45, Jacobs takes on the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8). With intention and an unwillingness to fully let go of his workaholic habits, Jacobs eases into his Sabbath-keeping gradually. The first week he decides to avoid email...well, all but the subject headings, that is. Each week he moves further away from working at a slow, steady pace. Initially, he confesses that struggles to find a way to honor the command to not work himself without using Sabbath as an opportunity to “weasel out of household tasks,” for example, when his wife asks him to carry the newspapers to the recycle bin.²

But by day 240, Jacobs has found that Sabbath-keeping becomes the landmark around which he orients his week. When the year is over, it is one of the practices he will choose to maintain. As one who was raised in a mostly secular but Jewish home, Jacobs’ Sabbath begins at sundown Friday night. So, Friday during the daytime, he begins his preparations for the next 24 hours. He makes coffee for the next morning. He completes his work for the week. Yet even with such diligence, he admits that Sabbath-keeping is difficult, that his mind engages in a mental Whack-a-Mole game, trying to keep ideas of work from occupying his attention. But he says: *By the end of Saturday, as the sun finally sets, I feel as if I’ve done something strenuous but healthy, like I’ve taken a run through Central Park. I feel good, like I deserved the endorphin rush the Sabbath gave me. And then I start to look forward to next week’s Sabbath.*³

As people of faith, we, like Jacob, struggle to maintain Sabbath practices in our own lives that allow us true rest, that remind us that the God who made us, cares for us and has set us free. We have all heard the command to keep the Sabbath since our childhood days. We know the story about how God created the universe in six days, and on the seventh day rested, and we are reminded that if the Sabbath is necessary for God, it surely is essential for us.

And we’ve all heard or read or seen movies about how Moses delivered the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. And we certainly learned that, along their journey, Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, and delivers them to the Israelites as guidelines for holy living. A quick look at the Hebrew Scripture for today reminds us that the fourth commandment is the one established that orients our lives toward intentional rest and freedom from work. I, personally, have a track in my mental playlist of a song about the 10 Commandments called “The Perfect Ten” that was featured in my 5th grade musical. Should I forget the order, I can call to mind the line that says: “Number four, the Sabbath’s for, God’s worship and for rest.”

And many of us have heard the less-familiar passages of scripture from the 25th chapter of Leviticus: of the mandate for Sabbath years, where every seventh year everyone, even the land, is to rest. And we read of the mandate for Jubilee too: That in the 50th year, Jubilee is to be proclaimed: debts are to be cancelled, servants are to be released from their labor, and everyone’s land is to be returned to the original owner, and those who work for others are to return to their families. No one is to work the land, sowing or reaping, eating only what can be taken directly from the fields. Every fifty years, the playing field is leveled, as the focus shifts to God’s provision and steadfast care.

Sure, we have heard this all before, and many of us strive in one way or another to maintain some form of Sabbath practice. We come to church; we spend time with our



families; we spend a lazy afternoon reading the newspaper or walking through the park. But most of us are likewise aware that the world has shifted since our childhoods. Stores and restaurants once closed on Sundays are now open. Our kids now have practice and games for school sports all morning and afternoon on Sundays. And as much as we keep ourselves from physically showing up in the office, our smart phones allow us to carry our work with us in our purses or pockets. We go about in the frantic pace of our days without ever really noticing how the minutes add up to hours: and work of all shapes and sizes has snuck into our Sabbath day.

As Jacobs notes through the chronicling of his own experience, Sabbath-keeping is difficult. Our culture has tricked us into believing that our own worth is connected to our net worth, that our value comes from what we have earned and acquired, and that our energies need to go toward the persistent pursuit of more. We see it in reality TV shows that draw us into the dramatic lives of the real housewives of Beverly Hills or New Jersey or Miami. We see it in the 2012 Presidential election, where economic policies are spun by candidates in jargon intended to illicit a sense of security, but where post-debate fact checkers must unpack the rhetoric to help voters decipher who really cares for whom this election year.

We have fallen victim to the power of the lies that teach us that we are what we have, or what we do, or who we know, or how busy we are. We find it impossible to say “no” to those who expect that our energies will be directed toward efforts that will get us what we want, or get them what they want. Our identity looks more and more like our cable packages: all things to all people; On Demand at all times.

Yet the words of our faith assure us that there is something more. There is a need, we are told, to turn the volume down on the clamor around us so that we can hear God’s words of life. Our Gospel passage issues a holy invitation, an invitation that immediately puts us at ease, as if we have just settled into a hot bath at the end of a long day. Christ speaks through the noise around us, as he spoke to the disciples through the noise of theological debate and internal power struggles; as he spoke to those following him through the sound of their cries for help and the worries that pressed upon them. Christ speaks to us. In these words of invitation, Christ calls us to draw near, to orient our lives toward him. He promises us rest. Christ speaks of offering a yoke that promises to lighten our burdens, makes the living of our lives bearable. He’ll do the heavy lifting, if only we will draw near.

See, the mandate for Sabbath-keeping is a mandate that not only gives us a “get out of work free” card, it is also a mandate that orients our lives toward God: not by what we do on any given Sabbath, but by what we don’t do. When we stop the busy-ness of our days, we see that the world still spins beyond our control. Our hearts keep beating. The birds fly, the clouds offer rain, the tide rolls in. We are reminded of the very good news that we are not in charge.

Although these are words of genuine encouragement, this reality may be a threatening stance for those of us who are Marthas: always wanting to do our best, showing our love, making sure that everyone receives care. We know what it feels like to feel and be responsible for getting things done, for taking care of others, for making sure stuff happens. Sabbath may, initially, leave us with a vacuum that makes us feeling



vulnerable, in that narrow space with responsibilities lifted for a moment or a day. We sometimes don't know who we are, or how we are to be in the world without our work.

But this posture invites us into a space where we can realize that the core of our identity is not our work. At our deepest core, our identity is that of a child of God: made in God's image, redeemed by God's grace, set free from captivity to sin, sustained for abundant life.

And we are, to remember too, that Sabbath was not created just for us: "Sabbath is," as Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in *An Altar in this World*, "the great leveler." The words from Deuteronomy remind us that the command is not simply for those whose wealth guarantees them servants to do their work for them. Sabbath is an opportunity for ALL to rest. Part of our participation in a Sabbath culture is that, on that day, or for that hour, or for that year, we don't rely on the labor of others. Everyone deserves a rest.

As we join with persons of all faiths across this nation this month, we recognize the need for a Children's Sabbath. We honor that the systems of this world needs to be reoriented so that those so treasured by God , the little children, can come to the God who has given them life. We remember that this thirst for consumption, this lust for power, this rugged individualism that is so much a part of our contemporary American culture often leaves the vulnerable *more* vulnerable. We stand to orient ourselves toward a culture that allows all to find rest: from the captivity of poverty, of inadequate health care, of a marginal education, of the hatred of racism, sexism, age-ism, class-ism, and hetero-sexism. If we can stop long enough, we might be able to take a hard look inward, and a hard look outward, and see what needs to change.

Pastor Randy returns to his ministry here at the church tomorrow. He has piles of mail on his desk, his email has been turned back on. No doubt he will re-emerge within this community with fresh ideas, insights, and hopes for this congregation as he has allowed the pressures of a busy day to fall away and be nourished by the Spirit. But tomorrow does not need to mark an end to our congregation's thought about Sabbath-keeping. In fact, we have an opportunity to learn from his experience and to receive and give one another permission to enter into this Sabbath space that we might attune our hearts to the wisdom of the Still Small Voice that all of our busy schedules and busy lives drown out.

May we, like Jacobs, find intentional ways to keep the Sabbath week, honoring our foibles and struggles along the way.

May we give thanks that we worship a God, who, in love, has set us free.

¹ Jacobs, A. J. *The Year of Living Biblically*. P 4. 2007.

² *Ibid.* p 74.

³ *Ibid.* 251.

