

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Eric Howell
Good Work and Good Rest
Mark 2
June 2, 2024

Our scripture readings this morning go right to the heart of two very important parts of life: work and rest, and the relationship between work and rest. The law in Deuteronomy establishes the rhythm: 6 days you shall work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord. Sabbath is the name of the 7th day, a day of rest, a day devoted to the Lord. As it is said elsewhere, for everything a time under heaven. This rhythm for life honors both the time for work and the time for rest, both as good, both as holy.

Work and rest. Two very important things.
Two things we're also apparently not very good at.

We're not great at work, are we? A couple of years ago I tried a new-to-me restaurant to get a taco dinner. It was one of those places where you order at the counter. So I stood at the counter waiting for someone to take my order. No one was there. I looked around. There were a few tables here and there of people with food and drink, but I didn't see any employees. After a while standing there, getting a little impatient, I saw a sign. Like literally, the sign, a handwritten sign next to the menu board: it read: "We apologize for any delays in service. No one wants to work anymore. MGMT"

However good the food might be at that place—I've never been back, it didn't leave a good taste in my mouth, so I walked out, thinking: Is that true? That no one wants to work anymore? Maybe. Obviously, the management at this establishment had gotten frustrated at not being able to hire and retain employees, or maybe having the ones they had hired not show up to work or not do their jobs. But I suspected as I walked out, without a taco: maybe no one wants to work for you and for the wages that you're offering..

"No one wants to work" is a complaint echoed by corporate managers and store owners. Ironically though, we are a society that is also described as being overworked. In this society where no one will work, people are also overworked, stressed, maxed out, and exhausted. Vacation time is unused; emails and projects go late into the night. People say they can't turn off and have time for themselves. Over the last 20 years, Americans have added a month of work to the year. According to Economist Juliet Schor:

- US citizens are the most overworked and among the least rewarded in real terms in the industrialized world.
- Most US citizens would rather have more time off than higher pay.
- Overwork brings stresses to families and individuals that have huge costs which are largely unknown.

So which is it? As a society, are we bad at work? Or as an economic system: are we bad at taking rest and giving rest? Maybe it's both.

Maybe there are two kinds of people: the workers—working hard, overworked, and non-workers who aren't doing anything and don't want to work. But I doubt that.

Rather, I suspect that we are a people for whom work and rest have become so mushed together in a relentless churn that we have lost a clear sense of the purpose and gift of each. And so we, as a people, don't work well. We as a people don't rest well. Can we just admit, we the people of the protestant work ethic and the sabbath code, don't really do either very well as spiritual discipline and practice of justice? I'm not sure when we ever did.

Deuteronomy is crystal clear about both, including work. Work is for 6 days. Therefore, work is good. Hard work is good. There's very little more rewarding than working hard at something and then seeing the fruit of the labor. Whether it's a lecture or an evening meal or digging a hole or putting on a roof. Intense focus on something which requires single-mindedness and produces sore muscles or tired mind—this is a beautiful thing.

It's beautiful to stand back and see what you have accomplished that you've poured yourself into. This is actually what you learn in school—you learn to work, even at things you don't necessarily want to do. This is certainly what differential equations in college is for. I can think of no other possible reason for that class to exist. Learning how to do what you don't really want to do, but you do it and learn what you are capable of while you do it.

No one wants to work? Hardly. We just want work that is meaningful, challenging, rewarding, and compensates fairly. I wish this for everyone embarking on a career—that you would find work that challenges you, excites you, and rewards you with participation in service to your community and beyond. That kind of work can sustain you for a long time. Work that just serves corporate shareholders and doesn't pay off with accomplishment or meaningful service—that will drain your spirit. No one wants to work—I don't believe it. No one wants to work in jobs that are demeaning, pay little, and where the boss would hang a sign such as “No one wants to work”—who would?

Just as important as good, hard, holy work is good, life-giving, holy rest. Sabbath is its name. Rest is not supposed to be a luxury for some. If we're possibly bad at work, we're certainly bad at rest. Americans are notorious for this. Other cultures think we are very strange.

A couple of years ago an undergraduate class was given the assignment to practice Sabbath. Their assignment was to take a Sunday and do no homework, read only something not for school, and, this was the kicker, no cell phones. They were to sabbath from technology. That's what broke them. Students came to the professor complaining of their mental anguish in anticipation of being off the grid for a day. They said, “I can't do it.

What if someone needs me?” When I heard this story I wanted to say, “You’re in college. Now one needs you. You’re not that important.”

Those students grow up to be adults who don’t know how to turn off. The river of work, the river of feeling needed, the river of feeling like the world collapses if I’m not there to keep it humming and attend to it flows outside its banks until it makes a stagnant swamp of work--off work muddle. Technology allows us to work remotely, from anywhere, at any time. That’s great in so many ways, but also it challenges the very notions--not only of work-life balance but work-life rhythm. I’m as susceptible to this as anyone. If we don’t know when we’re at work, we don’t know when we’re at rest or play or worship. And it all muddles together.

Jesus muddled it up for them, too, in a way. The religious leaders had a set of rules to force people to not work on the sabbath day. There was so much of that, it became work to not to do anything that constituted work on the sabbath day. It became the religious leaders’ work to police others doing the work of not working on the sabbath. It sounds exhausting. So when Jesus and his disciples brazenly pick a few heads of grain from a grainfield and crush them and eat them, it violated their rules. When Jesus audaciously stands in front of everyone and heals a man with a lame hand, this is an affront. He’s muddled the rules; he’s broken the rhythms. He’s violated sabbath.

But had he? He obviously didn’t think so. He said, “Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath.” We could pay attention to the two particular things he does on this particular day: eating and healing embody the gift and purpose of sabbath. Sabbath is for nourishment and healing of the body and the spirit of creatures. For nourishment and for healing. What if we thought of it that way? What if we reclaimed it as a day devoted to what honors God and nourishes and heals? What honors God? What feeds the soul? What heals? What’s in need of being healed? Do that. Take time to do only that.

And it’s not just what is good for you, but what is good for others around you. Deuteronomy grounds the practice of sabbath rest in justice for those around you: all of them: your children, your workers, the resident alien in the land, even your animals. You were a slave once upon a time. Don’t ever forget it. Remember what it was like to be forced to work for an unjust system, for a product that wasn’t for you, for those that didn’t reward you at all for your labor, that didn’t value you as a human being, that took you and used you and then let you wither or die. Never forget that experience—and never repeat it. Respect the dignity of the work and the rest, of your people, of the animals, of the land. Work is good. Work was made for our good. Abusive work is an evil and an oppression. Work that never ends is unjust. Remember we are all connected in the rhythms and fabric of creation and what one does affects the other. So, learn to rest well, too. A sabbath to the Lord.

Wendell Berry, the old Kentucky farmer, has written dozens of poems on the mutual relationship of good work and Sabbath. Here is one:

*Whatever is foreseen in joy
must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
by our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
the hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
by work of ours; the field is tilled
and left to grace. That we may reap,
great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
rests on our day, and finds it good.*

Our prayer for our church and for this place all around us is that a sabbath mood would rest here and be encountered here and given to each of us. This is a gift we give to one another in work and in rest. There's always work to be done to make a church a church. We pray its good work. We pray that our work would be as if it were itself a prayer. All the while, the most important work we do is the work of letting the work go and leaving life and all of it to grace, even just for a while. This, too, is a discipline and challenge, maybe one of the most pressing in our time. It's remembering that music is made by the sounds and the silences between the sounds.

St. Paul describes the human condition as a jar of clay. "We hold the treasure of God in jars of clay," he says. This makes us humble—good things come from God, not from us. Until the day when all is made right, each day we wake is like a jar of clay. It is to be handled carefully, wisely. Hold it securely, hold it lightly, that God may pour out its goodness on all.

Our prayer: that each day may give its purpose and gift in rest or in work for you and your family and community and creation.

Our prayer also: that the holy days of sabbath and this place devoted to them would nourish and heal us, our communities, the land, and our spirits.

May it be all to God's glory. Amen.