

Topic: Sabbath Rest: A Time for Restoration and Refreshment

Subtopic: Not a legalistic rule but a life-giving promise

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/QME8GXLx2dI>

On this Second Sunday after Pentecost, the Church's color is changed to Green, which signifies spiritual growth. It coincides with Summer when we have longer days, plenty of sunshine, and everything is leafed out to its fullness. There is no denying that Summer is a life-giving time of year, and many make plans for vacations where we can cease from our labors and find time for playful and restorative activities. But today's readings point us towards something even more critical to our spiritual and emotional well-being. It is found in our Old Testament reading and demonstrated in the Gospel when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand.

The first sentence in our Old Testament reading says, "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy."¹ The Hebrew word for Sabbath means "to cease or desist," and it was usually associated with the seventh day, which was dedicated to rest and worship. The Sabbath was instituted at creation when "By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy."² Originally, the Sabbath was meant to deepen our connection with God and one another, but tragically, the spiritual leaders in Jesus' time turned it into something gravely burdensome. They had added so many rules around it that the very thing the Sabbath was meant to provide was stifled and even forbidden. The scenario of this

¹ Deuteronomy 5:12

² Genesis 2:2-3

tragedy is poignantly played out for us in our Gospel reading today when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. Knowing that he would be criticized for his actions, Jesus asked, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.³

Before healing this man, Jesus takes the initiative to ask what is permitted on the Sabbath, “to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?”⁴ The question, which seems so obvious, had the effect of silencing his adversaries. Their traditions had so confused the Sabbath’s original intent of finding rest and restoration on this holy day seemed practically impossible.

The writers of the New Testament epistles wrestled with the implications of burdensome Jewish traditions surrounding the Sabbath. They concluded that we should “not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or concerning a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These things (and especially the Sabbath) are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality (the substance - in Greek “soma” for the body), however, is found in Christ.”⁵ Therefore, coming to Christ and finding our rest in him is the epitome of what this day is meant to foster. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”⁶ This is our Sabbath rest.

³ Mark 3:4-5

⁴ Mark 3:4

⁵ Colossians 2:16-17

⁶ Matthew 11:28-29

God told Moses, “The Sabbath will be a sign between you and me for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy,”⁷ for “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”⁸ The word for refreshed means “to be breathed upon.”⁹ This is exactly what Christ did when he breathed upon his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ Therefore, the Sabbath is meant to be a time when Christ breathes upon and renews us with strength and encouragement.

This renewal is what we need in a world that tears us down. In our New Testament lesson today, Paul acknowledges that we are “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”¹¹ In Christ, we can boldly face whatever is thrown at us. But in this hostile environment, we need continual renewal and strength.

Therefore, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”¹² But “let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”¹³ Therefore, he encourages us to mix the promise of entering God’s rest with faith. Then he quotes David as saying, “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.”¹⁴

In the fourth century, St. Augustine said, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”¹⁵ So far from being a waste of time, the Sabbath

⁷ Exodus 31:13

⁸ Exodus 31:17

⁹ Strong’s Concordance, # 5314 A primitive root; to breathe; passively, to be breathed upon

¹⁰ John 20:22

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

¹² Hebrews 4:9

¹³ Hebrews 4:1

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:7 – A quote from Psalm 95

¹⁵ St. Augustine, Book I.1.1

rest brings us to that place where we lie down and be at rest. It is a time, as our Collect (prayer) today states, “To put away hurtful things, and ask God for those things which are profitable.”¹⁶ It is profitable for us to enter into our Sabbath rest. *Amen.*

¹⁶ BCP, Collect for Proper 4, p. 229