

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 13, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: Exodus 20:8-11 & Matthew 11:28-12:14

Theme: Words of Life: Sabbath: Rest, Renewal, and Reverence

[prayer]

As we continue our series on reading the Ten Commandments through the eyes of Jesus, I want to begin with a reminder that the Decalogue is divided into two categories: love of God and love of neighbor. The first three commandments demonstrate how we are to love God while the final six commandments demonstrate how we are to love our neighbors. The fourth commandment, which we just read, forms a bridge between these two categories. Jesus taught that by loving God we learn how to love our neighbor, and by loving our neighbor we learn how to love God (Matt 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28). The fourth commandment – observance of Sabbath – is a key spiritual practice for growing in this Law of Love.

I am going to make an earnest confession to you, church: I regularly break this commandment. I break it more than any other. Because I work on Sundays, I am supposed to take my Sabbath on Fridays and/or Saturdays. But because ministry also doesn't fit neatly into a 9-5 workday, my work frequently spills over into my day off. Ironically, I wrote this sermon on observing the Sabbath instead of actually observing my Sabbath. I thought about taking a leaf out of the prophets' handbook and committing a sign act by not preparing a sermon for this morning at all. But I eventually decided that I needed to preach this sermon as much for myself as for you.

The institution of Sabbath was an innovation in the ancient world. Before the Decalogue, the existence of a regular day of rest, let alone two whole days (the modern weekend), did not exist. The fourth commandment was God's response to the harsh working conditions the Israelites experienced in Egypt. As slaves their worth had been reduced to their labor, to what they could produce for the

empire. But after the exodus, their worth was no longer defined by their productivity. Instead, it was defined by their identity as the children of Yahweh. Observance of the Sabbath became one of the key ways Jews distinguish themselves from Gentiles. God commanded, “Be sure to keep my sabbaths, because the Sabbath is a sign between me and you in every generation so you will know that I am Yahweh who makes you holy” (Ex 31:13 CEB).

The Jewish sabbath begins at sundown on Fridays and ends at sundown on Saturdays. Christians moved observance of the Sabbath to Sundays, the first day of the week, in remembrance of the day Jesus rose from the dead. Our observance typically centers around gathering for corporate worship. But the fourth commandment doesn’t actually say anything about worship. Instead, it prescribes a complete work stoppage: “Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Do not do any work on it...because the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day” (vv. 9-11).

There are plenty of reasons why we may struggle to prioritize Sabbath. Necessity is one: Bills must be paid. Chores need to be done, errands run. We have people in our lives who require our attention and caregiving. We have jobs with expectations that must be met if we want to keep drawing a paycheck.

But we also do not prioritize rest and Sabbath because we are addicted to control. We are addicted to hurry, to busyness, to the tyranny of productivity. We fear what will happen if we stop moving, doing, producing. I have heard it said, “If you stop moving, you die.” This may be true physically, but is it true spiritually?

In his book *The Rest of God*, author Mark Buchanan writes, “The root idea of Sabbath is simple as rain falling, basic as breathing. It’s that all living things thrive only by an ample measure of stillness.”¹

Sabbath teaches us this important truth: The world goes on without us. That does not mean that our lives and work do not have meaning. But Sabbath reminds us that we are not at the center of Creation. God is. God is the Creator, and we are creatures made in His image. If God chose to rest, who are we to think that we do

¹ Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 60.

not need to? When we break the fourth commandment by not prioritizing Sabbath, we are also breaking the first commandment by making gods out of ourselves.

The fourth commandment establishes that time belongs to God. Did God need to rest on the seventh day? No. But Creation was incomplete without the Sabbath. God intentionally designed rest, reflection, and renewal as part of the sacred rhythm of Creation – a time set apart (the definition of holy) to heal and restore what labor extracts. God established this rhythm and then He modeled it for us. After six days of laboring to create, God stepped back to pause and appreciate the beauty and goodness of what He created.

This is fundamentally what the Sabbath is for – to give thanks for and celebrate the goodness of Creation.

As a freshman in high school, my English class did a poetry unit where our teacher had us assemble our own poetry anthologies. Many of you know my love of poetry, which had its genesis in this assignment. My anthology was about nature and the first poem I chose was a poem called “Leisure” by the Welsh poet W. H. Davies, published in 1911.

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.²*

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leisure_\(poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leisure_(poem))

Every time I see a cow I think about the wisdom of this poem, and the wisdom embedded in the practice of Sabbath. Rev. Adam Hamilton writes that “Sabbath is about stopping to savor, to enjoy, to reflect, to be in awe, to celebrate, to give thanks, and to be renewed.”³ To this day observant Jews mark the Sabbath by lighting candles and breaking bread together. The Sabbath is meant to be a joyful day when we enjoy the fruits of Creation and the fruits of relationship. Keeping the Sabbath is about remembering that rest is part of God’s design for all Creation, not something we earn as a reward for our labors.

But that is how we often treat rest – as something to be earned, rather than a gift from God. We take what God has given us for free and then we turn around and we start charging people for it. The Sabbath is supposed to be an experience of rest, renewal, re-creation. It is about restoring the very breath of life within us. But what do we often reduce it to? A list of prohibitions, a burdensome religious expectation, something else to check off our busy to-do list...that is, if we bother to truly observe it at all. If we have reduced Sabbath to whether we go to church or not, then we are missing the point.

When we were told not to work on the Sabbath, of course we wanted to know what exactly constituted work so we could then exploit the loopholes. The teachers of the Law diligently studied this question. Eventually they created a list of thirty-nine categories of forbidden activities. These included things like:

- Do not add fresh water to a vase of cut flowers on the Sabbath, because this is a form of sowing.
- Do not separate good fruit from rotten fruit, because this is a form of harvesting.
- Do not switch off an electric light, because this is like extinguishing a fire.

But Jesus, as always, radicalizes the Law. When the Pharisees accuse his genuinely hungry disciples of breaking the Sabbath by gleaning food to eat, Jesus tells them, “If you had known what this means, *I want mercy and not sacrifice*, you wouldn’t have condemned the innocent. The Human One is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:7-8).

³ Adam Hamilton, *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), 80.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God created the Sabbath. And God created it as an act of mercy by liberating humanity from the heavy burden of endless labor. Showing mercy to someone in need is therefore an appropriate way to observe the Sabbath, even if that act of mercy means breaking the prohibition against work.

Notice that Jesus does not denigrate the rituals of Sabbath; he knows that these rituals can help us experience the rest that God intends. But the ceremonial law is never greater than the moral law. After all, he teaches “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The Pharisees are not being legalistic; they are genuinely concerned about honoring God by correctly observing the Sabbath. Their problem is that they are neglecting the real will of God behind the Sabbath commandment – namely, concern for the vulnerable. God liberated the Israelites from Egypt out of concern for their harsh working conditions. God is concerned for our quality of life, especially for those who struggle to find a complete day of rest.

Frequently I hear this refrain: “Take care of yourself, pastor.” I appreciate the caring sentiment behind that statement. But the problem with the way we talk about self-care and rest in our culture is that we act like it is solely an individual’s responsibility, rather than a communal one. The fourth commandment teaches us that it is actually both. “Do not work on [the Sabbath] – not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you” (v. 10).

Sabbath observance is a communal enterprise. My need for rest is bound up with your need for rest. Our renewal is bound up with our neighbors’ renewal. Humanity’s re-creation is bound up with the earth’s re-creation. The fourth commandment enshrines the connection between Sabbath and freedom. This means that we can never properly fulfill the Sabbath commandment unless we are also committed to undoing the systems of injustice and oppression that keep people, and the earth, from the abundant life God intends.

I am thinking especially this week of the undocumented immigrants in our midst who are being incarcerated without due process. I have no words to describe the moral distress I feel watching news coverage of “Alligator Alcatraz.” I felt physically sick reading comments from fellow Americans joking about feeding “illegals” to

the alligators. That kind of dehumanization is the starting point for every humanitarian atrocity in human history. Undocumented immigrants are our neighbors. They pick and process our food. They clean our buildings and mow our lawns. They build our homes and care for our elderly. We have benefited from their labor, often at poverty wages. God has commanded us not to mistreat them, and that commandment does not distinguish between legal and illegal immigration (Lev 19:33-34). Why do we think this nation is the exception to His rule? Yes, our immigration system needs reform. But let me be clear: We will not be able to reform it until we also reform the underlying economic systems that oppress and exploit laborers. We will not be able to reform it until we choose to put people before profits. This gangrene in our nation's moral fabric will spread until we acknowledge that our freedom is bound up with our undocumented neighbor's.

Jesus said, *I want mercy and not sacrifice*. He was quoting the prophet Hosea (6:6) who railed against practicing false piety instead of justice. This week, I challenge you to observe the Sabbath by doing something that contributes to the flourishing of Creation. Observe it by engaging in acts of mercy and justice. Observe it by honoring your baptismal vow to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Observe it by celebrating your identity as a child of God. Observe it by stopping to stare at something beautiful. Observe it by taking the time to rest and remember God's mighty work of salvation through Jesus Christ. Every Sabbath observance, no matter how small, is an opportunity to celebrate the freedom God desires for us. Every Sabbath observance, no matter how small, is an act of resistance.

Amen.