

“Sabbath Rhythm” – June 2, 2024

Genesis 2:3

“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” (NSRVUE)

Hallelujah!

It is good to be back from vacation! And it’s a joy to see you all again. I’m truly grateful for your prayers for my family and me during my time away. I began my vacation with a three-day self-retreat at Portsmouth Abbey in Rhode Island. I tried to follow the monks’ daily routines, which include Early Morning Prayer at 5:45, Morning Worship Service at 7:20, Midday Prayer at 11:45, and Evening Prayer at 5:30. Following dinner together with the monks, I attended the Night Prayer at 7. Certainly, you were included in my prayers during those times. After the Night Prayer, everybody, including monks and guests, remained silent until the Early Morning Prayer the next day.

Approaching the end of my vacation, I stayed at Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham, MA. The prayer schedule was similar to Portsmouth Abbey and in both monasteries, I experienced such warm and deep hospitality. Those monasteries are open to everybody, so if you wish to stay in one, you will be welcome any time as well.

It has also been a great pleasure to practice Tai Chi intensively with my old friends under Master John Conroy, a Yang Tai Chi lineage holder. I call the Tai Chi rhythm of loosen-empty-push the rhythm of creation, because the same rhythm is embedded and found in every creation, from the jumping of a frog to the cycle of the seasons, and any other ‘ready-set-go’ actions. This rhythm of the “loosen-empty-push” can also be understood as the ongoing interplay between potential energy and kinetic energy, the energy you experience in Ready . . . Set . . . Go! In Tai Chi rhythm, relaxation is essential for natural, graceful, and more effective movements. If you come to our Tuesday Tai Chi class, you will experience this rhythm with your whole body and mind.

If I were to sum up my vacation in three words, I would choose prayer, family, and Tai Chi.

From time to time, we need to say “farewell” to our ordinary busy routines, at least briefly. We all need a vacation. Among those joining us in person or virtually, some may be on vacation at this very moment. If that’s the case, I hope you fully enjoy your time.

Do you know what a vacation and a vacuum cleaner have in common? They are all related to the Latin word “vac” meaning “empty.” The words vacuum, evacuate, and vacation--they all contain “vac.”

If you see a hotel sign, “No Vacancy,” it means no empty rooms available. If the vacuum cleaner is full of dust, it cannot function effectively. If it continues to operate while it is full, it will eventually break. We also must stop working at some point and be emptied to remain well – in “good operating order.”

We often think that God took a rest after finishing creation. As a matter of fact, God’s creation was not complete without the divine resting on the seventh day.¹ God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. We call this day the Sabbath day, which is the center of the seven-day cycle. As Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “the Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath.”² The Sabbath is the crown of God’s creation.

Our Jewish siblings observe the Sabbath as a day of holiness and rest, from sunset on Friday to sunset of the following day. Christians, from the very beginning, called the resurrection day not only the first day of the week, but also the *eighth day*, a completely new day beyond ordinary human experiences or imagination. It was a day of God’s redemption and new creation.³

We still need to heed the significance of the Sabbath that comes from the Hebrew *shavat*, meaning to rest or to cease. Just like a mother needs rest after childbirth, God has shown us how essential it is to find the rhythm of work and rest. God also became a role model for us not to be exhausted, but to create room for pause, rest, and peace. Living in a rapidly changing and multi-tasking world, we often forget that we are called to choose the God of restfulness, not the “gods of market ideology” that never stop saying “more, faster, not enough yet!”⁴

The Sabbath is also part of the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” bridges the first three commandments concerning relationships with God and the last six commandments concerning relationships with neighbors. At the center, the Fourth commandment

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible.*

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*. Sabbath comes from Hebrew *shavat*, meaning “cease,” or “rest.”

³ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship.*

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as resistance: Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW.*

reminds people that the God who rests is the same “God who emancipates from slavery and consequently from the dehumanizing work system.”⁵

God said, “No work: Not only you but any others, including your children, your servants, foreigners, your ox, your donkey (or any of your animals)--no work on the Sabbath Day. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:10; Deut. 5:12-15). Although rest is the core theme of the Sabbath, rest is always linked to God's creation and liberation.

Sabbath reminds us that God’s beloved children are all equally and beautifully created in the image of God. Walter Brueggemann, one of the most influential Old Testament scholars, said, “On [Sabbath Day] all rest equally, regardless of wealth or power or need.”⁶ The Biblical Sabbath is always aspirational for all people and all God’s creation to rest and become well. As we rest in God who is the Sabbath-keeper and Sabbath-giver, we can be better connected and reconnected to God the creator and liberator, and all God’s creation.

Sabbath invites us to see that “God was confident enough to rest.”⁷ According to Brueggemann, “God’s rest has made clear (a) that God is not a workaholic, (b) that God is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work.”⁸ Following the image of the resting God, we are called to rest, be refreshed, rejuvenated, recovered, re-created, and have more room to embrace ourselves and others.

I occasionally facilitate workshops on topics like Sabbath and pastoral self-care, yet I must admit that I too struggle with taking time to rest. Still, I want to invite all of us to be brave enough to pause and take a rest. Then, more and more, we can see our lives as God-given gifts rather than a product of hard work or achievements. Having a rest and vacation is one of the “must do” things. We must do this for the same reason we are told in the event of an airplane emergency. We need to put on our own oxygen masks first so that we stay strong enough to help others.

Answering the Call, a guidebook for pastoral candidacy, says, “As much as you must focus on what you do to be spiritually healthy, you must also be attentive to what you do not do. As important as it is to ask yourself, ‘How often do I pray?’

⁵ Ibid (adapted); Bryan P. Stone & Claire E. Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis in Interpretation*. Also see Deut. 5:12, 15; Exod. 20:8-11.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Interpretation*.

⁸ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as resistance*. (adapted)

you must also ask, ‘How often do I rest?’ Sabbath reminds us who God is in the midst of all of our ‘busy’ness. In God’s sight, *you* are worth more than you can produce. Rest in that truth!”⁹ In other words, we are blessed and invited to have a vacation (and vacancy) year-round through prayer and rest, emptying and expanding our inner room for God’s presence.

God rested. Through Jesus Christ, God became one of us to embody God’s “self-giving” and “self-emptying” love. Jesus also said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28) We are amazingly grateful when we think about God’s unfailing, immeasurable love and grace through Jesus Christ.

When we open up our hearts to God, we can replenish them with love, compassion, resilience, and joy. When we trust God and rest in God’s emptying, re-creating, and liberating presence, we become able to release our “to-do list” into God’s caring hands, and we can embrace not only ourselves but also all God’s people and God’s creation more and more.

I invite you to heed God’s invitation to find Sabbath rhythm in your daily routines as I conclude today’s sermon with Henri Nouwen’s prayer. (Thanks to God, I received this prayer via email just as I was finishing my sermon preparation last Friday.) Let us pray:

Dear God,

Speak gently in my silence.

When the loud outer noises of my surroundings
and the loud inner noises of my fears

keep pulling me away from you,
help me to trust that you are still there
even when I am unable to hear you.

Give me ears to listen to your small, soft voice saying:

“Come to me, you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest . . .

for I am gentle and humble of heart.” Let that loving voice be my guide.

Amen!¹⁰

⁹ Higher Education & Ministry, *Answering the Call* (adapted)

¹⁰ Henri Nouwen Society