



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Rest for What?

Alexandra Jacob

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

I am a reluctant but fairly steady user of social media. I recognize it for its many benefits and its many drawbacks, and I am aware of the ways that it can both build and tear down community. One of the things that fascinates me about social media, especially in the past few years, is my growing awareness of how social media algorithms can tailor our user experience, often unwittingly. It's interesting to see what trends, activities, and experiences are being marketed to me, and presumably others in my same demographic bracket.

Last week, I took a scroll through my Instagram ad feed. For those of you not on the app, you can of course scroll through a feed of photos posted by the people you follow on Instagram. But you can also scroll through a feed of curated advertisements, which are linked directly to the purchasing platforms. As I scrolled through, a major theme emerged: the category of items that has in recent years been termed “self-care.” There were those extra-wide fuzzy spa headbands that help you achieve maximum comfort while doing your makeup. I saw jade rollers meant to provide a smoothing sensation on the skin of the face, reducing puffiness. I saw a lot of fancy water bottles that promise to help you increase your water consumption and clear up any number of ailments due to your lack of regular water consumption. I saw bath bombs, shower fizzers, clay face masks, and under-eye cooling patches. So many items that fit within the “self-care” category, all promising to help you rest, relax, rejuvenate your way into being your best, most well cared-for, self.

There is a prosperous, successful industry out there devoted to the advancement of this idea: that with the proper accompanying items, you, too, can “self-care” your way into a better life. It is an enticing promise, and I do love a good clay face mask and bubble bath at the end of a long week. But we all know that even the most luxurious spa treatment is not going to transform you into an unrecognizably well-rested version of yourself. It’s just not going to happen.

But I am intrigued by this multi-billion-dollar self-care industry because it points to something very real at work in the world around us. Rest does not seem to come easily to many of us. I don’t think the bubble bath sector of the self-care industry would be quite so profitable if we all regularly took the time to luxuriate in the gift of free time that many of us are afforded. Instead, the idea of self-care becomes this radical and counter-cultural affirmation that it is ok to rest, or maybe it’s actually good to rest.

Of course, our Christian tradition has something to say about rest: that it is good and holy, and that it is actually required of us. We call it Sabbath – the generations-long practice that we share with our Jewish siblings, which calls for us to take regular rhythms of rest away from work, a day devoted to rest and to delighting in the presence of God. Sabbath practice is grounded in the Genesis creation story. God created the world in seven days – and the seventh day was a day of rest. Creation was not finished until after the seventh day, that holy rest day. We, too, are made most whole when we have regular patterns of rest away from the grind of what keeps our minds and bodies occupied for most of our waking lives. This Sabbath grounding in the creation story offers even more wisdom from the earth, too. Any farmer, or any home gardener, knows that the land itself needs rest. Crops need rest – whether it’s a large-scale commercial farming operation or the little tomato plant you’re trying to keep alive in your backyard.

The earth itself does not toil at the same rate for all twelve months out of the year. There are fallow seasons – seasons for the slow, underground work to happen. So it is with Sabbath. The slow, underground spiritual movement of lying fallow, of letting our minds and hearts and bodies rest, to see what might be taking root within us as we delight in the gift of simply being.

I almost don't need to say this out loud because it's so obvious, but this is deeply countercultural. How often do you enter into conversation with someone and when you ask how they're doing, they respond with, "I'm feeling especially well rested and refreshed this week!" And actually if someone responded to us that way, we might feel a little twinge of annoyance or envy. Who are you to feel so well rested when the rest of us can't catch a break? Work to do, meals to make or purchase, children to parent, horrifying national news to emotionally process, meetings to attend, media to consume, and my goodness, the laundry basket really never is empty, is it? It can feel

like a hamster wheel. When do we stop? How can we stop?

Sabbath is deeply counter-cultural. It is the affirmation that regular rhythms of rest are not only good, they are essential. They make us whole.

But what's really radical about the call to Sabbath-keeping, what the self-care industry gets wrong, is that it is not just for me; it's not just for you. It's for all of us. It is a practice of community life that allows everyone to flourish, even the earth itself. Sabbath is not about you; it is about all of us.

In the scripture passage we heard from the Older Testament, we find ourselves with Moses as he receives the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. God is sharing with Moses the set of guidelines by which God's people are to live – those ten practices that help us live more fully into God's desires for us and for the world.

It is the Sabbath commandment that we heard – you will keep Sabbath, taking a day apart each week to refrain from work, you and your whole household and even your donkey. No working on the Sabbath.

But there's one special detail about the way this commandment is narrated in Deuteronomy as opposed to other accounts of the Decalogue. In Deuteronomy, God points backwards to the journey of God's people from generations past.

God is asking the people, "Do you remember those days of slavery in Egypt? Do you remember those years of backbreaking, uncompensated, unjust work, those days when you were never afforded the right to rest? And then remember how God brought you out to a new future of liberation? Remember those things. And keep the Sabbath."

In Deuteronomy, the call to Sabbath-keeping is expanded to be about the community. As scholar Steven Tuell writes, “Knowing what it is to be a slave and to work without rest should prevent Israel from inflicting such hardship on anyone else...However, should empathy prove insufficient, the installation of Sabbath is made a divine commandment. No one is to be deprived of the God-given right to rest.”

The Sabbath is for everyone. From the very earliest days of its institution as a practice for God’s people, Sabbath has been about ceasing from work not only for our sake, but for the sake of the world.

This is why in many communities, faithful Sabbath-keeping includes refraining from purchasing on the Sabbath day. Because if you’re purchasing, someone has to be selling and someone else has to be producing. It’s an affirmation that we are all caught up in this web of interdependence; no one of us is alone in this need for

holy rest. When some of us cease while others cannot, the whole human family is not flourishing.

The anthem that the choir will sing later in this morning's service is a reminder of this reality. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes; we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

In the world we live in, we cannot all rest. There are strong and stubborn systems that keep barriers in place - barriers of race, class, ability, and all manner of human difference. God calls that rich tapestry of difference good and beautiful, but much of the human community has called it a threat.

The words we'll hear from the choir are from civil rights activist Ella Baker, set to the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock. Journalist Melannie Jay describes the message this way: "I do not take the anchoring phrase 'we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes' as a dismissal of

self-care or some capitalist grind philosophy. It is not 'I cannot rest,' it is 'WE.' It is akin to the tradition of West African dance, drumming, and song, where the 'WE' generates continuous movement and music. While individuals and partners may take breaths between passages, our collective contributions keep the song of freedom playing."

The call of Sabbath-keeping is not about me or you; it is about all of us. Because we know that there are those who cannot rest until we all can rest. There are those who are fighting simply to live, much less rest. Sabbath is about all of us.

In the gospel story we heard earlier, Jesus was engaging hard questions of Sabbath. He was doing things like healing on the Sabbath day, which you were really not supposed to do under the Jewish teachings of the day. It's work. The powerful leaders of his community were incensed – they went to Jesus and tried to catch him in his

wrongdoing, just as he's about to heal someone's hand. Jesus asks them what's lawful – can you do good on the Sabbath; can you save life? They have nothing to say. And the gospel writer describes it this way: “Jesus looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man in need of healing, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ The man stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

Those powerful leaders went home that day grumbling to themselves about how they could take Jesus down.

Jesus, too, shows us that the aim of Sabbath is the restoration of the whole human community. When he healed that person with a hurting hand, he was also creating the conditions in which the person could enter back into their community. Sabbath, again, is not about you or me – it is about all of us.

This year over the King Holiday weekend, I caught a glimpse into the life-giving work of Sabbath, the ways that the Sabbath rhythm can contribute to the healing of the whole human community. Our youth groups gathered on the King holiday for a day of service projects, along with the youth group from Zwingli United Church of Christ (near Rochester, MN), where former Westminster interim associate pastor Karen Larson now serves. We had a couple of service projects in the works that fell through at the last minute, so as we often do in the world of youth ministry, we pivoted. We shopped for personal care items requested by our partner organization, Our Saviour's Community Housing, a shelter here in Minneapolis. We wrote thank-you cards to adults in our lives who have impacted our faith in positive ways. We crafted valentines to send to our partner congregation in Matanzas, Cuba. And we wrote letters to lawmakers, asking that they consider the issues close to our own hearts. Students wrote about climate justice and equitable housing options; they wrote about the importance of gender-neutral

bathroom facilities in their middle schools; they wrote to encourage lawmakers to consider reparations for racialized harm done to communities of color here in the twin cities over the generations.

The next day as I sat in my office reading those letters and sealing them in envelopes, I thought: this is Sabbath, too. Our youth and adult leaders had the day off from school and work, and their Sabbath day was spent contributing in small but important ways to the healing of God's world. I think it was a restful day – we laughed and sang and prayed and ate pizza together – but it was also a day of healing.

There was no homework, at least for those 8 hours, and there were no chores or extracurricular commitments. But there was space for us to open ourselves to what the Spirit is up to in our world, to participate in that work in meaningful ways. That was Sabbath for us.

We are only two weeks away from the season of Lent, and I wonder how Sabbath-keeping might become part of your regular rhythm of that special season. How might you set apart time, as an individual or as a family, to participate in a Sabbath rhythm? There are countless ways to do this – one of the things Jesus wanted his community to see in that story we heard earlier is that rigid rules about our Sabbath practices don't really serve us. For those of us who are in seasons of our lives where long stretches of solitude aren't possible, we might think about ways to simplify one day every week – turning off the phone and TV or going outside; working on an art project with our kids or plugging into a ministry here at church or in the community that's lifegiving but that you don't always make space for. Living into these rhythms helps us not only heal within our own bodies and minds, but within our neighborhoods and communities. May it be so.

Amen.