



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater  
Text: Matthew 11:28 – 12:8

April 27, 2025

### Sabbath Gratitude

One of Sister Gilchrist's responsibilities at the Abbey of the Mississippi was to collect herbs from the abbey's fields for cooking in their kitchen. She enjoyed the many herbs she found and appreciated how they added to the meals she helped provide. Upon the advice of a land management consultant, the sisters started moving the cattle that they raised around on the land in such a way that different sections of the field would lay fallow for a period of time, getting a rest from the cattle's grazing. After several years of this process, Sister Gilchrist was amazed one spring morning to find when she went out to collect herbs, that there were at least a dozen new herbs and grasses that she had never seen before. "Where had these herbs come from?" she wondered, "no one had planted them." Then she realized that the seeds from these new herbs and growth had likely been in the soil forever but because of the trampling of the cattle they'd not had the time they needed to break through and grow, to feel the warmth of the sun. Only in a sort of sabbath time, she would come to understand, could all the seeds lying pregnant in that fertile soil finally, of their own accord, without any effort, come to flower.

This is one of the stories that minister and therapist Wayne Muller tells in his book: *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest and Delight*.<sup>1</sup> "How many of us ache for this kind of rest?" he asks, like those seeds experienced in the fallow fields. "Every spiritual tradition tells us," he argues, "that this kind of rest is not something that we can forget, is not something that we can pretend that we do not need. And yet," he recognizes, "we have lost cultural permission to rest. The world around us insists that everyone and everything move faster and longer and without ceasing."<sup>2</sup>

The challenge of living in a world that relishes this sort of fast-paced way of being and pushes humankind toward the brink, is perhaps something of what I think Jesus was trying to address in our text for today from Matthew. "Come to me, all you that are weary ... and I will give you rest," Jesus says. He follows up this promise by challenging the cultural norms of his context and time. He particularly challenges the rules around sabbath-keeping for the sake of a strict adherence to the letter of the law – a legalistic approach – rather than what he encourages, an invitation to sabbath-keeping for the sake of the people. Mark's version of this story makes that argument even more clearly, proclaiming that, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath,"<sup>3</sup> as if to say that the whole purpose of keeping sabbath is for the benefit of people, not for the benefit of the sabbath itself! For the sabbath exists to be a time set aside for people to rest and to be renewed. Muller says that, "The point is not so much that rest is better than work, or work is better than rest," but, I would add, that the point is to *recognize the difference*, to, as Muller says, "feel in our bodies, that gentle tidal rhythm that pulls at all life, ... To know when it is time to work and when it is time to rest is a source of great wisdom and great peace."<sup>4</sup>

My friend and Presbyterian minister, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, and her husband Robert found themselves inspired by these ideas about fifteen years ago on a pilgrimage with her congregation to a spiritual retreat center on the remote island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Both with busy careers and calendars, they were also the parents of two young children, and they were feeling weary. "Something's got to change," they told each other and so they decided after a few years of some thoughtful discernment, prayer, the birth of a third child, and lots of conversation to launch into a year trying to pay close attention to the difference between rest and work, and finally to keep one day a week as a Sabbath. MaryAnn recorded the experience in her book, "*Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time.*"

They began by defining sabbath and their plan for keeping it one day a week, over one school year, from September through August. For them they defined "sabbath-keeping" as more than just *not* doing work, but it was about not doing anything to change their context or the world around them -- but instead, to change their relationship with time. They aspired to embrace *restfulness and renewal* at what they called a "savoring pace, especially in the company of family and loved ones."<sup>5</sup> It was not easy, and in fact their stories of all the ups and downs, successes, and foibles, has filled a whole book. One of the big lessons they learned was to be creative and to *lean-in* to the experience, as they embraced a new term that MaryAnn coined, an adverb she calls, "sabbathly." When perhaps unplugging from work could not be accomplished all the time, she learned to try to do things "sabbathly," to do something, as she called it, in the manner of sabbath. "There are times when I don't feel restful," she says, "I don't feel the joy of the moment. I don't feel connected to God. But I believe that we can *act our way* into a new feeling. We can look at life, with its imperfections and annoyances, and change it for the better by acting as if it's *already* better. We can let language guide us. Words, like sabbathly, can do more than describe our reality, they can also help shape it."<sup>6</sup> "Acting sabbathly can happen at any time, not only on the sabbath," she encourages. "I can act as if the kids and I have all the time in the world in the mornings before school. That doesn't mean that we do, but it means that I am a different person. I do things sabbathly. I can act like the relaxed person I all-too-rarely am, and then over time, I become her. During the week, we can do our work Sabbathly, feel the warm water on our hands when washing dishes, being mindful and being present. We can be with people sabbathly: looking them in the eyes and not over their shoulder or down at our smart phones. We can even observe the Sabbath, sabbathly," she says, "making the decision that even if work is pulling at us, we are going to focus our attention elsewhere."<sup>7</sup>

This summer, I have gratefully answered a call to embrace living sabbathly! I'm taking a sabbatical leave from our ministry here together at Immanuel from mid-May through Labor Day! The concept of a sabbatical has its roots, of course, in sabbath-keeping and the practice of seeking a time away from work and daily routines to find replenishment, rest, and renewal. The most familiar context for many is an academic sabbatical, when professors take time off from their usual work of teaching, most often to do research or to write or to produce something. Not quite, sabbath-keeping in the Biblical sense! Unlike academic sabbaticals with a focus on writing or research projects, clergy sabbaticals *lean-in* to the Biblical practice of

Sabbath-keeping, as they are meant to be times of spiritual growth, personal study, and wellness. I recognize that sabbath-keeping is a gift and that it is privilege to be able to take time away, that my colleagues and perhaps some of you, will rise to perhaps, a few new occasions, to help re-balance responsibilities and some of our shared commitments. I am grateful to have the privilege to be able to take this sabbath time and for the whole-hearted support of my colleagues, the Session, and so many of you. Thank you! As the ministers and church leaders have reflected on this time ahead, we've been helpfully framing it as a bit of a sabbatical for all of us. I hope that this summer will be a time for all of us to consider living "sabbathly" in new ways, and that after nearly 21 years of experiencing ministry together that this time away from one another will also help to clarify and undergird the richness of our continued call to ministry together. One year into our interim time with Randy and as the transition team *leans-in* to its process of inviting the whole congregation into listening and discernment, it feels like a perfect time, not only for me to *lean-in* to a bit of sabbath rest but for the congregation to experience some time without me. As the ministers and leaders have discerned together, we hope this season of sabbath-keeping will be a time of reflection, growth, and renewal for all of us.

One of the greatest voices on understanding sabbath-keeping was the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. His seminal book, *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern [Hu]man[ity]*, has been described as timeless and transformative. "Six days a week we wrestle with the world," he writes, "wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul."<sup>8</sup> One of the ideas that transfixed me in my study of Heschel in preparation for this sabbatical time, is what he says about the relationship between rest and work. Heschel critiques the perspective of Greek philosophers like Aristotle, who argued that relaxation was for the sake of future activity, that rest was to gain strength for new efforts. He says that, "the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. But that the Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Humanity is not a beast of burden," he argues, "and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing efficiency in our work. The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living," what Heschel eloquently calls, "a palace in time."<sup>9</sup> For Heschel, embracing rest and renewal by honoring the Sabbath becomes a way of glorifying God, of thanking God, for the gift of life we have.

Inspired by an idea that I heard from a clergy colleague several years ago, and now one that I can also attribute to Heschel, I'm planning to use some of my sabbatical time this summer to go on a sort of "gratitude tour." In gratitude for my life, for the time away, and with thankfulness for the many people who have helped me on my life's journey, I plan to travel to see important mentors, teachers, and friends to personally thank them for the difference that they have made in my life. Among others, I'm planning to visit my undergraduate academic advisor, a United Christ of Christ pastor turned American Studies Ph.D., who gave inspiring lectures that felt almost like sermons, helping me to begin to discern my own call to ministry. I'll also visit my seminary professor, Bob Dykstra, who preached here in this pulpit for my installation as associate pastor and during my first semester of seminary

invited me to my first Covenant Network conference where I met my future colleague and friend Deborah Block. For many years, even beyond my time at Princeton, Dr. Dykstra and his wife hosted a confidentiality support group in their home for out and closeted queer seminarians trying to navigate seminary and a call to ministry in a setting that was often *not* welcoming or friendly. And I'll also see, after over twenty years, my seminary field education supervisor, who it felt like to me at the time, was able to see past my self-conscious insecurity and need to prove myself as a gay man in ministry, to see me and to simply affirm my gifts as a person called to serve the Church. My hope and prayer for this summer is that you'll join me during this sabbatical time, to also lean in to practicing gratitude, to think about the important people in your lives who've made a difference and to take the time to say, "thank you."

As I've reflected on the time ahead for all of us this summer, I loved one of the stories that MaryAnn McKibben Dana shared in her book. She writes, "A Buddhist monk visiting New York was told by his Western host that they could save ten minutes by making a complicated transfer in the subway at Grand Central Station. When they emerged from the subway in Central Park, the monk sat down on a bench. His host wanted to know what he was doing. 'I thought we should enjoy the ten minutes,' the monk replied."<sup>10</sup> Let's all of us enjoy an extra ten minutes or a lot more of sabbath gratitude time this summer.

Our final hymn today is a popular hymn for ordination and installation services for ministers, elders, and deacons as it highlights the call to ministry and service. As I contemplated hymns for today, particularly one that might fit with this sermon on sabbath gratitude, I was newly aware of this hymn's call, not only to serve, but also to rest and renewal "to daily learn," as it sings, "refreshed and restored" with its call to embrace the way God helps to repair our inward lives. May we, each one of us and all of us, in this Easter season of new life, and always, hear and heed this call! AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest and Delight*, audiobook, 17 December 1999, 17:00.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 2:27.

<sup>4</sup> Muller, 24:00.

<sup>5</sup> McKibben Dana. *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 2012, p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), 1951, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> McKibben Dana, p. 11.