

Sabbath: A Time to Pray & Play

A personal reflection on Sabbath

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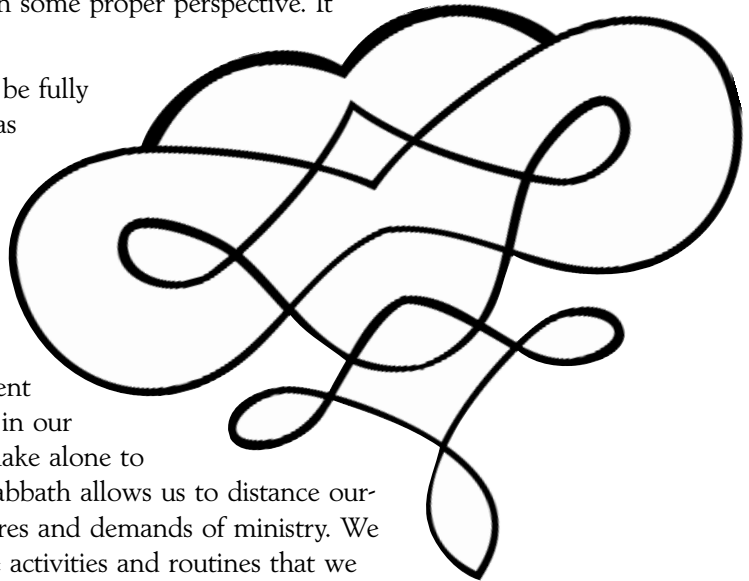
General Assembly has called our denomination to observe a year of Sabbath preparation followed by a year of Sabbath. During this time the church is called to pray and reflect on what this theme means to us. I invite you to incorporate the Sabbath practices suggested in this resource into your religious routines-every day, week, month and year.

As church leaders, we must keep Sabbath if we expect others to do so. During Sabbath times we expect God to speak to our Church, to provide the wisdom and direction that is necessary for us to move forward. As we rest and enjoy our Sabbath, we await the word that God in Jesus Christ is preparing for The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We rest in hope and in faith.

The meaning of the Hebrew word Sabbath is to *rest*. This means that we must pause in the midst of our activities-stop and take a break. It is an opportunity to gain some new insights, to refocus and to gain some proper perspective. It is not just a day off.

To be faithful to God, we need to be fully engaged in the work that Christ has called us to do. To be faithful to this calling also means to regularly stop and seek renewal.

If we don't regularly take time out, we run the risk of taking ourselves too seriously and depleting our inner resources. This can prevent us from seeing what God is doing in our midst. As Christ went out on the lake alone to reflect and have a time of quiet, Sabbath allows us to distance ourselves temporarily from the pressures and demands of ministry. We also need to take a break from the activities and routines that we look to for our identity, so that we can renew our perspective.



Sabbath is a call to be *still* (Psalm 46). It is a time to be still in order to know God. It is a thoroughly "unproductive" time, time well wasted. It enables us to disengage in order to find the moments of clarity and creativity which we need to re-engage in our work. Clarifying purpose takes quiet and uninterrupted time.

According to theologian and writer Eugene Peterson, Sabbath is a time for prayer and play. He believes that the Bible has two versions of keeping the Sabbath commandment. The first comes from Exodus 20:11, and recounts how God worked for six days and rested on the seventh. And so should we.

The second version of Sabbath is found in Deuteronomy 5:15. It states that the Israelites toiled in Egypt for four hundred years without a break. In consequence, they were no longer regarded as human beings but as slaves. They were not seen as people created in the image of God, but merely work implements.

According to Peterson, the two biblical reasons for keeping the Sabbath result in parallel activities of praying and playing. We can honour God both in our prayer and in our play. The Exodus passage directs us to the contemplation of God, which becomes prayer. The Deuteronomy verse directs us to

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social leisure, which becomes play. Prayer and play are deeply connected. John Calvin, despite his reputation, filled his Sabbath with both. He would lead his Geneva congregation in prayers in the morning and play skillets with the townspeople in the afternoon.

Prayerfulness and playfulness are life enhancing—they help to reverse the soul fatiguing effects of living a misdirected life. Keeping the Sabbath involves both playing and praying.

In his book *Working the Angles* (Eerdmans, 1988), Eugene Peterson talks about the trigonometry of ministry—the interface of prayer, Scripture and spiritual direction. Prayer is the act of bringing ourselves to attention before God.

To keep the Sabbath, we need to pray, read the Bible and seek spiritual direction every day, every week and every month of the year.

Every Day Sabbath

Scripture reflection: Genesis 1:1 - 2:4

The Bible recounts that at the end of each day of creation “there was evening and there was morning.” Creation began in the evening. We wake up to a world and to work that God made the night before. God invites us to participate in this new day and to follow the initiatives that were started while we were sleeping. Night time can be a time to dream and to vision. When we awake, we can make these dreams become reality.

Begin each day with this Sabbath, thought. Jimmy Valvano was a young and inspirational basketball coach at North Carolina State University. In 1992, at the age of 44, he died of bone cancer. In a speech shortly before his death, he said that in order to have a full life, we need to pray, think and laugh every day.

Likewise, Sabbath keeping is something that must be done every day.

Because I am a morning person, I prefer to pray at this time. This helps to remind me that I awake into a world and into a work that God has already begun. I pray with thanksgiving for past mercies and for grace sufficient for the day’s challenges. Prayer helps to frame my day and thanksgiving helps to frame my prayer. We repeatedly pray before worship services, before meal times and with patients in hospital rooms before their operations. Prayer needs to precede everything.

Every Week Sabbath

Scripture Reflection: Psalm 92

*“It is good to give thanks to Yahweh,
to play in honour of you, Most High “(92:1 Jerusalem Bible)*

Christians primarily observe Sabbath weekly as they participate in their church’s Sunday Worship. Parish ministry provides the weekly opportunity to observe the Sabbath in the same worship community with other Christians in the same church. Ministers and church leaders may find it difficult to find Sabbath when they are responsible for leading worship and attending to other church related details on a Sunday morning.

There is a link between worship and play. In worship, as in play, we don’t keep track of time. We should lose ourselves in what we are doing and in the experience that time should not matter. Both

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worship and play help to pull us out of ourselves and change the way we understand time. It is as if we are caught up in another world where time is of no consequence.

The 1992 movie *A River Runs Through It* is a largely autobiographical account of the life of writer and poet Norman MacLean. The story takes place in Montana and focuses around MacLean's younger brother and his Presbyterian minister father. At the beginning of the movie, Maclean narrates that in his family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.

In doing this he discovered a key to keeping Sabbath: allowing our recreation to be our re-creation. At play we are refreshed and renewed. We experience true Sabbath when we are re-connected with our true selves-the person we are intended to be in Christ.

On Sunday afternoons, between his two worship services, his father would unwind by walking beside the river. It was a time when his soul was restored and his imagination stirred. It was Sabbath. Enjoy two hours and four minutes of Sabbath and rent this video.

Play is the ideal way to learn about life. Childhood is the curious road, which leads to joy and discovery. Play is a primary form of learning and most adults need to play more.

Play as in worship is the first step towards complete relaxation, comfort, the abandonment of control, and the ability to just be in the world without wanting to run it. Play can lead to peace of mind, spirit and heart.

Play is noncompetitive. We don't compete against ourselves or against anyone else.

In play, no one wins and no one loses-we simply have fun. When we play, we don't keep score. It's not about competition, but about connecting. We connect with our inner child-like selves, with the world and with those around us.

Play is not defined by a sport or activity, but by our attitude towards it.

Where is your play place? What do you do just to play and have fun?

For some, it is a weekly game of golf, time in the garden, playing music, or time with family or beloved pets. What's yours?

Every Month Sabbath

Scripture reflection: Matthew 14: 13 - 21

"Get out of town!" used to be a popular expression. Now it is sound advice to those who seek Sabbath. In order to truly rest, we need to change our perspective, to go off site and change our pace. Yes, for some church leaders this does give Biblical warrant to go fishing. Sabbath moments can be found in physical places but also in our state of mind.

While on summer vacation a few years back, I enjoyed some Sabbath time by listening to the New Testament on audiocassette tape. I purchased a program call *Faith Comes by Hearing* from the Canadian Bible Society. In half an hour each day for one month, I listened to the New Testament. It was most refreshing to hear the words spoken. It gave me a renewed insight into the meaning and message of the text.

Another way to accomplish this would be to read Scripture into an audio cassette player and play it back. You will be amazed at the new way God speaks to you through hearing, rather than reading, the Word.

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Every Year Sabbath

Scripture reflection: Exodus 31: 12 - 17

For church leaders, time out or away is at the heart of Sabbath. Annual study leaves, retreats, conferences, workshops, and continuing education events can provide opportunities for inspiration and refreshment in a different environment. They can also provide a new perspective and the opportunity to share and learn with other church leaders.

Church leaders are expected to be spiritual directors, but they also need spiritual direction.

Peterson believes that spiritual direction takes place when two people agree to give their full attention to what God is doing in one or both of their lives, and when they seek to respond in faith. He believes that three convictions underpin these experiences:

1. God is always doing something: an active grace is shaping our lives into a mature salvation.
2. Responding to God is not guesswork: the Christian community has acquired wisdom through the centuries that provides guidance
3. Each soul is unique: no wisdom can simply be applied without discerning the particulars of this life or this situation

Remember these three convictions as you seek and seek to give spiritual direction.

The Alban Institute's Roy Oswald states that the best way to find a spiritual director is to look for someone with an understanding of spirituality that you feel may help you. He suggests reading Tilden Edward's book, *Spiritual Friend*.

Sabbath means to stop, cease and desist by adding moments of pause and reflection.

Sabbath after all, is a call to faithfulness, a time to pray and play.