

Don't Forget the Sabbath

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." – Mark 2: 23-28

I come from a family of worriers. My Mom in particular is a worrier. For example, when I first started losing my hair around the age of 22, one day my Mom said to me, "R.G., I think you should go to the doctor and make sure you don't have a vitamin E deficiency." In fact, when I told her that I was going to tell that story, she confessed that she actually called her family doctor to ask him if she should be worried about my hair loss.

Now I shouldn't make fun of my Mom too much because I have a tendency to be the same way, especially as a kid when I worried a lot. I worried about a mean man coming to get us, even though we lived in a town of less than 3000 people in rural Alabama where you really didn't need to lock your doors at night. I worried about our house catching on fire. I worried about tornadoes. To make me feel better, my parents had solutions for each of these things. "What if a mean man comes to get us." "Don't worry," they'd tell me. "Daddy will hit him with the fire iron."

So you should know that my dad is an incredible dad, the best grandfather ever, but is not exactly one who would strike fear into an intruder.

The solution to my worry about fire – we'll run outside.

Tornado – we'll go to the basement.

But then, I had another worry. "Mom," I said, "What if our house catches on fire while there is a tornado. We can't go outside because the tornado will get us. We can't go to the basement because the fire will get us."

Did I mention I was a worrier?

I think I've become a little more rational in the things that I worry about – that my kids will be healthy, that our nation will find some way to come together, that we will take care of our planet before it's too late, that somehow we will make it through this pandemic.

And my guess is that while you may not be able to relate to some of my more irrational worries of fires and tornadoes at the same time, you too probably have things that make you worry.

Family worries

Job worries

Worries about uncertainty

Worries about relationships

And of course, the pandemic.

One of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, has a poem called, "I Worried," that I think many of us can relate to.

I worried a lot.

Will the gardens grow,

will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught, and if not, how shall I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows can do it and I am, well, hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it, am I going to get rheumatism, lockjaw, dementia?

*Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning, and sang.*

I've been reflecting on this poem quite a bit with all that is going on in the world right now, with everything that I'm worried about. Worrying, in and of itself, is not a bad thing...in fact, I would say it's normal. But it can be so easy to become obsessed with our worries, especially about things that we have little to no control over.

And that's why it's so important for us to remember God's call to "Don't Forget the Sabbath" right now. Last week, we talked about the end of the journey of the Hebrew people into the promised land. It was a journey that began when they fled Egypt and finally ended when they crossed the Jordan River and were invited to build an altar to remember what God had done for them and to remember who they are. But before they got there, they spent 40 years in the

Wilderness. That's when God gave them the law and the 10 commandments. Now today, in 2021, it's easy to read the 10 Commandments sort of like a list of rules for individuals.

Now, don't you steal.

So and so... don't you covet.

But these weren't meant to be just about individual rules at all. Rather, they were meant to be communal. It was how they would build their society, and, specifically, how they would build a society different from what they had left in Egypt. And right in the middle of the commandments, we have the one about the Sabbath:

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work

When the people were slaves in Egypt, they got no rest. They had to work whenever the Egyptians wanted them to. But here, God says, you'll be something different. Everybody, everything deserves time for rest, time away from work, time to simply be – be with family, be with friends, time to relax. You see, when God gave the people the law, God understood that we humans need time to re-charge, time to practice self-care.

But, like we humans do, the Hebrew people turned a commandment that was meant to be a gift for all to practice self-care into a rule used to oppress people. We see that time and again in the gospels when Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath when he healed people. Or in our Scripture today, when the disciples decided to eat something when they were hungry.

You see, the Sabbath was never meant to be a burden that people are forced to follow. Rather, it was meant to help people find release from their burdens, release from their worries. It was meant to give us time to rest, time to be with family and friends, time to enjoy life. As Jesus says, "The Sabbath is made for the sake of humanity not humanity for the sake of the Sabbath."

And I think that's just as important a message for us today (maybe even more so) as it was 2000 years ago. And so, today, I want to invite us to think of the Sabbath not as something rigid – you know where every 7th day you make sure you rest no matter what. Rather, I want you to think of the Sabbath as God's gift and God's invitation to each of us to be intentional about setting aside time to practice self-care and to take in the things that truly give us life..

Friends, there is so much work to be done to make this world the one we all want. To make our church all that we want. And even if we work every minute of every day, I don't think we ever get to a point where we can say that work is done. We don't ever get to a point where we can say, "Ok, our church is inclusive enough. Our world is just enough." The work is never-ending. And don't hear me wrong. We are called to that work. But we are not called to that work all the

time. We are also called to pay attention to our own mental, physical, and emotional capacity and when we need to take a break, to take a break.

I'll end with another Mary Oliver poem as I think she says it better than I could. This is "Don't Hesitate"

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate.

Give in to it.

There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.

We are not wise, and not very often kind.

And much can never be redeemed.

Still, life has some possibility left.

Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.

It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins.

Anyway, that's often the case.

Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty.

Joy is not made to be a crumb.

Friends, no matter how distressing the state of our country or world may seem, love and joy and life will still break through. No matter how many worries you may have about your job or your family or your future, love and joy and life will still break through.

So let's hear the words of Mary Oliver – give into it. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

And let's hear the words of our Scripture – remember to take time for Sabbath.

And let's hear the words of Jesus – the Sabbath is made for you.