

Sabbath Keeping  
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church  
August 24, 2025  
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Have I mentioned that God is not subtle with me?! This week when we have a Gospel text about the sabbath, I was so exhausted on Thursday afternoon, that Dan and Craig sent me home, rather than let me stay and help serve at Table. Because I haven't been keeping sabbath well.

First, let me make my excuses. Some of the blame is simply my schedule and my job. Which I love - but can be just busy enough that some weeks I don't get an entire day off. And some of the problem is my personality, which can make it hard to take that sabbath time in tiny chunks when I don't get a full day. Instead, I fill that time with tasks that must get done in the house or garden, or errands. I share all of this because I suspect I'm not alone in struggling to find real sabbath time.

And yet - keeping sabbath isn't a suggestion, it's a commandment. Meant to help us find the abundant life God wants for us. I know, we're New Englanders, we live in a culture shaped by puritan ideals of work, frugality, and more work. Which adds to the weight of our guilt when we try to keep sabbath.

This Gospel text happens in a very different time and culture - one that Luke frames for us this morning. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue. There he encounters a woman who has been ailing for 18 years. And Jesus heals her. When he's criticized for healing on the sabbath, he points out that the powers that be are missing the point entirely.

For those of us who were not raised in the Jewish tradition, a little background is helpful. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, there are two primary accounts of the commandment to observe the sabbath day. The first is in Exodus, framing the practice of keeping sabbath as an imitation of God, who rests on the seventh day of creation.<sup>1</sup> The second is in Deuteronomy, which frames the sabbath as a way of remembering the exodus from slavery in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Keeping the sabbath each week is like a "little exodus." As each week, it releases us from toil. Sabbath reminds us of God's saving grace at the heart of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

It's important to note that sabbath rest was for everyone in Israelite society, without exception. Keeping sabbath is meant to help us thrive, personally, and communally, and the sabbath spirit embraces the whole neighborhood, including other species ("ox, donkey, livestock," and so on). Sabbath is meant for restoration, of ourselves and the world God has made.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus heals on the sabbath, reminding us that the point of sabbath is to remember that we are created for more than work and struggle. That God wills abundant life for us, all people, and the world.

A story - when I was in grad school for sports medicine, I had to job shadow an orthopedic surgeon at the University of Virginia Medical Center. Because I'd been working in the UVA training room for two years, I had the dubious honor of shadowing the team doctor.

Dr. Frank McCue III was a legend, known for his remarkable surgical skill and his abrupt manner. He could be gruff with patients, and with his staff - he was direct to the point of being terrifying. I was more than a little nervous. Shadowing is awkward, you don't do anything, except get in the way. I followed him into surgeries, and clinic visits, and while he was seeing patients at the hospital.

One afternoon, when I was following Dr. McCue at the hospital, he saw a patient who had driven from North Carolina, after waiting months for this appointment. The patient was a NASCAR driver, and had injured his shoulder so badly that he couldn't wear the car harness for more than a few minutes before his arm would go completely numb, after which he would experience searing pain for days. This had been going on for more than a year - through countless appointments and tests, and of course, loss of employment.

Seeing Dr. McCue was his last-ditch hope. But the patient's records hadn't made the transfer to UVA, and Dr. McCue had none of the diagnostic materials he needed to understand the injury and subsequent trauma. Standard procedure would have been to send the man home, tell him to have his records sent, and make another appointment. After all this is a famous surgeon, whose time is vastly over-booked.

But Dr. McCue chose a different approach. He apologized to the patient because the medical system had failed him. And if there was anything Dr. McCue could do about it, that failure would end today. He got on the phone and called various diagnostic offices in the hospital and told them they were going to retake all those tests. Today. And then they were going to get that information to Dr. McCue before the end of the day, so he could do right by this patient. And he did. The patient left with answers and a plan to help him recover as much as was physiologically possible. Because Dr. McCue never lost sight of why he got into medicine - to help people find healing.

Which brings us back to our Gospel. Those criticizing Jesus were technically right. There are six days a week in which to work and heal. The woman had waited this long, she could wait one more day. Except, as Jesus points out, putting off her healing, even by one more day, misses the point of keeping sabbath. We keep sabbath to recollect and celebrate God's salvation. What better day to free this woman from pain? So she can live the life God wills for her.

When we keep sabbath, we're living into God's rhythm of salvation. We're acknowledging that we are meant for more than work, and our communities are more than what they can "do" for us. It's a way of recognizing that our **being** matters more than our productivity. Friends, there's a reason it's called "well-being" and not "well-doing." Keeping sabbath restores our perspective.

So I'm grateful to Dan and Craig for sending me home on Thursday. Not just because I was exhausted and needed to go home (even if I didn't want to admit that). But because I shouldn't be serving others from a place of being completely done, poured out. They shouldn't get the dregs of me. That's not fair to them. Normally, handing out meals in the doorway, or ladling out food in the kitchen, is such a joyful exchange for me, and I get more than I give. But I do give. Which means I have to **have** something to give.

As Christians, our sabbath day is Sunday. Which many of us begin by grounding ourselves by worshipping God in community. Though admittedly, some of us work on Sundays. So, whenever we are able to keep sabbath, even if it's in small moments we carve out of our over-busy lives, I encourage us to rest, unplug, unwind, **do** less, **be** more. Lean into God's life-giving rhythm for us, with gratitude, so we can give life to others.

Let's end with a poem that feels like sabbath to me:

The Gift, by Mary Oliver<sup>5</sup>

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.  
Earth and heaven both are still watching  
though time is draining from the clock  
and your walk, that was confident and quick,  
has become slow.

So, be slow if you must, but let  
the heart still play its true part.  
Love still as once you loved, deeply  
and without patience. Let God and the world  
know you are grateful. That the gift has been given.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:8-11

<sup>2</sup> Deut 5:12-15

<sup>3</sup> Unbound: SALT's Commentary for Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 18, 2025; [saltproject.org](http://saltproject.org)

<sup>4</sup> Unbound: SALT's Commentary for Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 18, 2025; [saltproject.org](http://saltproject.org)

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, published in the collection: *Felicity: Poems*, Penguin Press, October 13, 2015.