



Pentecost 2 – Proper 4 (B)

Gym Bros Teach Us About Sabbath

[RCL] Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 81:1-10; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

In athletic circles, you will often hear of the concept of “recovery days.” From weightlifters to runners to golfers to basketball players, people who take exercise and sports seriously understand that they cannot drive their bodies to the breaking point seven days a week and expect to make progress. The only result of that kind of overwork is burnout and injury.

We can draw an analogy to the sabbath, the concept God is teaching us about in our scriptures today. But notice that in our hyper-productive, always-on culture, we often conceive of rest and recovery days only in service of further productivity. Take some time to rest *so you can work harder*, our society says. Rise and grind, and only rest so you can rise earlier and grind harder.

But in scripture, if we take a moment to examine God’s priorities, sabbath is an art and a science and a pleasure for its own sake. God does not rest on the seventh day for the purpose of getting right back to work on the eighth day. God rests on the seventh day and commands us to follow God’s example because *sabbath has inherent value completely apart from work*.

Sabbath has a kind of beautiful purposelessness that makes it holy. We often think we’re taking a break when we scroll social media for twenty minutes during the day or veg out on Netflix on an evening or weekend. And while feeding our dopamine circuits with some quick hits is all fine and good, it is not the type of holy rest that God is talking about in scripture. Many people who take on sabbath as a real spiritual discipline struggle for weeks or months to actually practice it and not just fill it up with more distractions or mundane work like doing laundry or buying groceries.

Sabbath is rest that is designed to deepen our connection with God and one another. That’s why Sunday, our sabbath day, is our day of worship. And notice that Jesus in particular uses sabbath to feed his disciples (in a way that makes the Pharisees angry) and to heal a man with a disability, what scripture calls “a

withered hand” (which also makes them angry). And so, for Jesus, sabbath is very much rooted in the physical body. Feeding and healing people are physical acts, incarnational encounters.

Link this back to the concept of recovery days in exercise, in weightlifting for example. There’s an old gym bro adage that muscles aren’t built in the gym, they’re built in the kitchen and the bedroom. When you lift weights, you are actually breaking your muscles down, causing intentional damage to them. The growth in strength and size happens when you eat and sleep. Your muscles heal and grow stronger through the intentional practice of nourishment and rest.

The same is true for our souls and our relationships with God and one another. Throughout any given week, our connections to God and to each other go through any number of micro-tears, stresses, and small injuries that break them down. Sabbath time is the intentional application of rest for the purpose of healing and nourishment. We spend time with God and one another purposely devoid of stress and strain, so that we may enter a new week with our grounding and our connections stronger than they were before. Spiritual muscle is built during sabbath. Who knew the gym bros could teach us so much good spiritual practice?

But let’s go one layer deeper on the incarnational nature of sabbath, the ways in which God works through our bodies to help us know rest and healing. In our lesson from Mark, we read of the man with the injured or disabled hand, “withered,” as the text calls it. Jesus does not reach out and touch the man to heal him, as he does in some other miracles in the gospels. Mark tells us that Jesus says to the man, “Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.” Jesus invites, even commands, the man to reach toward him, and in that reaching, the man is healed.

There is an important parallel in our Deuteronomy text that contains God’s teaching on the sabbath, on how to keep it holy. God tells the people to remember their time enslaved in Egypt, and how “the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” On the sabbath, God outstretches God’s arm toward us to connect with us, and Jesus invites us to stretch out our arm toward God in answer. The result is healing, strengthening, new life.

How could this image of sabbath change how you practice it? If sabbath is designed to be a time when God reaches out toward us and we reach out toward God, and that mutual reaching creates healing, that suddenly makes sabbath a much more active and participatory practice. The gym bros call this “active recovery.” We participate in our own healing and reconnection by stretching toward God, stretching toward one another.

And stretching can hurt a little bit, sometimes hurt in a good way, in a way that means progress rather than injury. Paul describes this whole process for us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also

be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.”

So, spend some time this week observing your relationship with God and with others. Notice the breakdowns and micro-tears and slow fraying of the connections. Then, on the sabbath day, reach out and stretch toward God and your loved ones. That could mean reading scripture, attending worship, making a phone call to a loved one, going for a walk in nature to pray by yourself or with others. Take part in active recovery, sabbath that creates healing and new strength.

And remember that we practice sabbath not for the purpose of throwing ourselves back into more work. The healing and growth of sabbath is for the glory of God that shines forth in us as fully realized human beings. “The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath,” Jesus says. The healing he brings us when he tells us to stretch out our hand toward him is holy and beautiful in and of itself.

“Keeping the Sabbath” across generations in the church has often turned into grim adherence to strict traditions rather than true rest and refreshment. It was as if people were supposed to work hard at resting! We sometimes think of Christianity as hard work—and it undoubtedly is. We have to work against our old familiar sins and pray for God to help us increase in virtue and generosity.

But at heart, Christianity is not about work. Suffering and struggle are vital parts of the journey that have their own unique spiritual value, but suffering and struggle and work always lead somewhere else. And that somewhere to which they lead is joy. Consider the joy the man in our gospel must have felt as the healing surged through his body and restored his hand. Savor the joy in God's voice as God cherishes us in God's teaching on sabbath in Deuteronomy. Jesus says to us directly of his entire message to us, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

The gym bros get it with their preaching on active recovery. They blend the discipline of taking time off with the singular joy of the rhythm of challenge and rest. We can do the same with the rhythm of active recovery of our spirits, our souls, our relationships, our communities. “Stretch out your hand,” Jesus tells us. Stretch out your hand every week toward God and others, and feel the outstretched grace reach back toward you.

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