

Shabbat Shalom: Clergy Sabbath as Disruptive Innovation and Renewal

by

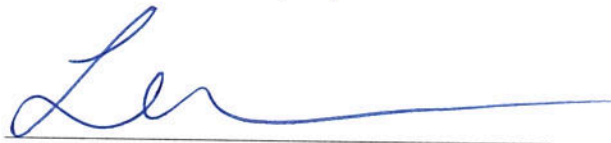
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

ABSTRACT

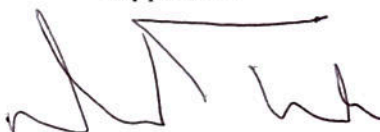
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As a practice in Western society, Sabbath has been largely eroded over the last few decades. This is true not only in the culture but in the church as well, both of laity and of clergy. The implications of this loss may be seen in terms of personal health or perpetual exhaustion, and while these are true results of a loss of keeping Sabbath the real loss is in a faithful life. More than a mere day off to recharge the batteries, keeping Sabbath rejuvenates us spiritually as we live into God's invitation to live life abundant *with* God.

Long before the Ten Commandments, Sabbath comes to us in the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. The “day of rest” is actually a day of continuing creation where God brings *menuhah* – peace, rest, harmony – that is not separated from the previous six days but crowns them. In an attempt to define and protect the Sabbath, Jewish leaders set categories of work to be avoided on the Sabbath that were derived from those tasks necessary to build the tabernacle. Over time, the rules became ever more involved and stricter. This was the context of Sabbath that Jesus found himself in, and his Sabbath healing stories in particular show where the attempts to protect Sabbath were actually stifling its life.

This thesis focuses on keeping Sabbath by clergy as a means to renew not only themselves but the wider church as well, drawing from written sources as well as my own experiences serving in United Methodism and British Methodism. For clergy, Sabbath is not a luxury. Clergy are not so indispensable that they are unable to take Sabbath. Some clergy have trouble with saying “No” to doing things, a practice that is needed as Sabbath time must be protected. Clergy are important in Sabbath keeping because clergy are called by God to their life and Sabbath is integral to that life. Sabbath is integral to the life of all disciples, and clergy are leaders and modelers of that life.

Using the concept of Disruptive Innovation developed by Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School, clergy can begin to reclaim keeping Sabbath and find in it renewal of themselves and of the wider church. The wider national culture has overtaken much of church culture in this regard, and keeping Sabbath is a means to disrupt the new normal of living busy, hectic, exhausting lives and call us back to participation in the life rhythm of God. Duke's Clergy Health Initiative found that clergy needed to repeatedly be given permission to take care of themselves, and this is a stark reminder of how far we have strayed from keeping Sabbath. Keeping Sabbath is part of our *communal* life together, and Christians have much to (re)learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters as to how we do that. Western life has become largely ruled by the clock, which is not without its benefits but also becomes an uncompromising taskmaster when completely submitted to. God's children are invited to share in a life that is more than the big hand and the little hand and how much can be squeezed into a day. It is a life of creative rhythm.

Clergy can lead a renewal that embraces life abundant over a life of unrelenting busyness. Keeping Sabbath is a cornerstone of this life. By keeping it themselves, clergy can inspire members of congregations to follow suit and the ripple effects will spread outwards. While the ideal goal is to recover a Sabbath for all on the same day, there are also realizations of those who cannot keep Sabbath because of financial realities as well as professional realities such as emergency and medical workers. Nevertheless, part of keeping Sabbath is finding way to include these others, often beginning in small groups. Further, what is defined as "work" has personal *and* group dynamics.

We too often live as less than we are. In keeping Sabbath, we acknowledge that the Lord of the Sabbath is not I. The Sabbath is not just to be remembered. It is to be kept *holy*.

This work is dedicated to my fellow clergy “Sabbath works in progress.”

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I

Remember the Sabbath and Keep it Holy

*It's just another manic Monday
I wish it was Sunday
'Cause that's my fun day
My I don't have to run day
It's just another manic Monday*

--- from the song *Manic Monday* by The Bangles

I was staring at the ceiling. Not that it was a particularly nice ceiling, but I was lying in bed and there it was. White. Squares. I resisted the urge to count how many, not that I would have been able to concentrate on such a task anyway. My brain was fuzzy, unable to focus with any intensity on anything at all. But at least by then I knew where I was. This particular ceiling was in an Emergency Room in Huntersville, NC. For the first time in my life, I was in an Emergency Room not as a visiting minister but as a patient.

The date was February 18, 2017, and my brain had taken a trip...and did not take me with it. By the time I found myself staring at this ceiling, I was “back” in the current world. There is an hour and a half where I have no idea what happened, only that when I came out of it I did not know who I was, where exactly I was, whether I was married, the name of my church, or who lived in the house I was in (it was *mine*).

It was terrifying.

On January 26, 2018, it happened again. On January 27, 2018, it happened yet again. My body was letting me know that something was seriously out of whack. And as with many health issues, the root cause is rarely a single physical item. There is often a spiritual element as well. And as it turns out, a particular spiritual failing of mine had been a loss of keeping Sabbath and taking care of my whole self – the soul as well as the body. With his belief in taking care of both, John Wesley would not be amused.

Sabbath.

Does this have meaning for you?

I am a preacher writing to preachers. Questions about Sabbath should not lead immediately to thoughts of time off. Vacation. Freedom from church demands. These are not the same as keeping Sabbath. This gift of God, this sharing in God, is far too vital to continue to ignore. An unreferenced quote I once heard embraces the trap clergy may fall into when trying to meet the many demands on their time: we spend so much time on the merely important that we forget what is vital. Consider these lyrics from the song “I’m in a Hurry (and I Don’t Know Why)” by the country group *Alabama*:

*I’m in a hurry to get things done.
Oh I rush and rush until life’s no fun.
All I really gotta do is live and die
But I’m in a hurry and don’t know why.*

Sabbath is introduced to humanity in scripture, and that is where I will begin. Then I will look at how difficult clergy can find Sabbath to keep. The guiding focus of this paper is the

challenge to *lead* a (re)discovery of keeping Sabbath by clergy, which will be guided by the concepts of *disruptive innovation* (a business model developed by Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School, where changes that come into a market disrupt it and change the whole equation) and *cascade* (where one act causes another causes another causes another until a seemingly unrelated event results. Also called *trophic cascade*.). Finally, clergy will be encouraged to lead cultural disruption that will hold the promise of bringing us from small beginnings to an entire culture shift that reorients towards God. In short, the challenge is to reject the lie of exhausting busyness and embrace the life centered in celebratory rest that God has called holy from the very beginning.

Sabbath is something that many of us choose to ignore, “the dessert most people leave on the table.”¹ I, of course, have been *aware* of Sabbath for a long time but it took that turn in my health to focus me so much that I set aside the entire direction of my research and embraced Sabbath as the new way forward. I have written many of these words while on renewal leave, a largely unknown gift that the United Methodist Church offers its clergy every four years. This leave a time to center life once again on God before burn-out kills ministry or relationships or even joy itself.

Still, what does it say when I could not enjoy my renewal leave because I was worried about getting my thesis done...a thesis on *Sabbath*? My original plan for my leave was to re-read the Bible, *Genesis* to *Revelation*, spend time each Monday through Thursday working on my thesis, and then have Friday through Sunday to recapture the long-lost art of watching movies, catching up with friends, and other things that had become lost over the years. I was also going to cut firewood, give the house a thorough cleaning, and get into better physical shape. In trying to

¹ Christopher D. Ringwald, *A Day Apart: How Jews, Christians, and Muslims Find Faith, Freedom, and Joy on the Sabbath* (Oxford University Press, 2007), xi.

get the most “good” out of my time I overloaded my days. In trying to utilize it to maximum efficiency, I took the *gift* and tried to ruin it. My leave started out over-planned to the point that it was as exhausting as life before it. Since then, I have proceeded in much more of a Sabbath spirit. I get as far as I get *and it is okay*. God is involved, and that weekend Sabbath is slowly but surely renewing my life *in each day*. Abraham Heschel observed that the Sabbath “is not a date but an atmosphere.”² I could not agree more, and I am finding that slowly the atmosphere of Sabbath is expanding from a single day to embrace all my days. It is the very breath of life, sustaining us in each moment. *Shabbat shalom* is the peace of the Sabbath that transcends the one day and binds all together.

Anecdotal evidence over the years – with my friends, from clergy who responded to my questions in preparing this thesis, and through things that I have read – tells me that this gradual loss of non-working time and the failure to keep Sabbath by clergy is now the norm. Stanley Hauerwas’ reported description of clergy as “a quivering mass of availability” has become more appropriate than it should. Duke University’s Clergy Health Initiative, a multi-year study of the health of United Methodist clergy in both North Carolina conferences, found that over a third of clergy felt guilty about not doing enough.³ We should note that that was the one-third that *admitted* to that guilt, a figure that among my personal clergy friends and colleagues is much higher. The direction of this thesis is keeping Sabbath by clergy as a means to not only renew themselves but the wider church as well. To be clear, Sabbath is *not* the same as time off or vacation time. We are engaging in a gift from God that brings rest and joy and worship and expectation and renewal.

² Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 21.

³ Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Bayassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 3.

My ministry has been blessed by being able to serve in both United and British Methodism, living within different cultures and ways of being the Methodist Church. This thesis is from a Western, largely American and British, point of view. I was first ordained as a deacon (pre-1996 *Discipline*) at Lake Junaluska, N.C., then as a presbyter in British Methodism in 1998. I served in Britain from 1996 until 2010, gifting me with appreciation of the cultural differences but also some cultural confusions leaving me something of a Brit-American. To other Americans who came to Britain, I described British culture as just familiar enough to be totally confusing. I perceived that there was a slower pace there, not quite a Sabbath pace but slower than what I was used to in the U.S., that changes how the rhythm of life pulses. As one example, we in the U.S. are used to being hurried on from a restaurant so the table can be cleared and the next set of paying customers can take our place. In Britain, it is more common to ease your way into the meal and then ease your way out, with pre-dinner drinks, the meal, dessert, and then drinks and conversation after. Once becoming accustomed to it, I found it an incredible change. A British friend of mine tells a story from their time as Mission Partners on the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, another example of culture clash. An American contractor had been brought down to help with a construction site. He arrived at work one day and asked what was to be done. He was told, “Today we are waiting for the concrete to dry.” He was incensed. “What?! You mean we’re wasting a whole day doing *nothing?!?*” The reply was telling: “No, we are *waiting.*”

In our 21st-century Western culture, keeping Sabbath, indeed almost any form of rest, has become a luxury. To keep Sabbath is to go against the prevailing cultural work ethic. Watch TV for a few hours, and the commercials will make clear that people are expected to be busy – kids playing seven sports plus band plus Scouts, jobs that require long hours. *Do more. Work harder. Work longer.* With church culture expecting ministers to be available 24/7/365, clergy are

exasperatingly prone to the “do more” disease. In *The Sabbath*, Heschel often describes Sabbath as “a palace in time.” Can we even grasp such a concept, and then continue stretching to see it as something God freely gives?

Keeping Sabbath is difficult because the culture does not understand it, and the wider national culture has impacted church culture. The peaceful silence of a Sunday afternoon in the days of my youth is now lost to the sound of constant traffic, lawnmowers, and hammering. Our congregations are made up of cultural people. Christians, yes, but American Christians, British Christians, Christians within a larger cultural context that encourages the filling of every minute with activity. Sabbath keeping, then, is now counter-cultural. “In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest.”⁴ How do clergy recover this rhythm in the midst of a world that still grasps at the thought of Sunday as “my fun day” and then does everything it can to make any fun days, much less a Sabbath, all but impossible?

Method Out of the Madness

There is a way. It is called Sabbath. *Shabbat*. The Seventh Day. The day where God rested, and the day God *hallowed*. The day that God invites us to live into, not as a mere part of life but at its heart. The day becomes the day, not a time to get things done. Things will get done, but not in a way that credits the GNP. It becomes a day that credits God. Slow down. Stop. *Understand* that “the root meaning of [Sabbath] is ‘to cease,’ as in ceasing from the everyday.”⁵ As a British colleague put it, “Don’t do today what you can put off until tomorrow.” He did not

⁴ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 1.

⁵ Craig Harline, *Sunday: A History of the First Day From Babylonia to the Super Bowl* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 4.

mean that as an invitation to laziness, but as a way of living. Come to terms with the truth that the constant rush to fill every moment with busyness is a lie. The Sabbath has one direction: God.

Clergy are key to understanding this. We are called as *leaders* in God's church. Do we remember that it is *God's* church as we are ping-ponged from one demand to another? Consider how many of the prophets called Israel to repent of their failure to keep the carpet looking new and stain-free? None. Did they not instead call Israel back to *life*, and one inescapable sign of that life was whether they kept the Sabbath holy? Jesus kept the Sabbath and worked hard to free it from overly restrictive rules, culturally defined chains that sucked the life out of the day. Clergy can use small beginnings to reclaim Sabbath not just from cultural challenges *but from church ones as well*.

In forgetting Sabbath we are forgetting a focal point of our life in God. God has given us more than abundance, God has given us *enough*. But those Jones seem to have more, and off we go. "When we do not trust in guaranteed abundance, we must supply the deficiencies out of our own limited resources. We scramble to move from our sense of scarcity to an abundance that we imagine we ourselves can supply, all the while frantically anxious that we won't quite make it: It is necessary to erode the holy time of Sabbath for the sake of productivity, given our sense of scarcity grounded in distrust."⁶ Little do we realize that all we are doing when we sacrifice Sabbath is to sacrifice unity with God (even when we claim to be wearing ourselves out so we can do more *for God!*) in order to embrace even more exhaustion and death. When clergy embrace this lifestyle, they merely confirm its validity for others.

On my first Sunday off after moving to Britain, I went to a service in central London and then decided to walk the few blocks over into a shopping district where I had seen a hobby store I

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 1.

wanted to visit. When I got there, *the shop was closed*. After all, *it was Sunday*.⁷ National law still kept a check on commerce on Sundays, long after the quiet North Carolina Sundays of my youth had given way to everything being open and ready for business. But something that will be mentioned in these pages is how Sabbath *cannot* be coerced. Laws have long governed our activities on the Sabbath, with everything from fines to humiliation to prison the result of not keeping Sabbath as legally defined. But God offers us Sabbath as a *gift*, a *Please come!* instead of a *Do this or else!* God want us to want God.

The goal is not simple change. The goal is not simple growth. The goal is *renewal*. May clergy lead a cultural renewal that remembers the Sabbath and keeps it holy.

⁷ Subsequent changes in British law mean this store is likely now open on Sundays.

II

For the Bible Tells Me So

Genesis – Malachi

In the beginning...

Ask a random collection of Sunday School children – or adults, for that matter – how the Bible begins, and you will almost always hear “In the beginning...” That has been a favorite translation from the King James Version (KJV) to the more recent New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Tanakh, or New International Version (NIV). It is ingrained. And it *may* be correct.

When I was embarking on the great adventure of ordained ministry, I spent the early to mid-1990s at Duke Divinity School. One of the highlights of my time there was a class in *midrash* taught by Rabbi Sager. His approach to Scripture and its interpretation was refreshing and, especially for one whose experience of the Bible up until that point had been of the “It’s in there, that’s it” variety, eye-opening. One of his images was the image of all of Scripture as spider silk...*but still inside the spider*. All of those words just jumbled up, swirling around, and then as God speaks they spin out in a thread. Do any of the words become more important than others? Which were first, if they were all in there together to start with?

So. *In the beginning...* was not the beginning. Move ahead to Proverbs 8 and we find we move before Genesis 1. Proverbs 8 tells us that wisdom has been with God from a beginning before there were heavens and earth, before mountains, before fountains, *before*. Robert Alter translates the beginning of Genesis as “When God began to create heaven and earth...” In *The*

Message, Eugene Peterson says “First this: God created the Heavens and Earth...” Another possibility I have seen is “In *a* beginning...” Perhaps that translation is more to the point of why a discussion of Sabbath scripture begins in Genesis and not in the more expected Exodus or Deuteronomy.

In Genesis 1, God creates. Heavens, earth, day, night, greater and lesser lights, fish, birds, animals, people. Ask an average church-attender how long creation took, and the response will be, “Six days!” And what happened on the seventh day? “God rested!”

Well. Yes. And more.

Genesis 1 takes us through different acts of creation. There are evenings, there are mornings, the first day through the sixth day. And then Genesis 2 begins this way: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”¹

The Creation story in Genesis uses the rhythm of evening and morning, how God looks on each completed bit and declares it good, and how at the end of the sixth day God looks on everything that has been created and pronounces it very good.² This is a story that clergy may think they know too well. But there is a surprise in what *actually* happens on the seventh day. The heavens and the earth and all their multitude are finished, but before God rests we are told that “on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done.”³ The heavens and the earth were finished *but creation was not*.

¹ Genesis 2.1-3, NRSV. All further Bible references NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² Not just humans. I have heard more than one sermon that noted how God said only humans were very good, but the text is clear that God looks on “everything that he had made.”

³ Some translators use “completed” rather than “finished.”

There are three differences between God’s activity on the seventh day and the other six, but creative activity is not one of them. The first is that the formulaic ending “And there was evening and there was morning...” is absent. Not missing, absent. Creation is completed. We do not move on to the next act. There is something special about the seventh day, and that is the second difference in that the seventh day moves beyond things being good or even very good. God blesses the seventh day and *hallows* it. In his classic work *The Sabbath*, Abraham Heschel notes that “to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate; it cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base, the holy is the summit. Things created in six days He considered *good*, the seventh day He made *holy*.”⁴ Clergy must never lose the idea that the seventh day, *Shabbat*, hence *Sabbath*, has been *hallowed* from the very first one.⁵

That third difference in the seventh day is in what is created: *Shabbat*, the hallowed day of rest itself. The story of this beginning is complete. “Which makes the ending suitably grand. God enters his palace and ascends his throne. The medieval Jewish liturgists adored this image; they called the Sabbath God’s coronation.”⁶ “Although all aspects of the world were finished at the end of the sixth day, the world became whole and perfect only on the seventh day, when the hammer fell, as it were, and God’s rest brought *menuhah* into being. As different as the seventh day became from those that preceded it, it still had tight links to them. It was the crown of creation, but it was also its climax and completion.”⁷ There is a lighthearted picture to be imagined here of

⁴ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 75.

⁵ It is easy to overlook but Have you ever noticed that humanity’s first full day is the Sabbath.? God creates us on the sixth day, gives us our task, and when we wake up the next morning (did we sleep then?) God gives us the day off.

⁶ Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010), 68.

⁷ Francine Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day* (New York: Harmony Books, 2002), 137; cf. Heschel, 54.

God sitting back, drink in hand, joyfully and contentedly looking over all that had been made. And maybe having a nap. Genesis 1.1-2.4 makes Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 *possible*.

The Exodus and Deuteronomic lists of the Ten Commandments are the same. Mainly. One of the joys of the Bible – and I do mean that – is how different places tell us the same story differently. One example is a list of the twelve Apostles, comparing who is listed in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and The Acts of the Apostles. Which list do you go with?

Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 both give us the commandments. What they differ in, when it comes to the Sabbath, is the rationale for *why* God gave it to us in the first place. Exodus 20.8-11 says, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.” The rationale is straightforward: we rest because God rested. One day in seven we enter God’s time, not governed by a clock but by the rhythm of creation. As God shares creation – place – with us so God shares Sabbath – time – with us. But it is a particular time, a holy time, a time that is set apart where activity from a human point of view is overwhelmed by a gift of divine peace. In a culture so driven by the clock, contemporary clergy must re-embrace this concept of time.

In contrast, Deuteronomy 5.12-15: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that

you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” The rationale is no longer Genesis creation but Egyptian bondage.

Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5: which is it? Participation in God’s creation or remembering God’s powerful act in calling us out of bondage? The answer is *both*. “On the one hand, Exodus explains why the Sabbath is a holy day on the basis of the story of creation. On the other, Deuteronomy is concerned with why the Sabbath should be kept, grounding it instead in the story of salvation. The former directs attention to the God of the covenant, the latter to the people of the covenant. These different theological bases for the Sabbath are complementary, not contradictory.”⁸ Or as Victor Hamilton put it so well, “Both call the faithful to rest on the seventh day because of some beautiful work of God. That beautiful work of God is bringing something into existence that did not exist before, his cosmos and his covenant chosen.”⁹ In that sense, both understandings are creation stories.

Do not both point to the primacy of YHWH? Note further how both versions extend Sabbath not just to God’s chosen people but to slaves, livestock, and the aliens living in their midst. Taking that into today, I will not enjoy Sabbath while making others have to work during it. I will not enjoy Sabbath while leasing out my work animals on the Sabbath (though farmers will be glad to note that over the centuries the rabbis made exceptions as well as rules, and tasks such as milking cows are allowed under the heading of preventing suffering). And I will not enjoy Sabbath while...well, think of the backlash in many U.S. states against the influx of immigrants, often lumped together derisively as “Mexicans.” God always includes those among us that we can only

⁸ David L. Baker, *The Decalogue: Living as the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 76; cf. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*. Interpretation: Resources for the use of Scripture in the Church series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2009), 132.

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 339.

think of as aliens and not as those who are also made in the image of God. Against these backdrops, this is a reminder of what happens when God is not first -and- that God acts against these tendencies/injustices. As leaders, clergy must echo this.

God gives us Sabbath and invites us to enjoy it. Then begins the arduous task of trying to figure out *how* we enjoy the Sabbath. What is allowed? What is not allowed? Rules come into being, admonitions, restrictions. The process of defining practice is rarely easy.

In Genesis, God rests. In Exodus 20, humanity is invited to share in that resting. In between, Sabbath seems to go into hiding – neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob are mentioned as enjoying a Sabbath – until we come to Exodus 16 and the story of the manna. As is frequently the case, the story begins with the Israelites grumbling. There in the wilderness of Sin they wonder where their next meal will come from. Despite God’s continual provision, doubt and fear take over. In response to Israel’s complaining, God provides quail in the evening, and then the next morning forty years of manna begin.

Day after day after day. But not *every* day. For the first time since Genesis, *Shabbat* appears.¹⁰ The people are instructed to gather what manna they need each day. They find that those that gather a lot and those that gather a little have exactly what they need. Those that worry about tomorrow, and presumably whether God will remember to send more manna, find that what they try to save is riddled with worms and inedible. The sixth day of gathering manna is to be different. The people are to gather twice as much as on other days because there will not be any manna on the seventh day. And why? Verse 23 has Moses tell them, “This is what the Lord has

¹⁰ Interestingly, as the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments lies only four chapters ahead and the context of the manna story is the longing for “the good life” back in Egypt, the Exodus version bases out of God resting on the seventh day. It is the Deuteronimic version that grounds in no longer being slaves in Egypt.

commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord.’ And then verse 26, “Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.”

Is Sabbath just a guideline? Exodus 20 lists it among the commandments, the Ten Words. Exodus 31 drives home how seriously Israel is to take it. Those that work on the Sabbath are to be cut off from among the people (31.14) as well as put to death (31.15). Those two penalties – being put to death and being cut off from the people – are only used one other time, in reference to giving children to Molech (Lev. 20:2-3).¹¹

It is in Numbers 15 that the seriousness of Sabbath is highlighted. The first part of this chapter deals with various offences but goes to some length to differentiate between those who sin intentionally and those who sin unintentionally. Then comes the story of the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath. It is evident that Sabbath is a known practice because the man is found and arrested. It is also evident that Sabbath is still a new practice because while people know it is a violation they do not know what should be done about it. One thing not told is *why* the man is gathering sticks. Is he caring for a sick mother? But if God does indeed look on the heart, and given the “intentional” and “unintentional” aspect of preceding verses, then what happens next gives us the idea that the man knew exactly what he was doing and did it anyway.

The Lord’s decision is clear: take him outside the camp and stone him to death. Not exile, not being cut off from the people, *death*. This is a serious story, one that I continue to struggle with, but the importance of Sabbath becomes inescapable. Sabbath is *holy*. Do not treat it as anything less. There are further ways to think of this story. For example, a “man gathering wood on the Sabbath is not only doing forbidden work; he violates the mutual non-compete clause that lets Sabbath-keepers feel they can afford not to work. If he gets away with it, then everyone else

¹¹ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 524.

can, too, and no one will be able to rest. It will no longer be feasible to keep the Sabbath.”¹² There is a movement here from gift to not being able to enjoy the gift. Societal pressure precludes keeping the Sabbath once it becomes acceptable to ignore it. On their way to worship, current church-goers may see people washing cars, cutting grass, delivering mail, a whole list of things unthinkable just a few decades ago. Activity for activity’s – or profit’s – sake. Keeping the Sabbath holy? I am not in any way advocating a return to the death penalty or Puritan stocks or Blue Law fines for Sabbath violations.¹³ But how do we keep the Sabbath *holy* in a perpetually busy culture? I will return to this theme in the next chapter.

In the Pentateuch, the sanctity of the Sabbath is protected over and over. Leviticus 23.3 states that the Sabbath will be a day of *complete* rest. Are there no exceptions? When I served in northeastern Scotland with British Methodism, there were still two weeks in October when schools were not in session: the Tattie Holidays. These two weeks were the remnant from a time when the whole family was needed to bring in the potato harvest. Food trumped education. But does it trump Sabbath? Exodus 34.21 says no, that even in plowing time and harvest time there is to be rest – “a high price to pay for an early society.”¹⁴ How about the building of the tabernacle? Surely something as important as this God-centered place can be built on the Sabbath? Is this not “holy” work that justifies breaking the Sabbath? Exodus 35.1-3 answers – *No!* “Maybe the demands of building this edifice as quickly as possible will call for a seven-day workweek. May one put aside the prohibition about not working on the Sabbath Day when one is engaged in such a sacred enterprise? Apparently not.”¹⁵

¹² Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 44.

¹³ Previous generations in Europe and America have employed such penalties for ignoring the Sabbath.

¹⁴ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 45; cf. Paul Heintzman, *Leisure & Spirituality: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 97-98.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 596; also, this idea from Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 143: “Israel is not to be a total-work culture, regardless of whether the compulsion is external or internal. Moreover, the Sabbath imperative suggests that the basis on which

Once Sabbath observance was instituted it never lost its force. It did, however, lose its focus. As with seemingly everything else in the life God called Israel to, once they were settled in the land of Promise, Sabbath began to erode. Even before the book of Joshua is finished, cracks have begun to show in Israel's covenant living. Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are unrelenting in their detail of how often and how far God's people distance themselves from God. The prophets come, and Sabbath is an integral part of their message, their calling of Israel back to God. Amos, Ezekiel, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah are clear that the loss of Sabbath observance is one of Israel's many sins. They are also clear that worship is now an intrinsic part of Sabbath observance. What began as a day of rest is now a day of restful worship. That model of restful worship, I would suggest, remains our primary Sabbath calling today – and just as difficult to maintain in a world that once again has forgotten it.

Note, for example, how Isaiah treats Sabbath. Or perhaps more directly, how God treats Sabbath *through* Isaiah. Already in chapter 1, Sabbath is lifted up as something lost, now abhorrent to God because God's people have descended into iniquity (1.12-14).¹⁶ Michael Burer notes that "Isaiah 8.13-14 is similar to Isaiah 56 in that God will bless his people in response to proper Sabbath observance, which involves not only behavior but attitude as well."¹⁷ The boundary shattering extent of that blessing is found in Isaiah 56.4-5, a message that can only have been a shock to the system of every faithful Israelite. By Torah, eunuchs were barred from the Temple. Yet, God says here, "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please

work may be judged 'good' goes beyond its direct products – in this case, a portable sanctuary and a mode of worship acceptable to God – to include also the effect on human character that is an inevitable by-product of labor." This can challenge our own lives. In the last six months, how many times have you engaged in work on the Sabbath for "the greater good" or even "for God"?

¹⁶ Along these lines, Sturcke compares the prophet Ezekiel in that "the logic and parallelism of [Ezekiel] 20:18-20 imply that proper Sabbath observance is the positive counterpart of idolatry." Henry Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God: How Jesus Came to Personify the Sabbath* (Zurich: Theologischen Verlag Zurich, 2005), 45.

¹⁷ Michael H. Burer, *Divine Sabbath Work* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 46.

me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” The surrounding verses extend this blessing to foreigners, showing that even those not of God’s people and those formerly barred will be able to live in the covenant. This covenant living is more than keeping Sabbath, yet Sabbath is specifically mentioned and is mentioned *first*. Those who do so will be brought by God to the holy mountain, made joyful and be accepted in God’s house, and the Lord will gather the outcasts (7-8). Sabbath *matters*. Sabbath is *important*. Sabbath is *holy*.

And then came the exile. I & II Chronicles, a history of Israel’s kings fully rooted in a God-centric point of view, is noteworthy for how it ends. Nebuchadnezzar has come, the temple has been burned, and the Babylonian exile has begun. This exile, we are told, will last “until the land had made up for its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years” (II Chron 36.21b-22). Sabbath now becomes the marker of the exile.

And not just a marker, for an evolution begins. With the loss of the temple and the exile, and again when the Romans destroy the temple in the year 70, this loss of Sabbath place leads Sabbath to become a marker in time.¹⁸ “With a longing for what had been lost and a genius for re-creating it, the sages symbolically incorporated into Jewish life aspects of the Temple service that still define Shabbat at home.”¹⁹ Continued today, the *Shabbat* meal recreates the loss of place, a genius of memory. The menorah becomes the *Shabbat* candles. Mana, some of which was commanded to be kept with the Ark as an eternal reminder, becomes two *challah* breads. The priests wash hands and the Levites sing, and those become the washing of hands at the start of the

¹⁸ In *The Sabbath*, Abraham Heschel writes extensively about holiness in time with *Shabbat* being a “Palace in Time.”

¹⁹ Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment*, 92. While many others note the following correlations with Temple practice, for ease I have followed her list on pp. 92-93.

meal and the *zemirot*, songs and hymns. Altar sacrifices become meat and/or salt. Wine remains wine, its joy and ritual embodied in the *kidush* blessing. And the temple as a place of peace and holiness becomes a song welcoming the angels of peace at the beginning of the meal and knives being removed from the table at the end. There is much lament here. Loss of place, loss of focus. And yet Sabbath refuses to be lost, recreated in ritual that leads us into Presence. Would that Christianity had not been so quick to throw out so much Jewish practice. What aids do Christians retain today that help give meaning to the day?²⁰ But to our Jewish brothers and sisters, these practices are worshipful identity. “[M]ore than ever, after the exile Sabbath observance became a distinguishing sign for Jews and a barrier against assimilation into foreign ways in foreign lands.”²¹ Today, it is tempting to say that Sabbath can become a barrier against foreign ways in a familiar land. We know our country. We know our culture. Sabbath can become an identity marker that reminds us that our national culture is one we are in but not of. Chapters 3 and 5 will begin, but only begin, to unpack this difficulty, this tension, we live in as God’s people in a world that retains all the temptations of the wilderness and of Canaan.

Before moving to the Gospels, there is one more passage to note: Psalm 92, self-identified as a song for the Sabbath day.²² In the context of Sabbath worship, this psalm looks at the world and acknowledges evil but attests to something more enduring: God. The brutish and the fool exist, “the wicked spring up like grass, and all the wrongdoers flourish” (8). But over everything is the Lord – who is named seven times, that perfect number – whose justice will win out. But why “is it good to acclaim the Lord and to hymn to Your name, Most High” (2) on the Sabbath?

²⁰ A simple way to begin would be to adapt one or more of the Jewish practices just mentioned.

²¹ Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment*, 91.

²² I am using Robert Alter’s translation here. He has a way of explaining his translation choices that makes me want to know more. After finding his *The Five Books of Moses*, I preached Genesis for *weeks* such was the newness he led me to.

To escape the evil? That is not the message. Instead, we are reminded that God is ever faithful, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and who will scatter (exile?) the wrongdoers while the righteous will spring up like a palm tree or Lebanon cedar. To what end? “Planted in the house of the Lord, in the courts of God they flourish. They bear fruit still in old age, fresh and full of sap they are, to tell that the Lord is upright, my rock, there is no wrong in Him” (13-16).

What is the focus of Sabbath here? “According to the psalmist, our offerings of thanksgiving and praise are not a forced or commended response. When they are at their most authentic pitch, they follow spontaneously and naturally from a life that is attentive and responsive to God’s grandeur and goodness everywhere on display.”²³ Sabbath is only one point of our faithful life, but it is a focal point. When we gather for worship, when we tell God’s story – Creation, Exodus, calling and calling and calling the people to return to God, and yes even the Exile that always ends with the promise that the remnant will return – we remind ourselves of who and whose we are: God’s people. Sabbath becomes the time when we rest in God’s story and refresh ourselves to continue living in the covenant. “If the psalmist is right, then the test of whether we have genuinely practiced the Sabbath will come in the middle of our working week.”²⁴ Those old righteous people still bear fruit because they are grounded and fed in God. They keep their place in the Story by constantly telling and retelling the Story. Over the years, I have heard many people give voice to the same idea: when they miss worship the rest of the week feels like there is something missing. Our Sabbath life feeds us. Sabbath is the nexus of the totality of faithful living. This connectivity to Sabbath practice in the rest of the week is one of the tendrils that renewal can follow as clergy seek building blocks for change.

²³ Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

The Gospels: Jesus and the Sabbath

By the time Jesus is born, the Babylonian exile is centuries past. Moses on Mt Sinai was a millennium ago. The temple has been rebuilt, the Jews are again living in Canaan...but they are not free. After being ruled by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, the Romans take their turn.

Setting the stage is not easy. Among many influences, two are particularly worth noting. One is the evolution in religious thought. How does one remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? Invasions, exiles, and foreign rulers have shaken God's people. The refusal to keep Sabbath holy became a defining sin causing God's judgment and the exile. So, the rabbis set to work (pun intended) trying to define the parameters of a holy Sabbath.

This is not a worthless exercise. If people are to rest, what constitutes work on the Sabbath? "Biblical examples of prohibited work include gathering food on the Sabbath (Exod. 16:29-30; Matt. 12:1-2; Mark 2:23-24), leaving one's home and community (Exod. 16:29b), plowing and harvesting (Exod. 34:21), building the tabernacle (Exod. 35:2ff), lighting a fire (Exod. 35:3), gathering wood (Num. 15:32-36), marketing one's goods (Amos 8:5), carrying loads (Jer. 17:19-22; John 5:10), and healing (Luke 13:10-14)."²⁵ The rabbis, with their usual genius, eventually settled on thirty-nine categories of work, based on what was involved in the construction of the tabernacle. If something as important as work on the Tabernacle was to cease on the Sabbath, then here was a model for all other work. Rules, however, can take over, becoming more important

²⁵ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 338.

than the idea itself. I am a United Methodist minister. Our denomination has the *Discipline* that directs our organization and, to an extent, our lives. At its best, it is an attempt to provide guidance for living a life that is based entirely in Scripture and faith in God. At worst, people see no marriage with the Scriptural base and it becomes nothing more than a set of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” Many people like things in black and white, and if we are not careful then our rules replace God’s freedom and bind and enslave us. This idea is important in the Jesus episodes below.

The second influence is Roman rule itself, and what that means for the Jewish people. Even at a modern, local level, a congregation can bristle when the Annual Conference or United/British Methodist Church as a whole adopts a policy the locals do not agree with.²⁶ In our disagreements, tempers may flare but nothing particularly horrible is likely to happen. Not so when the Romans are in control.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, as told in Luke’s account (19.28-40), something interesting happens. The (previously unriden) colt is saddled, Jesus rides into the city, the crowd spreads their cloaks on the road before him...and then “the whole multitude of the disciples” praise God in loud joy by announcing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The very next thing that happens is that Pharisees in the crowd hear the disciples’ proclamation and interject, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop!”²⁷

Then, when Jesus is on trial, John 11.45-53 gives voice to what may well have been worrying these Pharisees. This chapter is well known for the story of the raising of Lazarus. But the immediate aftermath of that event has the Sanhedrin called together to decide what to do with Jesus. Their concern is very simple: “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If

²⁶ When I was in Britain, I was privileged to do some limited teaching of ministerial candidates. One of our classes was along the theme of “What happens when the church believes something that *I* do not?” This is not an idle question in an individualistic society.

²⁷ That verse is usually concluded with a period, but I believe the impetus of what is going on demands exclamation.

we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation!”²⁸ To which Caiaphas gives his unwitting prophecy that it is better for one man to die than to have the whole nation destroyed.

There is a known phenomenon that can happen to congregations in decline. They see the decline happening in something that they love. Naturally, they want to protect what they love. So, they begin to implement rules and policies to protect their love, often becoming fixated on the building and premises. The “rules of use” of the premises become more and more restrictive as money and people dwindle, desperate attempts to keep what they have known their entire lives from dying. The dark irony is that their very attempts to save what they love asphyxiates it. People outside the congregation perceive the more and more restrictive rules as a “You are *not* welcome!” sign, while those within the congregation who wish for change and newness finally give up and leave, hastening the decline.

In Jesus’ time, Rome ruled. This was not an alliance but domination. In the Roman reality, there was no king but Caesar. It was no mistake that those Pharisees wanted Jesus *to silence his disciples* when they were proclaiming the arrival of a king. Would not a Roman soldier watching this think it worth reporting? Rome did not suffer rivals. The theme continued when Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was a king. When he tried to release Jesus, the crowd reminded Pilate that if he released one who claimed to be a king then he, Pilate, was no friend of the emperor. In short, his job security – his life – would be in question. And then the crowd shouted that they had no king but Caesar.²⁹ The Sanhedrin was not exaggerating when they worried that the Romans would come and destroy the temple and the nation itself. Roman rule was absolute.

²⁸ Again, I have substituted an exclamation mark.

²⁹ And once again the kingship of God is denied in Israel’s history.

This is the context of Jesus' difficulties with the religious leaders over his Sabbath activities. The gift of Sabbath had become over-regulated. On many levels, this is understandable. They wanted to protect their faith. This was, after all, *the* sign of their identity. They were not Babylonian, they were not Roman, they were God's people. How they lived was an outward and visible sign of this, and as such it was vitally important that they get it right. However, "the true meaning of the Sabbath had been hidden by the many restrictions governing its observance. Sabbath-keeping was primarily external and formal. Rigid observance of a day was put before the needs of the people. Thus Jesus entered a situation in which human tradition was confused with the commands of God."³⁰ As is too often the case, interpretation of the rules overshadowed the holy core they were trying to protect.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each have a Sabbath confrontation. Apart from the story of the disciples plucking grain (Mt 12.1-8; Mk 2.23-28; Lk 6.1-5), they all involve a healing. (And even the grain episode is immediately followed by a healing story.) In Matthew 12.9-14, Mark 3.1-6, and Luke 6.6-11, Jesus heals the man with a withered hand. In each case, there is a context where Jesus is being watched to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. And in each case, before healing the man Jesus asks whether it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Always doing good on the Sabbath may seem obvious. But is it? Many contemporary Jewish communities prohibit driving on the Sabbath. In time, this gave rise to questions, such as: if I am a Jew and I am an ambulance driver, can I drive on *Shabbat*? The rabbis gave a clear yes to that, citing the over-arching prescription that obeying the Law was exempted in cases of life and death. (To quote a good United Methodist tenet, whatever we do, however noble the thought, we are to "do no harm.") Even then, the ambulance driver would be encouraged to have someone else

³⁰ Heintzman, *Leisure & Spirituality*, 101; We have our own modern confusions. Have you ever attended a new place of worship only to be told you were sitting in someone's seat or were dressed inappropriately or...?

(non-Jewish) drive them home after delivering the patient. While clergy will not often have to worry about driving an ambulance, this is the level of discourse I would like to see happening in our communities.

Then there is Luke 13.10-17 and the healing of the crippled woman. This woman had been crippled for eighteen years, unable to stand up straight. Unlike the previous episodes, Jesus does not hesitate – he calls her over and heals her. The leader of the synagogue is indignant: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” (He seems not to have been bothered by Jesus touching an ill woman, making himself ritually unclean.) The life or death exemption does not apply here. She has been suffering with this for nearly two decades. Why not wait until the next day to be healed? Surely Sabbath is more important than having your procedure done a day earlier, is it not? When I found myself spending a Saturday (*Shabbat*) morning as a first time Emergency Room *patient*, I was grateful the staff did not ask me to come back after sundown. Was it life or death? No, but we did not know that in the moment. Luke 13 “shows without a doubt that Jesus’ act of healing was intentional. He calls out to the woman of his own accord, he speaks a word of healing to her without her making a request, and he touches the woman. Within the framework of Sabbath law understood by the leader, Jesus has overstepped his bounds. Jesus’ conception of the Sabbath is altogether different. The implication that Jesus draws in his argument is that the Sabbath above all other days is a day on which this woman should be healed. The Sabbath is not incidental to Jesus’ action but is in fact essential...In the pericope, Sabbath is not simply the day on which the healing occurs: it is the *most appropriate day* for the healing to occur. When the woman receives release from her

infirmity, in a real sense she experiences exactly what the Sabbath is all about: freedom from bondage for her as an Israelite.”³¹

John’s gospel also brings the Sabbath into focus. In chapter 5, Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethesda. Noteworthy is that John tells the story of the healing *before* we are told it is the Sabbath. But in this case, it is not the healing itself that causes disruption. Jesus heals the man by telling him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Carrying a load in public was expressly forbidden on the Sabbath. Meaning that Jesus *knowingly* tells the man to break Sabbath rules. This story continues in chapter 7 (14-24) when Jesus is once again teaching in the temple. The crowd is confused by what Jesus is saying, and he refers back to the healing of this man. He notes that everyone considers it well and good to perform circumcisions on the Sabbath as those *must* be done on the eighth day, and then wonders why it is therefore not well and good heal an entire body on the Sabbath?

Finally, there is John 9 and the man born blind. This long story shows that people are genuinely afraid of being found breaking the rules (even the man’s parents refuse to stand up for him!) and that the healing proves to his critics that Jesus “is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath” (16). This story again shows that Jesus is not afraid of breaking the rules when good can be done. (And again, John tells of the healing *before* mentioning it is the Sabbath. This highlights that Sabbath is at the core of what is happening.) The contrast to the claim that Jesus cannot be from God is opposed by the very beginning of the story. The disciples wonder if he or his parents sinned that he was born blind – blindness being seen as a judgment against sin. Jesus responds that it was neither. Rather, “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (3).

³¹ Burer, *Divine Sabbath Work*, 117-118.

Jesus takes the Sabbath seriously. When Jesus goes to the synagogue in his home town, he goes to worship on the Sabbath “as was his custom” (Lk 4.16). Jesus is not trying to do away with Sabbath. It is something he celebrates. The problems arise when rules conflict with God’s intent for the Sabbath. Rules and attitudes can help keep the Sabbath holy, and they can hinder. Jesus “criticized his fellow Jews for overloading Shabbat with so many restrictions as to obscure its divine nature, that of a gift to sick and weary humanity.”³² A minister friend of mine tells the story of the time his congregation became upset that worship did not always end by noon. This is not an isolated complaint in modern Christianity, but this minister pressed the conversation to find out what underlay the concern. Being home in time for football? Uncomfortable seats? Boring worship? Neither of these. Instead, he was told that they had to be out the door by noon *in order to beat the Baptists to the restaurant!* They did not want to have to wait in line. Clergy face congregational pressure that can easily transform this personal desire into a Sabbath rule, an instrument of convenience. Jesus resists such attempts to trivialize God.

There are other Sabbath echoes in the gospels. When the women go to anoint Jesus’ body after his crucifixion, they do not go the very next morning – *because that is the Sabbath*. The day between the crucifixion and the Resurrection *was the Sabbath*. They wait until Sunday morning to go, keeping Sabbath Law even in their despair. Mark understands “that all readers would understand the necessity to postpone the anointing due to the Sabbath.”³³ And those Emmaus disciples are walking home on Sunday because it was too far to be allowed to do so on the Sabbath. For Jesus, Sabbath is *good*. Overly restrictive rules, not so much. The Sabbath should not bind people! It is a gift for those led out of bondage. Jesus would not have identified himself as Lord

³² Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 68.

³³ Harold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath Among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 89.

of the Sabbath if he had come to do away with it. The “problem” was not the healings themselves but that they violated Sabbath rules that themselves were a barrier to covenantal life with God.

Tying Together

In Genesis, God rests on the seventh day. The two formulations of the commandment give complementary reasons for embracing that rest: imitating God and remembering our life as slaves in Egypt. Questions naturally arose as to how this would happen, not least with the realization that on the seventh day God did an act of creation (the Sabbath itself). Over the centuries, guidelines were established, definitions of work were offered, and a cultural norm for *Shabbat* came into play. These norms are not lost today. At the beginning of one of my Doctor of Ministry classes, we were shown a photograph, a top-down view of a street in Holland. Asked to note what was odd or significant about it, our eyes were not trained to see the wire stretched across the street, the visible demarcation line of how far it was permissible to travel on *Shabbat*. Christian communities have far to go in catching up to our Jewish brothers and sisters when it comes to celebrating Sabbath.

Then came Jesus. Sabbath rules should never interfere with God. Keeping the Sabbath is bound up in the two great commandments. In loving God and neighbor, the Sabbath becomes a day of love of both. Hence, people may heal and not let the “form” of Sabbath stay their hand (cf. Lk 13, the daughter of Abraham). “Jesus performed many of his miracles on the Sabbath. The question is why...A better explanation is to see the miracles as specific people – creation in miniature – being set right to be what God intends.”³⁴ In addition to the Sabbath stories, Jesus

³⁴ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 45; cf. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 160, on the “insistence that the Sabbath is the time for release and setting free.”

frequently and regularly withdrew to pray and be with God – even in the midst of great demands on his time. Keeping Sabbath will cause disruption today. It may be culturally difficult but is spiritually necessary. I sometimes wonder if Jesus would have had the strength he needed in Gethsemane without his regular Sabbaths.

In conclusion, there is a well-known story was not addressed above. In Exodus 18, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, comes for a visit, bringing with him Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons. While there, Jethro gets to see Moses in action: literally spending all the live-long day judging cases that were brought to him. Jethro's response? "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone" (17-18). Many clergy are wearing themselves out. Not keeping Sabbath is akin to refusing to take time to heal when we are sick. We "tough it out," knowing all the while we would counsel others to take care of themselves. We give in to pressure from the congregation or pressure that is self-imposed (I'm needed! I can't be sick!) and push and push and push, kicking against the goads. Is it any wonder, then, that our illnesses tend to last longer when we do not care for our bodies, these gifts from God? This is "not good." When Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath, this was not an escape clause! Sabbath is a sign of how much God loves you.

In *The Message* version, God through the prophet Ezekiel says this: *I gave them my laws for living, showed them how to live well and obediently before me. I also gave them my weekly holy rest days, my "Sabbaths," a kind of signpost erected between me and them to show them that I, God, am in the business of making them holy*" (20.11-12). We are not called to be useful or popular or needed. God wants to make us *holy*.

Selected Sabbath Texts

Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-27; 8:4-5

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Exodus 16:25-30; 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-17;

34:21; 35:1-3

Ezekiel 20:11-12, 23-24; 22:8; 44:24

Hosea 2:11

Isaiah 1:12-13; 56:2-7; 58:13-14; 66:23

Jeremiah 17:19-27

Leviticus 19:3; 23:1-8, 21, 35-36; 26:2

Nehemiah 13:16-18

Numbers 15:32-36; 28:18-26; 29: 1, 12, 35

Psalms 92

Acts 2:46; 5:42; 9:20; 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-10;

18:4; 21:20

Colossians 2

Hebrews 4:1-11

John 5:1-18; 9:1-41

Luke 4:16; 6:1-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6

Mark 1:21; 2:23-28; 3:1-5

Matthew 5:17-48; 12:1-14; 19:3-9

Romans 14

III

Balancing Act: Clergy, “Work,” and Life

This thesis is about clergy. For clergy, Sabbath is not a luxury. Clergy are not so indispensable that they are unable to take Sabbath. Some clergy have trouble with saying No to doing things, a practice that is needed as Sabbath time must be protected. Keeping Sabbath is active, not simply falling asleep in a chair or fly fishing at the local lake *for its own sake*. But the ability to take a nap or go fishing *as a shared experience with God* can be Sabbath practice and is made possible by saying No to the many encroachments that could take away that time: saying grace at the Ladies’ Banquet, agreeing to a “we promise it will be short” called Church Council meeting, the never-ending list of people to visit, etc.

While British life is lived at a much slower pace than American life, demands on a minister's time are just as extreme. For example, in two of my British appointments I was out at a meeting or event nearly every Monday through Thursday evening for the five years of each appointment. I was still pretty good at guarding the Friday day off, but Saturdays were a mixed bag of events, and Sunday evenings had services – and in one appointment, some Sunday afternoons as well. Where in all of this was Sabbath?

Back in the U.S., I have been told that "of course" I would come back from vacation if certain things happened, usually a funeral but also other events considered important in the local context. It was made clear to me that if I did not come back then the consequences would be...unpleasant. At least one minister I know deliberately takes family vacations out of state *so*

they will be too far away to be called back. To be called back has become *normal*. In *Living the Sabbath*, Norman Wirzba counters this desire to *escape* with a call to just *stop*. Is stopping, is waiting, completely alien to us now? Is it beyond the understandings of the church?

These U.S. and U.K. experiences reflect church cultures that believe in perpetual busy-ness, equating that with productivity and faithfulness.¹ John Wesley himself encouraged the People called Methodists to avoid spending any time in trifling matters, but dare we think that keeping Sabbath with its rest and renewal and anticipation and union is something trifling? Clergy are important in Sabbath keeping because clergy are called by God to their life and Sabbath is integral to that life. Sabbath is integral to the life of all disciples, and clergy are leaders and modelers of that life. How persuasive will I be if I call for Sabbath keeping and plead for Sabbath keeping and beg for Sabbath keeping and all the while I do not engage with it myself? *You do this, but I am far too busy to do it myself.* We are now beginning to see the impacts of all our busy-ness on health, marriage, and church cultures. Google “stress” and see how much money is spent on medical treatments for it. As a participant in Duke’s Clergy Health Initiative, I learned that clergy are now near the bottom of professions when ranked by terms like health and marriage, categories we used to be thought near the top of. While my own failure at keeping Sabbath is at least partially responsible for personal health issues, it is not *the* reason to keep Sabbath. Sabbath keeping is not a “get well” procedure, though that may well be an outgrowth of it. It is also not a chance to recharge the batteries and get back to work the next day. Again, Sabbath is not a *rule*, it is a *gift* from God. It is part of our life, and it is part of our worship. In losing it, something of God is lost and needs to be reclaimed. Clergy are leaders of the faith, and so they are vital to this.

¹ As Jesus might ask, do we think we will be heard because of our many words (works)?

Clergy are to model behavior for the broader church. In all these senses, Sabbath is necessary to leadership.

But as Norman Wirzba truly observed, “We prefer to be self-reliant, believing that admitting need is a sign of personal weakness and failure.”² And that is the trap, is it not? The deception of self-reliance. The entire panorama from Genesis to Revelation shows that we are *not* self-reliant. If so, why would we need God? In order to combat this illusion, this sin, clergy need to keep God at the forefront. When Israel went down this road, the prophets came one after another after another to try to call them back to God. Today, prophets are hard to identify, or even to hear above the cacophony of modern life. But even if the prophets cannot get through to us, Sabbath can.

Still, looking at *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, how much Sabbath do we find there? Using the search function on a Kindle version, the total number of mentions of Sabbath was...*one*. And that single mention is near the beginning, in the history of the United Brethren Church, referring to the Confession of Faith of 1889.³ Sabbath may draw near at times. The chapter on “The Ministry of the Ordained” says that clergy are to “Nurture and cultivate spiritual disciplines and patterns of holiness.”⁴ There is encouragement to fast⁵ but not to keep Sabbath (at least not by direct mention). Deep within the page after page after page on clergy training, appointment, compensation, expectations, administration, charges against, differing types of appointments, and more, there is a single section, paragraph 350, that deals with continuing education and spiritual growth. Within that section, point 2 states that clergy are entitled to

² Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 84.

³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), Kindle location 1839.

⁴ *Ibid*, Kindle location 4751.

⁵ *Ibid*, Kindle location 5577.

spiritual growth leaves of at least one week each year and may include one month during each quadrennium, while point 3 provides for a six-month leave after holding appointments for the equivalent of six full-time years. Such leaves are not considered vacation time. Until very recently, *these provisions were never discussed*. At least not in my presence, nor in the presence of anyone I knew until first one friend and then a second announced they were taking renewal leave (under the paragraph 350 heading above). Then we found that our bishop was going to take renewal leave. These provisions are in the book, the *rules*, they are known (at least by a few), but they are rarely talked about. This is quite different from the British context where the Methodist discipline there *mandates* a sabbatical every seven years. There is also more time off (vacation), but there is a different stress in how British Methodism is set up. There is the impact of European culture to account for in this, but there is also a greater emphasis on self-care and spirituality.

What does that say of our American culture? The concept of renewal leave came as a complete surprise to me. In all of our training, our conferences, our encouragement to engage in continuing education, why are these leaves never mentioned? Being completely honest, few clergy spend any more time with the *Discipline* than absolutely needed. Yet within its *many* rules, the provisions are there to encourage spiritual exercises. Why have they been so ignored until recently?⁶

What is *often* discussed is *vacation* policy. On our Conference web site there is a page detailing clergy vacation policy, and before our recent move to a new platform it contained a line noting it as *the most frequently asked question*. (The suspicious part of my mind wonders if it is the most frequently asked because people want to make sure not too much vacation is being taken!) But vacation is not the same as Sabbath. Sabbath is far more important. Vacation “recharges our

⁶ Outgrowth or accident, there is much more awareness of their presence following the success of our conference’s (Western North Carolina) participation in Duke’s Clergy Health Initiative.

batteries” (except for those vacations that leave us needing a vacation to recover from the vacation!) so we can jump back into the fray with renewed energy. All work and no play really do make Jack and Jill rather dull. To make “merely instrumental what God named as holy is an offense against the deeper purpose of the day. It further tends to the merely individualistic, in which “I” rest in whatever way I decide upon, without necessarily being joined to others in common acknowledgement of community and purpose before God.”⁷ One practice we could easily adopt from our Jewish brothers and sisters is the “holy conversations” that happen around *Shabbat* meals. It is *normal* to discuss biblical texts, questions of God, anything faith related, as part of the Sabbath experience. We can learn from this, especially when our own worship communities are becoming less and less able to talk about God *even amongst ourselves*.⁸ Sabbath is a time to come closer to God and engage in rest and renewal that no vacation can ever provide.

Many clergy, however, rather than modelling Sabbath have lost their way. As a friend of mine texted me this week, “I’m not doing well with Sabbath at ALL.” *Faithful and Fractured* found that “clergy needed to be given permission to take care of themselves over and over again.”⁹ Clergy are trying to get to God, but something is getting in the way. As a group, they are happy *and* stressed, affirmed *and* criticized. The power of the positive word versus the power of the negative word. A general theme among clergy I spoke with was that a 24-hour Sabbath was rare indeed, even among those who genuinely and earnestly were trying to figure out how to make it possible. What many are left with is what I call “hit and run Sabbath,” a few hours here, a few

⁷ Marguerite Shuster, “Response.” In *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others*. Roger E. Van Horn, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2007), 85.

⁸ British Methodism recognized this formally in 2005 when it released the report *Time to Talk of God*, a guide and encouragement to recover such conversation *within the church*.

⁹ Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 24.

hours there, just enough of a taster to leave you wanting more but all too soon the pressure to move on becomes overwhelming. “Sabbath in ten minutes” is not Sabbath.

When I was serving in Britain, one tradition I developed was that of the Sunday afternoon nap. Is there anything more glorious? Especially when it is raining! I have never quite understood why after kindergarten the afternoon nap is frowned upon (*Lazy!*). In the British system, it was still normal to have an evening as well as a morning service. That left a few hours of Sunday afternoon to fill up with...what, exactly? If we are engaging in Sabbath that day, then certainly not work. Instead, this worshipful rest became a part of my normalcy. It not only helped Sunday services become more joyful, it also *impacted my enjoyment of the other six days of the week*.

Clergy are not so indispensable that they cannot take Sabbath! Actually, they are too important *not* to take Sabbath. Sabbath is life-giving. The urge to be useful, helpful, every single nanosecond of our lives is incredibly powerful. We have to fight against it constantly, and often against the opinion of others. A British friend of mine related the story of the time a man wanted to meet with him on a certain Wednesday at noon. My friend replied that he was sorry, he already had plans for then, but could arrange another time. As luck would have it, on that Wednesday this man was walking through the park by the river and saw my friend sitting on a bench having lunch. The man was incensed! *You said you were busy and couldn't meet with me now!* To which my friend replied, “Yes, this is what I had planned to do.” Clergy may find that attempts to start keeping Sabbath are not universally admired, especially in a culture that defines usefulness by how busy you are. Surely such time could be better spent? Yet what could possibly be better than spending time being renewed in God?

The demands on clergy time are not just from the church or out of self-convictions on what they “need” to be doing. What of the clergy family? A clergy spouse can give very direct insight

into clergy life and its demands, as well as how Sabbath could affect that. So can the minister's kids. Or take my own reality, divorced, meaning I am single again. In a British circuit meeting years ago I was told in a very matter of fact way that "you single ministers don't need as much." There is the belief that if you are single then you are just twiddling your thumbs waiting for someone to give you something to do. After all, you have no kids, no spouse, no family to think of. More time for church, obviously!

Into all of that, consider this:

"Jesus dismisses crowds filled with people still aching to be healed in order to get away for restoration. He sneaks out first thing in the morning, before folks have a chance to corner him with more and more need. He goes by himself. He prays.

Jesus manages to carve out the time for Sabbath, despite the dire needs that confront him at every turn. I have a hard enough time setting aside trivial things: the mail on the kitchen table, begging to be sorted, or the pile of Brownie patches that need to be sewn onto Caroline's sash.

Not exactly life-or-death stuff."¹⁰

Not exactly life-or-death stuff at all. But if we are not careful, that is exactly how we come to think of it, how we believe it to be. And, I get it. I truly do. Overwhelming guilt regularly drives me to do more than I should. Yet, how does constant attention to the demands of others fulfil the life of God?

When society became clock-driven, something of the rhythm of life was lost. No longer was it evening, then morning, the first day. Now it became a highly structured existence, where minutes and seconds took on global importance. You can do more, be more, get more! Now work

¹⁰ Maryann McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 34. Italics mine.

included the concept of “overtime.” Let us not deny that the clock has brought advantages to us, just as we should not deny what we have lost. There is something blessed in what some Brits refer to as “African time,” the ordering of life in ways other than where the big hand and the little hand are. Clergy that I have known who served in Africa shared the experience of setting out (walking) each Sunday morning and preaching when they reached the church, then walking on to the next congregation, and so on until the end of the day. Preaching happened when the preacher arrived. This did not mean that worship waited – as people arrived, there would be singing, dancing, praying, exhortations. But there were no beeping alarms reminding the preacher it was time to tie things up so we could beat the Baptists to lunch. God was at *play*.

Sabbath is not something you have to earn, no matter how deeply clergy feel the need to be given “permission” (not just by congregants but by *self*) to do so. God has already given it. But how to go about it? Not as a day off, certainly. A day *free*, perhaps. Free from worry, free from concerns, free from ungodly demands. “Practicing the spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians. Instead, the practicing teaches what it means to live as Christians. (There is an etymological clue here – *discipline* is related to the word *disciple*.) The ancient disciplines form us to respond to God, over and over always, in gratitude, in obedience, and in faith.”¹¹ For myself, keeping Sabbath involves one Yes and quite a few Nos. The Yes is to God. The focus of Sabbath is to be God, first, last, and always. The No’s are really anything that gets in the way of that, but for myself the usual suspects are: I do not deal with finances on the Sabbath. No paying bills, not even logging in and checking the bank balance. No church business meetings. The occasional “just five minutes after worship” type still creep in, but no formally scheduled ones. My basic rule is that if it is not something joyful, then it becomes a No. (Clearly, as we have already observed

¹¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline*. Study Edition (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015), xx.

in Jewish practice, matters of life and death take precedence, and we clergy are only a phone call away from a rush to the Emergency Room or to be with a bereaved family.)

Clergy may find themselves thinking Sabbath cannot be contemplated on a Sunday because they have to lead worship. But is worship *work*? Or worse, allowing worship to become “something marginal, one of many activities Christians do.”¹² If so, then something is seriously off-kilter. Or perhaps that is the “only” day that can be a family day. Does keeping Sabbath preclude family? The reality we are loathe to admit is that when it comes to “the Sabbath, the common refrain is, ‘I’d love to but,’ followed by a list of imposing factors. Most of the limits are self-imposed.”¹³ We must also admit that many of us “now keep a weekend of two Saturdays.”¹⁴ How do we keep it holy, set apart?

The life that we are called to is a life of community, quite different from the individualistic lifestyle many embrace today. One of the first things we will have to combat is in thinking of Sabbath as when “I” keep it. It is interesting that there are numerous reasons that “I” cannot keep Sabbath and yet entire Jewish communities regularly do. We can (re)learn a great deal from Judaism in how the Sabbath is for everyone, and even that it is kept on the same day. Is Sabbath not part of our practice, our *discipline*, that weaves us into a community? In Sabbath, “I” becomes “we.” One of the abiding memories of my childhood is of quiet Sunday afternoons. I need to emphasize that word, *quiet*. There was a sound of silence. “They” say now that snow is a socially acceptable excuse to do nothing, but when I was growing up that was Sunday. The sound of a lawnmower starting up was grating. There was a quiet, a peace, that is not easily found today. This is not an appeal for a strict return to the past. To quote that great theologian, Billy Joel, in

¹² Marva J. Dawn. *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 283.

¹³ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

Keeping the Faith, “the good ol’ days weren’t always good, and tomorrow’s not as bad as it seems.” God forbid we return to the days of an enforced Sabbath with mandatory church attendance and legal repercussions for Sabbath breakers. Can you imagine God saying, “*You will accept this gift or else!*”? But there is a *palpable* difference when Sabbath is kept by an entire community. The very *feel* of the place changes. So, one of the challenges of keeping Sabbath will be to find a community. But rather than finding one, this may necessitate building one.

Another issue will be what constitutes *work*. Again reflecting back on my British days, a normal part of someone’s property was the flower garden. The British *love* their flower gardens, spending hours kneeling, planting, clipping, sowing, pruning, watering, and displaying. To most of them, this is *joy*. For me, that is definitely *work!* Conversely, in my house there is a woodstove, and behind the house are acres of woodland. Cutting firewood is something that I enjoy, and something that I more than enjoy. I find cutting wood a spiritual experience. When I am in the quietness of those woods, the presence of God is palpable. God is *right there*, and I have extended conversations with God while dragging limbs or splitting logs or looking for downed trees. Yet this joy of mine, this spiritual experience, is something that many would see as work or even drudgery. The danger again is that it becomes an individualistic definition. Jewish communities have work defined for them, and there is good in that. Perhaps we can draw from that? Coming from small beginnings, perhaps a Sabbath community – be it from a congregation or a collection of area ministers or a group of friends – could together define what is work and what is not. There is something Pauline in that – it may be okay but if it causes someone else to stumble then leave it alone. There is also something in that harkening back to the beginning. God not only rested on the seventh day but finished work. How is that best understood? “A rabbi named Genibah offers a...satisfying explanation. The verb ‘finish’ and the noun ‘work,’ he says, are there to teach us

that Sabbath rest is not just a nothing, a not-doing, but a something that requires creating.”¹⁵ And that something, he says, is the Sabbath. There is an essence of Sabbath that is recreated every week. The bride, the queen, that is *Shabbat* comes to us anew. Just as those early Jewish communities needed to define Sabbath practice, so must modern communities find their way one step at a time. The trick will be to learn from the journey and not turn it into a millstone. “First it was a day of joy, a gift that expressed the original insight: God created and sustains us. Then the day became loaded with rules and regulations. After all, we want to do it right. In the third stage, believers rejected the rules and even the Sabbath altogether. God clearly did not intend what it had become. Finally, we forget the Sabbath, recalling it only in dim regret. Or we realize what has been lost and renew its practice with the original intent and, perhaps, modern modifications.”¹⁶ Or more succinctly, “Sabbath rules leave room to breathe.”¹⁷ After all, as Heschel reminds us, “Observance of the seventh day is more than a technique of fulfilling a commandment. The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man.”¹⁸

Still, my reality is that I am exhausted. *Constantly*. I do *not* get it all done, and I am too prone to keep trying to. I am a Sabbath work in progress. Yet it is worth noting that “[s]piritual teachers and philosophers seem to agree on this point: Life should not just make us tired; life should make us happy.”¹⁹ Did God call people to the ministry so that they could be miserable? Hardly! But clergy struggle. They lose their way, give in to competing demands, lose sight of what is in the heart of the “rules” and spend all their time obeying other “rules.” “All that effort will make me feel productive, but it will ruin it; life will feel hard and heavy and the result will not

¹⁵ Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 70.

¹⁶ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172

¹⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 60.

¹⁹ Muller, *Sabbath*, 124.

nourish.”²⁰ Jesus wants us to enter the Kingdom of God *childlike*. On their deathbed, no one ever regrets not making it to one more meeting. The difference between Sabbath as Scripture presents it and the Sabbath practice of my own ministry is great. What is needed is some holy disruption that will bring clergy, and thence the church, back to the life God calls us to.

There will be some trial and error. As Lauren Winner found, attempts at Sabbath can lead to an enjoyable time “except that my Sunday was more an afternoon off than a Sabbath. It was an add-on to a busy week, not the fundamental unit around which I organized my life. The Hebrew word for *holy* means, literally, ‘set apart.’ In failing to live a Sabbath truly distinct from weekly time, I had violated a most basic command: to keep the Sabbath holy.”²¹ One of my regular failings remains my enjoyment of a Sunday lunch out at a local restaurant. Naturally, in so doing I am not doing the work of cooking or cleaning up. But someone is. My actions contribute to the GNP but do nothing to help more of God’s children enjoy Sabbath. They must work so I can enjoy my time. I need to change this. All of the false starts, all of the attempts individually and together, must share the goal of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it *holy*. That is the bullseye. Changing the institution will follow.

²⁰ Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, 50.

²¹ Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, 7.

IV

Holy Disruption: Bringing Sabbath Back In

Championing change in the way we live and move and breathe is what I want next to explore in the context of Disruptive Innovation. Clayton Christensen came up with the concept of Disruptive Innovation as a business model where things from outside¹ an industry disrupt how it does business. If the business is adaptive, the disruption brings new life. If it is not adaptive, the disruption can kill it. To fit the model of Disruptive Innovation, the practice must not be part of “who we are.” Hence, by definition, keeping Sabbath cannot be Disruptive Innovation since we are called to it from our very beginnings. However, Sabbath practices *can* be. I would hope that no one in my congregation would be surprised or offended if I announced that I would be keeping Sabbath every week. And as a concept, this is not necessarily Disruptive Innovation. But if I began keeping Sabbath and I was therefore not available every single night for whatever event or meeting someone might want to schedule, and this rest and renewal and celebration began to impact the rest of my life and my availability for constant meetings, then the impact of keeping Sabbath can begin to affect the whole church, we begin to disrupt, and (hopefully) renewal follows. A practice from outside – in this case, simply saying yes to God’s Sabbath as a first priority² – would bleed into the congregation, affect and change them, and renew them. That is my hope for disruptive innovation. It is also where I want to use the model of *cascade* – where a single event causes ripples that bring changes far beyond the single event.

¹ The innovation may come from inside a company but still be outside its normal way of doing things, and thus overlooked or undervalued.

² I note the irony of observing Sabbath *before* the church calendar as now being something outside us.

Christensen identifies six traits of a disruptive innovation. They are:

- 1) An autonomous unit is set up – complete independence from the main organization.
- 2) Leaders experienced in the “new way,” who may have to come from outside.
- 3) Separate resource pool. Again, this group is completely independent.
- 4) Independent sales channels.
- 5) A new profit model. “Success” is redefined from the mainstream market.
- 6) Unwavering commitment by the CEO.

In terms of keeping Sabbath, I am not transferring these traits verbatim but using some synthesis. Independence is a *must*. Never forget that an organization will unfailingly try to adapt anything new into a recognizable structure, and we are trying to *renew*, not reinforce the way life is lived. Clergy must be committed to this, remembering that it is never a “have to” but something committed to as you are committed to something you absolutely love doing. Maybe you are a runner and nothing interferes with your road time, or maybe you are a reader and that hour before bed is sacrosanct. As for a new profit model, we have church tendency to define “success” either in monetary terms or more commonly in terms of attendance. “Bums on seats” is not the goal here – though you could make an argument that “bums on the couch” is! Complete independence may sound like an oxymoron when discussing church, which is called into community, but in order to renew the community we will need to step outside of it.

Outside forces affect congregations as surely as corporations. The lines between our church and national cultures have become blurred at best. *God Bless the U.S.A.* is more than a song, it is akin to a national creed. Something that defines as disruptive innovation begins from below but ultimately affects the mainstream. It is my contention that a return to Sabbath keeping will bring clergy from the more and more common state of perpetual exhaustion to a place of restful delight in God that will not only renew themselves but holds hope for the church as well.

Think of this hallmark of Disruptive Innovation: “Disruptive technologies, though they initially can only be used in small markets remote from the mainstream, are disruptive because they subsequently can become full performance-competitive within the mainstream market against established products.”³ Now, see through the “business speak” and allow it to begin to form around an ecclesial setting.

In *The Investor’s Dilemma*, a main example Christensen uses is the advent of the 3.5” floppy disk for computers. Before then, home computers had primarily used the 5.25” disk. The 3.5” was originally developed for a different market, for which it was not well received, and then found amazing life in the home computer market. Smaller than the previous version, more portable, more storage (quite handy as file sizes began to grow exponentially), home computer users grabbed on to the new technology with a vengeance. Did that lead to an even smaller disk? Actually, yes. But did it matter? Technology allowed for floppy disks that could be made smaller and smaller, but there is a point beyond which they are either not needed (do you really need an entire box of ten terabyte disks?) or not user-friendly (imagine that disk the size of a contact lens. Now, where did I put that thing?!). Remember the mini CD? Probably not. It was a smaller version of the compact disc that was going to take over the market.⁴ It did not happen. People simply were not interested.

The 3.5” disk started small (literally, but also in the marketplace). As people found the possibilities and advantages in it, they came more and more to it until it was mainstream. This can be the reclaiming of Sabbath. *Think small market*. It would be wonderful to see an entire Methodist Annual Conference or District decide that Sabbath was going to be the new normal. In

³ Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2000), xxiii.

⁴ A claim even made in the original *Men in Black* movie.

that case, failure would be almost guaranteed. As Christensen notes, “Head-on attacks almost never work.”⁵ I have attended far too many training sessions or courses where something exciting was put out there for adoption. It was wonderful, the world was going to change, the sun was going to come out, and birds everywhere would be singing. It never happened. When leaving the cluster of like-minded individuals and returning to the dominant culture, you were left, to use a British-ism, “to sink or swim” on your own. I remember coming back from an Annual Conference where the worship had been so inspirational that I planned an entire service around our being “on fire” where we were. I was excited, I had been there, I had felt it. But no one else had. They looked at me lovingly and tolerantly, patted me on the head (not literally), and went on to lunch. I had not been able in that single service to convey the feeling of Jeremiah, that fire inside me that would not be contained.

A Sabbath group will likely begin as a small group. This can be friends, fellow clergy, even a part of the congregation. For pastors of more than one congregation, here is a great way to bring members from different churches together and develop relationships. This leads into something that Christensen found to be true, namely that “established firms that successfully built a strong market position in a disruptive technology were those that spun off from the mainstream company an independent, autonomously operated organization.”⁶ In other words, develop a small, independent group that is *free*. Through all of this, remember something vital: *institutions resist change*. Left alone, things will revert to the status quo that existed before. And whether we like it or not, the church is an institution. This can be particularly true of local, smaller congregations, but is in no way limited to them. When every fiber of the premises and even the way things are

⁵ Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (McGraw Hill, 2011), 142.

⁶ Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 217.

done can be traced back to Uncle Fred and Great Grandma Ethel, the impulse to change will be challenged (even if latently) at every turn.

With this small group, clergy will have a vital role. Christensen found that “unless top managers actively manage this process, their organization will shape every disruptive innovation into a *sustaining* innovation – one that fits the processes, values, and economic model of the existing business – because organizations *cannot* naturally disrupt themselves.”⁷ Furthermore, “leadership is more crucial in coping with disruptive technologies than with sustaining ones.”⁸ The proverbial sign on the door will say, “Clergy Needed!” There will be more here than simply modelling Sabbath. When resistance comes – and it will come – there will need to be a counter to the “back to Egypt” movement. Remember, many people say that Sabbath sounds good for those that can manage it but that they themselves are far too busy. That is the very culture in need of renewal. However much we love our denomination, our country, our local church, we almost never change willingly. There is some outside stimulus that we have to adapt to. But think of what the body does when an outside stimulus invades it in the form of a virus: it tries to *kill* it. This will not just be “But we’ve always done it this way!” mentality. There will be resistance simply because it changes the way we live. And speaking as a Methodist, we are certainly creatures of habit. A year or two ago, we had a Sunday where there was enough snow to keep most people at home but not enough to cancel services. (I always tell my congregations that we may cancel the service but we do not cancel worship – do it where you are.) With around twenty people in attendance, I set up some chairs in a circle. Even though there were still empty seats, latecomers grabbed other chairs *and made a back row*. As one church sign read, “Come early and

⁷ Christensen, et al., *Disrupting Class*, 75.

⁸ Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, 121.

get a good back seat!” Sometimes we need to be poked and prodded to remind ourselves we are still alive. Keeping Sabbath reminds us that we are more than we have become.

This also means that even an intentional Sabbath group may not succeed on the first try. Christensen himself notes, “I need to conserve resources to get it right on the second or third try.”⁹ There *will* be confusion and resistance, sometimes light and sometimes beyond our worst fears. Clergy may even find that *they* get confused and lose their way. Just remember that the Shepherd comes looking for the single lost sheep. But again, this will be a lengthy process. Technology may be changing at a lightning pace, but culture does not change so quickly. Culture also needs a reason (which is not the same as a justification. A justification is when you sneak chocolate. A reason is what motivates you.).

So, what is the reason? New wine in an old wineskin? Maybe. Christensen notes that, “Historically, disruptive technologies involve no new technologies; rather, they consist of components built around proven technologies and put together in a novel product architecture that offers the customer a set of attributes never before available.”¹⁰ Now, is Sabbath being kept because it is a commandment? I would hope that we can go beyond that. Again, this must be more than a *rule*, it must have *life*. We no longer live in an age where we can argue for Sabbath and assume everyone (even in the church) will know what we are talking about. A friend of mine was asked to lead a school assembly. He wanted to make it something well-known, something the kids could relate to, so he decided to use the story of David and Goliath. *The kids had never heard of it*. Similarly, and sadly, even in congregations our familiarity with the Bible is declining. Sabbath is not new. It may, however, be new in the lives *even of congregants*. Our reason is to

⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

deepen our relationship with God.¹¹ We want to participate more fully in the life of God. For many people, that may be a place they have not yet reached. Perhaps they know through that glass darkly that something is wrong, something is off, and it needs to be fixed. And that is far as they can reach. Our broader culture has plenty of discussion going on stress, health care, marriage and divorce, but only a minute fraction of that discussion will involve God and the Sabbath. But even when we cannot see, God continues to guide us even in our imperfections.

When I was a ministerial candidate, there was considerable discussion around my call. In faith terms, call is a vital word. It is so much more than what we *want* to do, it is where God is leading us. Part of the leading that God will guide us through will be the lives of others. Although I am focusing on clergy as a vital part of a return to keeping Sabbath, clergy must never be the *only* focus. It is never just up to us. Too many of us are what is now called “siloes,” where we are parachuted into an appointment where we exist in isolation from the wider church until the phone call or email or letter arrives telling us we are being moved somewhere else...where we will likely be just as isolated.¹² In Christensen’s work, he says, “I have recruited coauthors for each of the hundreds of articles and books I’ve subsequently written, however, because I desperately need colleagues who see things differently from the way I do.”¹³ Members of a small Sabbath group will have ideas and insights of their own. *If it is all left up to one person, the group is in trouble.* God calls us into community. Yes, there are hermits, such as our Desert Mothers and Fathers that gained such holy insights into God. And yes, individuals have worship experiences that lift them up. But the disciples were sent out in pairs, Israel crossed the wilderness together, and God noted that it was not good for us to be alone. The prophets came to community. The Ten Commandments

¹¹ So, perhaps Lent is a good time to start a small group of Sabbath keepers?

¹² If that is you, do not merely accept it. Work against it. Find a community and connection.

¹³ Christensen, et al., *Disrupting Class*, viii.

were given to community. We gather as community, and more than community: the family of God. God lives and moves and breathes through all of us, and we need those insights and inspirations that come through others. More than once, I have been preparing to preach a sermon where someone else was reading the Scripture. They would use a different translation or put a different inflection on a word or phrase and suddenly I wanted to toss my sermon aside and start over *because I had never heard it like that*. Sabbath can be presented in a way that people have never heard, or perhaps have heard and then forgotten.

One point cannot be stressed too heavily: *Sabbath is not an add-on to what you already do*. When our cohort gathered for our first semester, it was emphasized that this D.Min program was not something we could do *in addition* to what we already did. It was not something else to be crammed into our busy schedule. If we tried that, we would almost certainly fail. Rather, we would have to give something else up so as to fully engage in our studies. Keeping Sabbath must be approached in the same way. Christensen notes the mistake of how some “have ‘crammed’ the new technologies into their existing structure, rather than allowing the disruptive technology to take root in a new model and allow that to grow and change how they operate.”¹⁴ The irony is that the broader culture might be more receptive to Sabbath if it *was* an add-on, something else to add to an overly busy life. *Hey, guys, look! I managed to cram one more practice in! I’m keeping Sabbath, between yoga and my third meeting of the day! Look at me go! Sabbath rest cannot be done while doing everything else. It is a stopping, a ceasing that recalls us to what we were created to be. Remember that humanity’s first full day was Sabbath. Enter God’s holy rest and begin to disrupt the world.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

Simply put, “Disruptive innovations take root in simple, undemanding applications in what...is a new plane of competition – where the very definition of what constitutes quality, and therefore what improvement means, is *different* from what quality and improvement meant in the back plane.”¹⁵ Allow Sabbath to redefine what “quality and improvement” mean. Think about every church discussion about ways to improve the service or the church. Was Sabbath even a glint in someone’s eye? Can it compete with a new sound system (or worship band), a social media extravaganza, or a new community building? When we think of “improving,” what culture gets to define that? Remember, we are working against a church culture where Sabbath is largely a lost art. I am located in a context where lunch and (American) football are more important than Sabbath, meaning this will require a radical shift. But not an insurmountable one. The same can be true in Britain. More people sing *Cwm Rhondda* (the Welsh tune used for the hymn *Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah*) together at a Welsh rugby match in the cathedral of Cardiff’s Millennium Stadium than in any church cathedral.¹⁶ In either case, though, Sabbath has the quiet power to renew.

That quiet renewal will likely come in a surprising way. I was an undergraduate student at North Carolina State University from 1984-1988. I was again a student, this time at Duke Divinity School, for the Master of Divinity (1992-1995) and then Master of Theology (1996-1998). The ThM degree was extended in that all of the classwork was completed over the 1995-1996 academic year, and the thesis was put on hold while I transitioned to life in Britain. But at both universities, I was resident. *This was the way it was done*. Even in the mid-1990s, email was in its infancy. The internet was developing. Paul still had to seek out Gamaliel to teach him rather than complete

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ As a friend once observed, “Sean, you have not lived until you’ve heard 50,000 drunk guys singing *Bread of heaven! Bread of heaven!*”

his studies on-line. Now? I am participating in a Doctor of Ministry degree that is something of a disruptive innovation itself. At the start of each semester, we spent an “intensive week” in classes where we were all together in the traditional model. We met in a classroom at the university, the instructor was with us in the classroom, and we participated as a gathered community. Following that week, however, the rest of the semester was completed on-line. We met “virtually,” staring into a computer screen while wearing headphones and microphones. From North Carolina to Washington state, Alabama to Maine, we “gathered” without physical presence. That was unthinkable when I was an MDiv student. The technology did not exist. Now that it does, it is not uncommon to see commercials for places such as the University of Phoenix and other entities where your entire degree can be completed on-line without ever having face-to-face physical contact with classmates or instructors. Worship communities have trodden these waters as well, such as British Methodism’s *Ship of Fools*. Join the site, perhaps receive an avatar that shows your presence to others there as well, type in your comments or prayer requests, even click a button and give your offering. All of the elements are there that you would see if you had physically gone to worship. This allows people to worship with others they otherwise would never be able to, but at the same time loses the *connection* only physical presence allows. A virtual hug is a poor substitute for the real thing. Sabbath is not new technology. But its renewing ability may lead to a different understanding of what it means to be *church* than had been thought of before. Can a church culture be imagined where Sabbath was *not* an inherent and obvious part of it? Probably easily. But how could keeping Sabbath impact *how* worship happened? *When* worship happened? *Where* worship happened? In my last Scottish appointment, we celebrated Easter sunrise with worship on a small hill looking out across the North Sea. The disruptive possibilities of Sabbath make that a possibility for *any* service.

Change is hard, even when it is wanted. Christensen notes that people need to “[u]se the right tools to introduce change. Don’t think that for some reason you will be exempted from the rules of organizational nature.”¹⁷ Clergy can be serious about this but in a light-hearted and joyful way, like being serious about the birthday party of someone you *love*. You want it to be perfect, you would not miss it for the world, and when it is over, despite all its imperfections, you cannot believe how wonderful it was. And cannot wait for the next one. So, what tools does keeping Sabbath as disruptive innovation offer that clergy can use to bring renewal?

When Sabbath Starts Renewing

Keeping Sabbath can renew. How many petty squabbles or mis-directions arise out of the fact that clergy and congregants are so *tired*? People so often forget to allow God to guide in *everything* – and that includes the color of the paint in Mama Lou’s Memorial Sunday School Room? Sabbath is not a day in isolation. Its tendrils will bind all days together and even bind *us* together. “While Sabbath can refer to a single day of the week, Sabbath can also be a far-reaching, revolutionary tool for cultivating those precious human qualities that grow only in time.”¹⁸

One tool is our understanding of time. Not just the time that is Sabbath but our whole relationship and orientation towards time. Contemporary people, including clergy, often rush around like Alice’s Mad Hatter yelling, “I’m late! I’m late!” They may even glory in busyness. *I worked 75 hours last week. You?* Think about this: in a worship space, how many clocks are there? Even if there is but a single one, what are the odds it is placed prominently where the preacher can see it?

¹⁷ Christensen, et al., *Disrupting Class*, 244

¹⁸ Muller, *Sabbath*, 5.

When did time become the enemy? Heschel writes about the cathedral in time, but I want to put time and space together for a moment. How do they relate? When I was living in Britain, there was no shortage of cathedrals and castles to visit. Just off the southwestern coast of Scotland, on the Isle of Cumbrae, is the Cathedral of the Isles. Here is where I had my first – and not last – experience of the merger of time and space. A pair of us were looking for a suitable place to hold a retreat, and this was one candidate. We were being given the tour (which did not take long, being the smallest British cathedral) when we were guided into a side chapel. When we entered this space, without anyone giving any sign, we all became quiet. *This* was holy ground. Literally, there was a holiness in that space, palpable, awing, that I believe had come about after a century and a half of prayer. These places, these spaces, bring time and place together, become hallowed ground after regular and long-term commitment to God. Muller notes that “Sabbath challenges the theology of progress by reminding us that we are already and always on sacred ground.”¹⁹ There is great truth in that.

Now, take that idea into the woods behind my house. When I am there, it *is* spiritual. God is right there. In that place, I am outside the pressures of time and free to *live*. Apart from occasionally hearing a passing car driven by a drag racer wannabe, all that can be heard is the wind in the leaves, the gurgling of the creek, the “cough” of a squirrel, and the tapping of my friend the woodpecker who for some reason likes to watch me as I split wood. These woods are not a place where there has been a century of prayer, but there has also never been a sense of hurry there. Even when it was a working pasture, the only time those cows even came close to running was winter feeding time! Is it any wonder that so many people, from as notable as Eugene Peterson to as local as friends of mine, find their Sabbath space in nature? You can tell a tree to *Hurry up!* all

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

you want to, but no matter how many pressing engagements you have you will probably need to come back next year to see how the tree has changed.

One of my favorite computer games has a known way of being played, of which I am supremely guilty, that is known as “a hoarding mentality.” That means that everything you come across that can help you in the game you collect *and then never use because you might need it later! Even if you already have 113 of them!* And so, when the game ends you are standing there holding your now useless 3914 items that would have made the game much easier in places. In Western society, people are blessed to live in what can only be described as a culture of abundance. And yet, it is so often treated as a culture of scarcity. And so food is hoarded to the point that some has to be thrown away when it goes bad. Sales draw crowds despite shoppers already having a closet packed full of clothes – plus two storage units.

This culture of scarcity extends to our view of time. There is never enough of it, we say, and then we rush even faster trying to make up time. Meanwhile, time passes and we do not even notice. One unexpected gift is that “Sabbath is a way of modeling a different relationship with time, one that values relationship over achievement.”²⁰ What about the Sabbath can clergy do *with God* to remember it and keep it holy?

In my experience, there are two contests with time – the attempt to control it and the attempt to be free of it. In attempting to control time, it is broken up into increments, each increment given a different color, and the day planned either to suit our whim or “as it has to be.” All the while, we know this is really an illusion. “Control of time confers the prerogative to set priorities and to determine what is important. This is the true challenge of ‘clock time’ and its most seductive

²⁰ Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, 22.

temptation.”²¹ Time will not be controlled, be it what I plan to do from 2.45-3.30 p.m. this afternoon or what will happen when there is evening and there is morning, the third day. As the Scots are fond of saying, if you want to hear God laugh then tell him your plans for next week.

The real issue is that God has blessed time. *We cannot control it*. It is part of the rhythm of creation, evening and morning, a friend on the journey. The disruptive innovation of time is to move life, literally, off the clock. Clergy can begin in a small yet important way to *hallow* the Sabbath by removing something that tries to restrict it, the complete rule of what time it is,²² and to re-embrace the rhythm of evening, then morning. As Abraham Heschel wrote, “The solution of mankind’s most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence of it.”²³ And if the Baptists beat us to lunch, well, lunch will be happening elsewhere anyway (see next chapter).

My normal day off is Friday. My own reorientation will be to enjoy Sabbath Saturday into Sunday. (Yes, I said *will be*. I am a work in progress.) One of the ironies of my ministry is that it feels like fully half of the funerals I have ever led have fallen on a Friday or Saturday. What do I do when a funeral – or anything else – invades the Sabbath? *Allow Sabbath to invade the event*. Some things are going to be unavoidable. But Sabbath can enfold everything else that is going on, bringing its peace, bringing its restful holiness, allowing nothing to be merely business as usual.

A second tool, and one that directly echoes Christensen’s model, is to *want* to keep Sabbath. And part of that desire is the desire to keep it holy. It is not identical to the other six days of the week, it is the crowning glory. And that desire must extend to our love of God and *all* of our neighbors. When we desire Sabbath we disrupt the whole idea of what is most important.

²¹ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 376.

²² Having only 15 minutes to pray, only 10 minutes for this visit, only 24 minutes for a meal, etc.

²³ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 28.

Abraham Heschel noted how, in his house, “certain topics were avoided on the Sabbath – politics, the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam – while others were emphasized. Observing the Sabbath is not only about refraining from work, but about creating *menuha*, a restfulness that is also a celebration.”²⁴ There are times when a word cannot be adequately defined. It must be *experienced*. In Scotland, a day that is misty, rainy, cold, dreary, and just plain yucky is referred to as a *dreich* day. Even the sound of the word is what it describes. *Menuha* is such a word. What words adequately capture all its glory? Restful joy? Delight? Celebratory quietness? A lounging around party? Every great now and then, I am able to enjoy a day that has no constraints. There is nothing that has to be done right that moment, the dusting can wait another day (or week), and before you know it it is five o’clock in the afternoon and I am still wearing the clothes I slept in. These “five o’clock and haven’t had a bath” days are absolutely filled with *menuha*. It is a day that is peaceful, it is refreshing, it is *good*. God is in heaven and all is right with the world. An easy day to praise God from whom all blessing flow. Sabbath desire makes the day different by what is embraced and what is left to wait.

One aspect of such a Sabbath day is the absence of certain topics. For my part, I also do not discuss politics, and as mentioned above I do not do anything with finances. Anything that is not conducive to worshipful rest is left until tomorrow. Going back to the healing story in John 5 where Jesus tells the man to pick up his pallet and go: “The reference to sin implicitly underlines what sin is *not*. Despite the accusations of the authorities, the man had not sinned by carrying his pallet on the Sabbath...”²⁵ Keeping Sabbath becomes an opportunity for *learning*, for *being made new*, for letting go of our rigidity.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁵ Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 218.

Part of that being made new is in remembering that clergy too are God's precious and irreplaceable children that God wants nothing more than to be with. On the Sabbath more than any other day clergy may remember that *all of us* are made in the image of God and are called into community whereas our society calls us to competition and alienation. "The Sabbath makes neighborhoods. It anchors communities in time and place. It counters the fluid mechanics of consumer culture, where we are ready to move for a bigger house, another school, a larger yard, and fewer poor people nearby. Sabbath pulls us back."²⁶ In my "Middler" year as an MDiv student, most of us were preparing to go home for the Thanksgiving break. Of course, not everyone could manage to leave. Either it was too far to go, there were too many papers to work on, there was nowhere to go, or the desire simply was not there, but there are always those who miss out on even large social occasions. One of our professors invited those of us who would be orphaned on that long weekend to join her and the "Duke Spinster Club" for a Thanksgiving meal and a time together. A mother, a father, 1.8 kids, and a house with a picket fence is not the reality many people live in. Part of the Sabbath desire is the very human desire to not be alone. Perhaps inside of us there remains a latent recognition that when we are together we look on one another and behold the image of God. Perhaps in being together, we try to be with God.

Finally, Sabbath desire is a desire to escape the false reality society claims to be true. The continual call to keep up with the Jones – now more along the lines of leaving the Jones jealously seething in your dust – is deadly exhausting. Heschel refers to the world of "clattering commerce" as "profanity."²⁷ In a simple definition, that profanity brings us to that which is profane – not of God. Yet we live in a world where God is in every moment and in every cell. No matter how much Sabbath (or God) may be ignored or declared as something that has had its day, this world

²⁶ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 231.

²⁷ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 13.

and all that is in it is God's. And God has a way of uncomfortably reminding us of that fact – and of making even the profane into something holy.

Sabbath is one of those reminders. Celebrations of baptism proclaim that it is “an outward and visible sign of an inward grace.” As Walter Brueggemann notes, “The reason that Sabbath is a radical discipline is that it is a regular, disciplined, highly visible withdrawal from the acquisitive society of production and consumption that is shaped only by commodity.”²⁸ *Highly visible*. It is rarely very hard to notice who among a group is behaving differently. The restaurant chain *Chick Fil A* is not open on Sundays. Yet they are hardly in danger of going out of business. (If you have ever been caught in their drive-through lane, you know this for a fact.) Every Sunday, they are noticeably vacant as people cram into all the other restaurants. Similarly, clergy on their way to church may be prone to noticing all the people going about a normal day – washing their car, mowing their lawn.

Years ago, I read an article about a locally owned grocery store that went out of business when a WalMart moved in. The superstore only stayed a year or two, and then closed its doors. People wanted the local grocer to re-open. He refused. He blamed not WalMart but the friends and neighbors who had driven past his store every day to go to WalMart. People notice when someone is different, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Clergy that desire to stop Sabbath shopping simply stop Sabbath shopping, becoming the one that drives on by. As Sabbath practice grows, that different desire will be noticed. Keeping Sabbath does not mean in every day there is no eating out or shopping or buying or selling. It does mean that lives are re-ordered and something else is more important. And that something is the holiness that is God.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*, 59.

The tools of time and desire embody in a third tool, community. Put simply, how do we be communal in an individualistic culture? “Private practice is inherently subjective; it complements any creed but by itself cannot sustain a community and its doctrine. If the ancient Israelites had rested on days of their personal choosing or in their own way, there would be no Sabbath left today.”²⁹ What does it mean to be an American, a Brit, a *Christian*, if we all do our own thing? What does it mean to keep Sabbath if we are all siloed?

Using Christensen’s definitions, keeping Sabbath as disruptive innovation will likely require a separated community. Being separated does not mean breaking all ties. But as momentum builds, it will need to be independent enough to resist being reabsorbed into what was before. It will not have the *announced* intention of changing the culture and renewing/building community – let that be God’s little surprise.

The self-styled “Duke Spinster Society” embraced the frequent Biblical setting of gathering around meals. It sought to build a community within the community, those who were isolated. Similarly, a Sabbath group can begin around a table. In Jewish communities, the *Shabbat* meal is an intrinsic part of its celebration. With its prayers, symbolism, gathering together, its roundtable discussions on anything God, it is a remembering of Sabbath and keeping it holy. My own version could be called “Supper With Sean.” Variations could include a home or even church-based lunch group after Sunday worship, a move that intrinsically blocks one another from giving in to the desire to dine out – a move that forces others to work so you do not have to. That Sunday lunch out (of which I am supremely guilty) prevents others from even the opportunity to keep Sabbath themselves, hardly a move that helps us keep it holy. The idea is that the Sabbath community will *live* Sabbath in a way that is quite different from the wider culture (even church culture), a way

²⁹ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 247.

that is noticeably different and noticeably together. The local congregation may not initially understand, but as the practice becomes entrenched, as people get to know one another and trust one another on a level that before was impossible, change will very slowly, even imperceptibly, begin to happen.

A fourth tool is the approach to worship. Most of the clergy I talked to referred to a particular challenge to regular Sabbath practice: leading worship. This is one of the challenges I want to make: Worship. Is. Not. Work. When God gave the commandments on Sinai, there was elucidation in the Exodus and Deuteronic forms. In neither case did God say, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy...except you Levites! You have work to do!” If anything, they were given a place of privilege in keeping the Sabbath holy. A former (British) superintendent of mine used to become so excited that someone paid him to study the Bible and lead worship. How amazing!

Yet consider this statement: “Sundays are workdays for clergy...”³⁰ That is how many clergy have come to view the best day of the week, taking what is to be holy and making it yet another day where there are things that *have* to be done. I can think of nothing more deadly to our ability to celebrate the joy of God when we worship. After all, “[w]hen worship is rushed through amidst a harried, striving day, not only do we easily miss so much of the richness and depth of its celebrative heart, but we are often left with just another flat, burdensome time of work – just one more thing to do to get through and to get right with God.”³¹ Through the prophets, God complains again and again about meaningless rites. Worship had become a form, a ritual in the worst sense, that was devoid of meaning and certainly not holy.

³⁰ J. Dana Trent, *For Sabbath's Sake: Embracing Your Need for Rest, Worship, and Community* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2017), 102.

³¹ Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), 79.

When I was living in York, England, I was occasionally free to enjoy Sunday choral evensong at York Minster. That is a beautiful worship space, has an amazing organ, and the echoing of worship sounds can make one easily imagine the joining of choirs on earth with those in heaven. Part of the Anglican service involves the vergers escorting the preacher to the pulpit. As part of this mini-procession, they turn and genuflect towards the altar. On a particular Sunday, the dynamic duo turned...and dynamic was hardly the word. If there could be a more perfunctory act than the briefest of nods they gave towards the altar, I would hate to see it. *It was an act devoid of meaning*, just something that had to be gotten through. It killed the spirit of the worship.

Clergy must *lead* worship. Sabbath is not just peace, not just rest, not just joy. Sabbath *is* worship. Clergy join with God in that spirit of *menuha*. Clergy live in a time that is *hallowed*. This should be easier than it is. Clergy labor for hours, days, to come up with worship that is true to God and meaningful to the congregation. They often have no help in this. And then they receive that deadly compliment: *Well, the hymns were good today*.

The innovation of a Sabbath group will start to work against this. Worship itself can be a topic of conversation. People may even offer to help lead. Perhaps even the now omnipresent aspect of our corporate worship – sound – can be abated. In current practice, how little, if any, of our worship time is quiet, not filled with spoken prayers, sung hymns, guitar riffs, or (dare I say it) a sermon? I am an introvert in an extroverted world, and I long for silence. I *need* silence. What chance does the Psalmist have of our ever being still and knowing that God is God? Keeping Sabbath does not change *one* thing. It bleeds into *everything*, shaping and molding, often when we least expect it.

Time. Desire. Community. Worship. These are just four ways, but four important ways, that keeping Sabbath can disrupt a culture. Sabbath is a gift from God, and *of* God, but “only by

participating do you receive.”³² If I advertised that there was a way clergy could reduce stress, get closer to God, and it only cost \$149 a year...how many multitudes would sign up? How much more, then, like Naaman the Syrian, when it is free and easy?

Perhaps Americans could borrow from our British and European cousins and have more holidays and shorter work weeks. Perhaps in their way of life lies a hint of Sabbath, a slowing down that changes life itself. As part of British Methodism, my holiday allotment was five weeks per year, three days each quarter to be taken together but not include a Sunday, public holidays, and the weekly day off. (As a probationer, you also receive a study day each week. One wonders why only probationers need to study.) In addition, there was a mandatory sabbatical every seven years – three months, paid. (There is a noteworthy shared root – sabbatical → sabbath.) What this meant in practice was that I was never far away from time off. It changed the way I lived. This is but a foretaste of the difference keeping Sabbath can make.

But when do clergy take it? Dana Trent relates a conversation with a friend about Sabbath, an outgrowth of which is the possibility of Sabbath starting at Friday sundown, as Christians have lost and Jews still keep, and then continuing all the way through Sunday worship³³ – an idea I am personally developing as *extended Sabbath*. It combines Jewish and Christian tradition, keeps faith with the day of Resurrection, and if celebrating Jesus gives us Sabbath overtime then wonderful! Such overtime may not contribute anything to the GNP, but it just may make clergy something much more real: a new creation.

Is that idea a fantasy? Saturday and Sunday remain the prime candidates if the ultimate aim is for a communal, even cultural, Sabbath. Whatever a calendar says, in the Judeo-Christian tradition Saturday remains the seventh day, the day that God hallowed. It is also the day in which

³² Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 33.

³³ Trent, *For Sabbath's Sake*, 70-73.

Jesus worshipped as was his custom. But the Resurrection is important, and Sunday can never now be dismissed. Why not both? Is that even feasible, or is it a plotline for *Fantasy Island* or *The Twilight Zone*? The list of barriers will be loud and long: no time, expectations, preparation for worship, guilt, demands, and so on. And, as has already been noted, clergy should remain pastorally aware that there are those for whom even a single day is financially impossible. But what if clergy began spending part of each Sabbath working for a Sabbath for all? (Do *not* turn that into a justification to keep working!!!) What if doing something for the widow, the orphan, the alien in your midst – the unvisited in the local nursing home, the Boys & Girls Home down the road, the newly arrived immigrants who are hopeful and terrified in a culture they neither understand nor literally speak the language – was the way Sabbath was kept holy? Despite the expectations of my childhood, Sabbath rest does not mean sitting on your hands doing nothing all day. It *can*, but it does not have to. Otherwise, Jesus would not have been so definite about the rightness of healing on the Sabbath – breaking every rule known to people but breaking down a barrier to God. Perhaps a Sabbath community is waiting to be formed in one of these places, a community to be formed out of people lost in loneliness.

In his book *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande, an American surgeon of Indian national descent, took the American healthcare system to task, including nursing homes. One of his primary critiques was how so many failings can be rooted in one reality – the loss of family care. In our great grandparent’s age, family looked after family. There was no one else to do it. This meant that when Aunt Sue’s diabetes or arthritis meant she could no longer live on her own she moved in to your old bedroom. She helped out as she could, but family took on the responsibility of looking after her. She was not left in a nursing home where, more often than we care to admit, people are not visited even when family members live within a mile or two. In those days, there

were more people around the home during the day, true, but there was also the assumption that no one would be left to cope as best they could alone. Sabbath community can offer a way to recover some of this family belonging.

In the United Methodist membership vows, promises are made of prayer, presence, gifts, service, and witness. All of these are bound up in Sabbath, inescapably so. We cannot be a Sabbath community, cannot keep it holy, if we refuse to participate in the life of a disciple. That life of a disciple includes working against the normal, even popular and affirmed, destructive ways of national culture. The church does not exist in a vacuum. National culture seeps in. At times it is difficult to tell the difference. But contrary to national folklore, we do not pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. God does not help those who help themselves. Those sayings merely reinforce our ideas of radical individuality and self-reliance. Rather, “[t]o rest from our labors because the world has already been created, and because our final trust rests in God and not in ourselves, goes flatly against the violent manipulateness and rabid promotion of self-reliance that permeate our culture, not to mention the relentless acquisitiveness that seems to head the list of our values.”³⁴

In my previous appointment, word finally got back to me that people would drive by the parsonage and comment, “The preacher’s sitting in the dark again.” Not quite. I had lights on, but only in the room where I was. We are using fossil fuels at an increasing rate. Appeals to change our thermostat settings to save power are constant. In Britain, it has not been so long since there were regular brownouts – whereas a blackout is the total loss of power, a brownout results in a “dimming” as the available power is stretched too far. Looking at comparable photographs of freshwater lakes in the American west shows that water levels are falling dramatically as it is used far more quickly than it is replenished. Current industrial agricultural techniques are similarly

³⁴ Shuster, *Response*, 83.

eroding our topsoil faster than it can be replenished. *A Sabbath community works against these tendencies.* Such a community will not be found with every light in the house blazing all night long. Rather, it will be working to extend holiness. When I am cutting firewood, I try to cut only wood that is already down or what may still be standing but is diseased or damaged in such a way that it will be down before long. This is part of my attempt to live Sabbathly,³⁵ caring for God's very good creation in every day, not just one.

This is part of what is called a cascade effect. One action will lead to another will lead to another until there is a result far removed from the original action, much as how the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone eventually led to rivers changing course as the ecosystem regenerated.³⁶ Keeping Sabbath will not just change clergy, not just the congregation, not even just the community. It can change everything about how we live.

Keeping Sabbath is not an appropriate subject for a cost/benefit analysis. This is all *grace*. While not fitting perfectly with Christensen's model, this disruption is *intentional* from the beginning, deliberately *wanting* the culture to change. And while Disruptive Innovation depends on improvement demanded in the market, my twist is that the improvements are demanded *of* the market. The market, the church, may think it is just fine as it is. But the reality of our lives shows that this is not so. Those wonderful prophets derided the popular preachers of the day who told people that things were just fine as they were. This was what people wanted – and still want – to hear. But it is not so.

Clergy will need to *lead* this for the long haul. Cultural change may take years, decades. The current culture will have to be slowly unraveled, pick by pick, so that God can weave us anew.

³⁵ I am stealing and slightly redefining this word from Maryann McKibben Dana, who uses it to define living each day a little less hectically. I am emphasizing within it a sense of carrying the holy with me in each day.

³⁶ See *How Wolves Change Rivers* by Sustainable Human, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

It is true that “[m]otivation is the catalyzing ingredient for every successful innovation.”³⁷ Worship is at times led where the person or people leading it obviously does not want to be there. Training sessions or focus groups are at times led where the person leading did not believe in the process. *Do not underestimate the power of this.* Even if concerns are well-masked, they will still show. In the 1960s, there was a line of cookware that salespeople sold door to door, often in a home to which several people were invited for a demonstration. One salesman was regularly behind in sales, so one of the leading sellers was assigned to go with him and observe his selling technique. At the selling party, everything was as it should be. All the information was given, and given technically well, yet few orders were taken. When they were driving away, the successful seller was still unsure as to what had gone wrong, so he began to ask questions. One of his questions was whether the other seller used the products in his own home. The response was along the lines of, “Oh heavens, no! That stuff is far too expensive!” No more questions were needed as to why he could never generate many orders. Keeping Sabbath is not a technique. It is *holy* life that recaptures and roots ourselves once again in the life of God.

³⁷ Christensen, et al., *Disrupting Class*, 7.

V

Sabbath as Disruptive Renewal

Current society, with its globalization and twenty-four-hour-shopping, its internet and instant communication, is hardly suited to a *societal* Sabbath. While this remains the ideal, there is some truth in the thought that we are starting over. Our cultural Sabbath pendulum has swung from overly rigid to overly ignoring. Still, Sabbath remains in the cultural memory but with little meaning beyond a day, usually Sunday, when things slow down (even if minutely). To the other extreme, our calling as disciples is not to solo acts. While “I” can certainly keep Sabbath on my own, spending time with God and deepening our relationship, this loses the communal aspect of the life God calls us to. My argument is for clergy to create a Sabbath community. It may be a few friends. It may be people from the congregation(s). It may be a group of local clergy, perhaps a clergy fraternal or United Methodist Missional Network. But whatever pool is drawn from, beginning with a small community will help each member celebrate Sabbath.

This small community will hopefully, prayerfully, be the beginning of a transformation in the church. *This will not happen overnight.* It will more likely take years if not generations. Many clergy have been on a mission trip. They went somewhere, local or international, and spent a week or perhaps a month working in an area where people had to live in a way unlike most mainstream Westerners ever have to. It impacts emotionally, maybe even awakes an awareness or even a calling that more needed to be done than “hit and run” activities. But then comes the return home where the reality of that experience can quickly fade. That is in stark contrast with historic Celtic Christianity. Their missionary impulse was not “door to door,” mission trip, or sending money. Instead, they would settle in a community beside an already existing, non-Christian one. Over

time, relationships would develop, *trust* would develop, and once people were comfortable with one another then the questions would begin. *Who are you? Why are you here? Who is this Jesus?* Only then would the gospel begin to be unfolded for them. Sabbath is a gift from God that society, including the church, has warped and largely lost. A Sabbath community can be the way in which God renews the gift. The clergy task is not to merely preach it or stand on the street handing out tracts about it. The task is to *live it* – embrace it, let it renew life, and as others begin to see that there is something tantalizingly different about a Sabbath life they will eventually want to know more. The Spirit will guide. This is not a *Ten Steps to Happiness* or *Seven Secrets of Sabbath Seeking Saints*. There will be opportunities to share but *Sabbath cannot be forced*. It is a gift.

The commandment enjoins us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Rather than waiting for the one day a week to slow down and become more attuned to God, the Sabbath can be brought into every day. Keeping it special, keeping it holy, keeping it as the seventh day, none of the ways God invites us mean Sabbath has to be kept *isolated*. It molds people, shapes them. Rather than try to fill the other six days with as much activity as possible that a Sabbath feels “justified,” the Sabbath will infect the other six days with leisure and joy and prayer and stillness. The Sabbath is not just a day. It is a way of living that molds *life*.

One practice, maybe the only practice, that I am consistently good at is tithing. This is not to say that I am not *regularly* tempted to withhold at least a part, given my reality of struggling each month just to keep the bills paid. But I try to make tithing a first fruit, giving the best to the God who gave me absolutely everything.¹ What I have found year after year after year is that somehow the bills get paid, and while retirement is not yet a feasibility there is regularly just enough money in the bank to cover those inevitable surprises. Like Emergency Room bills.

¹ Whether the church makes the best use of that gift is a discussion for another day...

When I was in Britain, I led a children’s time using an idea I found on a worship website. The idea was very simple: you had two sets of a jar, some rocks, some rice, and some water. What you did was this: first, you filled the jar with the rocks, all the way up to the top, and asked if it was full. You then added the rice, which filtered down between the rocks, and again asked if the jar was full. You then added the water, which filtered down between the rice and rocks, still finding room without spilling over the top. With that exercise completed, you then took the second jar and filled it with water and asked if it was full. Whether you then tried to add the rice or the rocks, it overflowed. The point was that if you put the first things first – as Bishop Bevel Jones, who first ordained me, used to say “keep the main thing the main thing” – then you still had room to fit the other things in. But if you started out in the wrong order, you were sunk.

Tithing has not made me rich, at least according to my bank account. Yet somehow, I am less stressed than when I used to refrain, and even have extra money to give away when it is needed. In terms of Sabbath, “[t]he sages did not teach that Sabbath observance always results in monetary reward, but they did suggest that Sabbath observance brings blessings that may not always be anticipated.”² Those blessings come in many, and often unanticipated, forms. These forms have power to disrupt what has become the normal way to do things and lead renewal.

One renewal is to embrace what I will call visible signs. In the movie *Waking Ned Divine*, the interim priest is asked if he gets paid for what he does, and his reply is that the pay is more of a spiritual nature. The young boy asking the question is less than impressed. The ethereal is hard for us to grasp. We tend towards the concrete and visible even when longing for the spiritual and invisible. When we celebrate communion together, we do not simply discuss the Last Supper. We

² Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment*, 165.

have bread and we have wine, and we touch those things, take them in, allow their physical presence to work something greater in us.

On *Shabbat*, Jews are encouraged to wear their best clothes. The simple act of dressing up is not just a visible sign but an emotional one as well. Many people *feel* special when they make an effort to dress up. Years ago, I knew a girl whose boyfriend told her to put on her best dress as he was going to take her somewhere really special. She did so, was all excited...and then distinctly let down when they drove into the local *Hardee's*. When we dress up, we expect something different, *special*. A wedding. A night at the opera. A trip to see *The Nutcracker*. That special loved one coming home after being deployed overseas. Even a funeral, which is to be as much a celebration as anything. Broadly speaking, Christians have not taken in the Jewish understanding of Sabbath as the arrival of the bride or Queen. But so simple an act as dressing up can become a demarcation that the day is different. A retired English minister once lamented to me about the decline in dressing up for church by noting, “I understand that God may not care how we dress, but we are coming into a higher presence.” In specially dressing for Sabbath, there is a visible sign that reminds us that the day is different.

There are other signs of *Shabbat*: “Simple white candles usher in the day and a colorful twisted candle escorts it out, the one announcing the stoppage of all creative activity, the other its beginning again.”³ Other candles are also used. “Shabbat begins 18 minutes before sundown, when Becky lights two candles, one for each of the biblical commandments – in Exodus and Deuteronomy – to remember and to keep the Sabbath.”⁴ Often when I am having devotional time, and every time I have been writing these words, candles mark the time. They symbolize the light

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 5.

that has come into the world, the presence of God that I *pray* is guiding me in what I am doing. The candles are signs that there is something *different* about the time, something worth noting.

Shabbat also features the presences of the two loaves of *challah* for the double portion of manna given for the Sabbath. What signs, if any, do we Christians have for this day of days? Fried chicken? Granted, the Sunday fried chicken lunches of my youth were *wonderful*. But they did not – at that time – point me towards a greater awareness of the presence of God. (Now, it is a sign to me of togetherness and family and community.) Still, fried chicken fails to appear in the Exodus story, nor any Sabbath text. *Challah* has meaning. A menorah has meaning. Bread and wine have meaning. A cross has meaning.

Christians can adopt *Shabbat* practices as well as add Christian ones, embracing visible signs that guide people deeper into God. And then clergy can allow *themselves* to become visible signs, people who noticeably go about the day *differently*. Removing clocks from worship space (or at least deny them any power) can be a noteworthy beginning, as can the refusal to do things that force people to work so others can enjoy Sabbath. If it is true that “[i]dentity markers do more than make a group recognizable both to itself and to outsiders; they express the nature of that group and its members”⁵ then clergy can *be* markers that work against the workaday world.

A second renewal is the blessing of freedom. The very difference in how Sabbath leads us to live brings a freedom with it. “It offers a day when instead of fighting time, we may luxuriate in it,”⁶ a far cry from the Jewish and then Christian mistake of binding it up in so many rules that it became “all duty and no gift.”⁷ It has the feel of a “five o’clock and haven’t had a bath” kind of day – slow, unhurried, devotional. This is directly opposed to what society expects of us. There

⁵ Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 78.

⁶ Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment*, 39.

⁷ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 242.

is constant encouragement to buy stuff you do not really need because you are told you need it – *trust us*. Then store it in a second or third or sixth storage unit. As one commercial parody from years ago brought out the truth, “If you buy this from me then I guarantee that I will have more money than you do.” Buy a bigger house. Why keep up with the Jones when you can make them jealous? Order a meal in an American restaurant and you will likely receive more food than you should eat in one sitting. But if the portions are smaller, small enough to actually see part of your plate, people complain! Buy, buy, buy. More, more, more. Never, never, never enough.

And yet... Spiritual seekers are everywhere. The “tiny home” industry is a minor boom market. The message of society is inherently false *and people know it*. What is not always known is how to escape it. Sabbath frees because it brings the reminder that daily bread is enough, and that God is faithful enough to provide it. It reminds people, including clergy, that all are human⁸ and that God’s children are *not* alone.

Sabbath is never a “have to” but it is essential. At no point has God *forced* Sabbath upon people, turned them into robots that have no free will and will do only what they are programmed to do. Sabbath is *freeing* because it reminds us that the greatest of these is love, and God loves us so much that we can choose *not* to enjoy Sabbath. That freedom reminds us that we do not have to live the lie that society preaches every single day. This is not a world of scarcity but of overflowing abundance. It is a world of *enough*. It is a world where time is not an enemy but a fellow traveler heading towards eternity. Someone once noted that if time was a line on a page then God would be the page on which the line was drawn. In the embrace of Sabbath comes the realization that if life is eternal then *the mortal life on earth is already living it*.

⁸ Klagsburn, *The Fourth Commandment*, 182.

A third blessing of Sabbath renewal is that it seeps into and blesses the other six days. Practitioners of Sabbath find something true in almost every case: a Sabbath life spills into all other days. Sabbath is *never* lived in isolation. The rejection of frenetic activity on one day calls into question its existence on all other days. The living simply on one day shows its possibility on all other days. A Sabbath life (re)learns that Sabbath is no more confined to one day a week than worship is confined to one hour a week. It affects all days. “Understanding and cultivation of authentic Sabbath rest could go a long way toward saving churches from merely mirroring the human world of the law, where there is no appreciation of the unmerited grace that frees us for holy rest.”⁹ Many Western congregations do little more than mirror the life they live the rest of the week, outside of church. Keeping Sabbath can turn that “law” on its head, affirming that all days can share an ethos but that ethos is quite different from the one generally accepted. Getting becomes giving. Hoarding becomes sharing. Any of the things discussed in this writing can begin with as simple an act as inviting someone to a Sabbath meal. Those Sabbath conversations can not only bring *us* together, they can bring the days together in a way that has been forgotten. Living Sabbathly leads to the realization that doing that only one day a week is impossible. There is still work, there is still play, but in a time and a community that is more *together*.

Embracing Sabbath blessings such as these can renew clergy, freeing them from a life of frantic, pointless activity that only drains rather than brings life. The retirement advice I most remember is from the minister who reminded us it is far better to ask forgiveness than permission. There are times it is better to “do the necessary” at the opportune time rather than make sure every requisition form is filled in...in triplicate. Duke’s Clergy Health Initiative indicates that clergy

⁹ Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 72.

may view Sabbath as something *they need permission to do*. Just as institutions resist change, so too can a personality.

Breaking the mold that has increasingly bound clergy over the last two or four generations will not be easy. In his memoir *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson writes about how difficult it was for him when he started to step away from pastoring in the “normal” way. One of his changes was that, except when necessary, he would no longer attend all the committee meetings.¹⁰ With his “new life” discussed and embraced by the congregation, he found himself completely unable to settle on the very first evening there was a committee meeting that he did not have to attend. When he could stand it no more, he walked over to the church and slipped into the meeting room. The person chairing the meeting halted the proceedings, looked at him and said, “You don’t trust us, do you?” He slipped back out, lesson learned. But it took that extra reinforcement to free him. When those shepherds burst in on the night Jesus was born, I often wonder if that was not a great gift for Mary and Joseph. Their message of angels and their very presence would have been confirmation that what they hoped was happening really was what was happening – *I didn’t dream it! It’s real!*

Keeping Sabbath is not something clergy should keep secret. Rather, clergy should be open about their struggles and triumphs. Even when everyone in a congregation is not involved, as will almost always be the case, let the body note this life-changing discipline. As Peterson shows, and has been mentioned before, keeping Sabbath will not be something squeezed in amongst everything else. Norman Wirzba observed that “[t]he first step toward becoming a Sabbath home will therefore require that we learn to say no to the many pressures to do or accomplish more.”¹¹ That includes the temptation of feeling indispensable. When I was in Britain,

¹⁰ Peterson, *The Pastor* (HarperOne, 2011), 277-282.

¹¹ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 110.

I was privileged to be part of a training team that met with clergy and their families who came from other countries. One of our annual sessions had a simple theme: saying No. Some clergy revel in telling others how busy they are. *Do not let it be so among you.* When did perpetual exhaustion become a badge of honor, something to be aspired to and emulated? Jesus calls disciples to life *abundant*.

Yes, saying no will be hard. There are too many years of neglect to unravel. The change from being that “quivering mass of availability” will not happen overnight. There is a psychology to this, not a “This is what I’m doing wrong” but “How can I do this better?” The starting point is fundamental. I say this as someone who regularly describes himself as having a double doctorate in worry! I am not just a worrier, I do not just play one on TV, I am a *professional* worrier. If I accomplish ninety-nine of one hundred things, it is the remaining one that I will carry home with me that night. But keeping Sabbath is leadership, leadership in a fundamental way. This is not fundraising, hiring a new staff member, planning a new building, or forming a worship drama group. This is being a signpost to others, pointing the way back to God. Despite my personal struggles with guilt, when I ask someone to prayerfully consider taking on a leadership position in the church I always tell them that guilt is not a good enough reason to say yes. They do not need a reason *not* to take the position, they need a reason, from God, *to* take the position. We say *no* to other things in order to say *yes* to God. And when we do that, life changes. We know the truth of that even when we are afraid to do it. But as clergy, what we do *matters*. When I am in public, people speak to me, people that I do not have a clue who they are but who know me because I am a minister. When keeping Sabbath as a minister, changes in way of life *will* be noticed. And, in ways beyond our ability to predict, *emulated* as God begins to work through particular clergy into others of God’s children.

This is not a clergy work ethic but a clergy rest ethic. God gave Sabbath as a gift *because we need it*. Not to recharge our batteries and jump straight back into the fray, but to participate in the life of God through rest and worship and renewal. They say that confession is good for the soul, and I have a confession to make: I am a minister, and I *hate* going to preacher meetings. And here is why: for twenty-five years now, I have gone to meeting after meeting after meeting where clergy moan about and groan about and complain about and caricature *their own congregations*. *I can't get them to do ANYTHING! I have to do EVERYTHING! All they do is complain! I can't wait to be moved!* And when those clergy do move, the same complaints come again. How easily forgotten is the *imago Dei* in everyone, *including those we worship with*. Keeping Sabbath heals the fractures among us as we enter God's life *together*.

One of my repeated stresses here is that *worship is not work*. But especially in the early days of trying to embrace Sabbath, it is a reality that is seen as a barrier. On one hand, some feel that they “at least partially sacrifice their own Sabbath time in order to provide it for others. They in turn need their own receptive Sabbath at a time when they are not responsibly in charge.”¹² The burden of leadership simply gets in the way. On another hand, clergy I spoke with consistently noted that *preparation* for worship is a barrier to a complete Sabbath. Finishing or practicing (or, let's be honest, *starting*) the sermon, getting familiar with new material, and finding participants are part of the reality of their weekly structure. Add in a family and it becomes *Sabbath?! Are you crazy?! Great for others, but absolutely impossible for me!* One noted that he kept a few prayers posted around the house, an attempt to find thankfulness and gratitude even in making coffee or changing diapers. As he put it, “Not specifically sabbath, but as close as I can get.”

¹² Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 136-137.

In the history of humanity’s attempts to keep the Sabbath, there is one discovery that we have largely forgotten today: “The distinction between rest and worship is a false one: resting was worship...”¹³ As we more embrace, and are embraced by, Sabbath, and as worship and rest blend together into a unity, we will find that even preparation for worship will become worship. For many this will sound too alien, but that only shows how far we have to go.

John Wesley preached care for body *and* soul. We are *both*. Part of that care is found in keeping Sabbath and keeping it *holy*. It is not a forced requirement, but it directly aligns with the early Methodist Band Meeting question of *How is it with your soul?* Keeping Sabbath is spiritual care and spiritual growth at the same time. While I will not list all the barriers I have read or been told by clergy as to why they do not keep Sabbath, which are many and varied even if they evoke common themes, they come across as choices that we make. *Even my own list*. What this shows is that keeping Sabbath is not a first priority. In extreme cases, keeping Sabbath is not a priority at all. It is a wish, a dream, something that will be possible in retirement. Maybe. Unless the grandkids are visiting or something else comes up. Walter Brueggemann notes very simply that “Sabbath is alternative.”¹⁴ If Sabbath is to renew, then clergy must learn – hesitantly, fearfully, falteringly – how to lower the barriers we erect that keep God at bay.

As clergy are renewed, that renewal can seep into the broader community – especially if that renewal is shown in great passion. When I was a student at North Carolina State University, I was a history major who spent some time on the teacher track. One day, my advisor *advised* me that I should take a course in African history. It was an up and coming field, and it would help when it came time to job hunt. I was less than enthused. While today I have come full circle, at

¹³ Heintzman, *Leisure & Spirituality*, 99.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. New Edition with Study Guide (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), xiv.

the time I could not think of many things in the history department I wanted to take *less* than African history. But I had been advised, I thought having a job would be a good thing, and I dutifully signed up. It was because of that that I met Ken Vickery.

Ken was at that time a young professor, though already making a mark. It did not take long to know something about Ken: he *loved* Africa, especially Zimbabwe! It was infectious. Tales of Great Zimbabwe, Bantu language...he even tried to teach us a few words in Xhosa, though to this day I cannot get the *click* right. From going into day one of his class with wailing and gnashing of teeth, I spent my final two years there taking every course he taught.

There is no greater advertisement than *passion*. What you are excited about will get more people interested than all the logical arguments you can make put together. If you keep Sabbath, people will notice. If you are *excited* about keeping Sabbath, people will *care*. They will want to know more. They will want to come and see. As someone once put it, based on how you talk and act about them would your friends be more interested in coming to your church or to your golf club? How would your friends answer?

Church can get a bad rap. Stories abound of congregations that gather together and burst into singing *O happy day that fixed my choice* with all the excitement of a brick wall. At Christmas, it is *Joy to the bored*. At Easter, it is *Jesus Christ is risen today but I wish he had slept in a little later*. There are people that you are convinced that if they ever smiled their face would crack. *It is not to be so among you*. To quote the old saying: if Jesus is in your heart, kindly inform your face. For this renewal to ripple outward, something must drop into the water. And that something will be nothing more – or less – than expressed passion about it.

Keeping Sabbath does not take us somewhere *else*. People are still the same people with the same struggles and hopes, and yet they become *different*. In *The Acts of the Apostles*, the

preaching of Paul was so passionate that people who had every reason to dismiss him regularly told him that they would like to hear more. Until he came back the next Sabbath, people went about their normal lives. But something was working within them, something that in time would grow. Life as they knew it was about to change, forever and for better. Keeping “Sabbath is not a break from life but rather a profound theological lens that enables us to get a better look at all of it. In its observance we commit ourselves to honor the presence of God in all things and to participate in the ways of life and health.”¹⁵

Life is so much more than many have made it. But what is often not known is what to do about it. Knowing the dilemma and knowing the solution are two different things. Keeping Sabbath reorients life towards the One who gifted it to us in the first place. Like that Prodigal Son, Sabbath keepers can “come to themselves” and find their way back home. That powerful parable from Luke 15 always struck me as having something odd, that repeated phrase about the younger son being dead and then alive again, was lost and then found. Surely, I thought, Luke had that turned around. Is the power not in what you end with, meaning dead and alive should take precedence over being lost and found? Until the day it struck me that maybe, just maybe, Luke knew what he was doing after all. That there is something worse than being dead, and that is being lost, separated from God. And there is something better than being alive, and that being found by God. *I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance* (15.7). The prodigal had to turn his life around – a basic definition of “repentance” is “to turn around” – in order to find what life truly was. It takes a similar reorientation on our part, making Sabbath a first fruit and not something squeezed in, that will begin to change us and allow perpetual exhaustion to give way to eternal joy. If this is

¹⁵ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 41.

accomplished, with God’s help, then people will notice, they will care, and they will want to know more.

A phrase I remember from the Iona Community in Scotland is the goal of seeing this world through God’s eyes, how it is *shot through with hope and possibility*. “Sabbath reflection and observance can be a primary source of cultural renewal because it serves as the antidote to our misperception and destructiveness. Sabbath practices correct and refine our vision so we can see once again...how everything that is made is *very good*.”¹⁶ How do disciples see the world? Is it *very good*? It is *just OK*? Or is it *the sky is falling! The sky is falling!* Sabbath has the quiet power to bring us back to where our story began, where things are very good, and to tantalize us with where our story is going, where things will be even better. The final word is not given to the Prime Minister nor President, nor should our politics of the moment define us. Always and everywhere, we are God’s children here and now. Claiming that identity changes *everything*.

Where to Begin?

I suggest starting small. The old acronym K.I.S.S. is helpful – Keep It Simple, Stupid. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Jews have been keeping Sabbath for quite some time now, and they have many insights and ideas that Christians can beg, borrow, and steal. Congregations can be so overwhelmed with the possibilities before them that they try to do everything and wind

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

up with nothing, like butter spread over too much bread (to quote Bilbo Baggins in the movie version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Pick one or two things and let the Spirit flow.

- Start a Sabbath meal. Invite a few friends and make a beginning. Steal as many ideas from the *Shabbat* meals as you like. *Remember* that in the early church communion was a meal. *Remember* that we used to have such things as family meals. What do we miss without those?
- Form a board game group. *Play*. Just as I wonder why it is only kids who get to take naps, why do only kids get to play games? One of the things I miss the most about the years I lived in the Raleigh-Durham, NC area is my game group. On those Thursday night sessions, it never mattered to me what we played. It was the people, the conversation, the community around those tables that had meaning.
- Start doing things Sabbathly. *Slow. Down*. My mother used to tell me I did not eat food, I inhaled it. I wonder how much of my *horrible* struggle with IBS is due to *how* I approach eating. Similarly, have you ever noticed how much more you see, even on a very familiar road, when you are the passenger in the car and not the driver? When we Sabbath, we *trust* God.
- Borrow an early Methodist idea and start a Band Meeting and then give it a Sabbath agenda. Just how is it with your soul, anyway?
- Get the congregation to buy in. There is not set way to do this, for people are people are people. Situations vary. But do remember that passion is a powerful tool.

- Go outside. Get away from traffic and cell phones and constant hurry and find a place where you can actually see the stars. Real stars. Let Sabbath find you hiking or biking or camping and then take it home with you.
- Whatever it is, do not make your primary Sabbath practice something that you do *alone*. Those times of solitude are vital – just ask Jesus – but *never* exclusive.

VI

Conclusion: *Going Off the Clock*

Stop. This is my word for clergy.

I started this journey in an Emergency Room bed. For my personal journey, this awful event contained the seed of the blessing of self-examination and was the first step on my Sabbath journey. When I began this exercise, I wanted to land squarely on a “recovery” of Sunday Sabbath. I have changed since then. In part this is because of the recognition that for many Sunday is simply going to be impossible. This is important because I do not want to find myself engaging in solitary Sabbath practices. Instead of faith affecting the culture for the better, that would be the culture affecting the faith for the worse. The church is called to be a *community*. The ideal would still be for the entire community to engage in Sabbath on the same day. There is a powerful *feel* when *everyone* is resting on the same day. It is quieter, life slows down, you can hear things in nature and around the house that the normal busyness with its cars and lawnmowers drown out. It is also true that “[w]hen we take a different day off, the day of rest becomes a purely religious, even private affair. Rest is harder if most others are working.”¹ While the aim is for as uniform a Sabbath as possible, perhaps the main community could designate a part of itself to keep Sabbath on a different day with these brothers and sisters as well. Sabbath can unite us with those we are alienated from. Rather than bemoaning how many others are not keeping Sabbath, let Sabbath lead us together. *Help* one another keep Sabbath.

The second reason for stepping back from a “Sunday-only” Sabbath is my growing recognition of the negative power of rigidity. Jesus struggled mightily with those who wanted to

¹ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 25.

protect the faith by instituting so many Sabbath rules. While I absolutely long for the day to come when Sabbath returns to the same day for all, that is not where society is right now. *Clergy should not lead a Sabbath that is exclusionary.* As long as there are those who absolutely must work on a Sunday (or even on *some* Sundays), there is a need for openness to keeping Sabbath on other days. Clergy can help lead long-term efforts to raise salaries, improve working conditions, and other justice issues that prevent people from being able to keep Sabbath, but also work to enable others to enjoy Sabbath when they can in the present time.

In one of our classes, Will Willimon defined Aristotle's idea of an immoral person as one who had no friends. Jesus calls us friends. In my experience, there is something missing in any Sabbath practice that does not contain some form of corporate worship (remembering that corporate can be where even two or three are gathered). I am slowly working towards "extended Sabbath" – Saturday into Sunday, trying to reclaim the rhythm of Genesis – though I am also still far too prone to the solo acts. Still, a Saturday Sabbath offers an amazing opportunity of allowing conversation and shared experiences between Christian and Jew. After spending far too many centuries drawing apart, through Sabbath God guide the faiths closer together. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have so much about Sabbath to remind us of. *Menuha*, that restfulness that is also a celebration. The very embracing of *menuha* prohibits overly proscriptive rules about what we must and must not do to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. There is also the phrase *me'ein olam haba* – a foretaste of the world to come. On the Sabbath, we look back to Eden and forward to the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Sabbath as it was, Sabbath as it will be. And the idea that Sabbath, *Shabbat*, is not something we do when we can squeeze it in. We *stop* with the God who stopped and led us to freedom.

Keeping Sabbath is not an invitation to laziness. It is an invitation to life. I have never been able to find a copy of it, but I once heard about a poster of South African archbishop and anti-apartheid leader Desmond Tutu. This particular poster had two scenes. In the first, Tutu was the fiery public preacher. He was speaking to a large crowd, and you could feel the energy in the air. There was excitement, there was action. In the second, Tutu was alone. He was in the small prayer chapel behind his house, head in one hand, Bible in the other. There was visible silence. The message of the poster was clear: *you do not get one without the other*. The public preacher and campaigner did not exist without the time spent in quiet reflection and centering in God. And the time of quiet reflection and centering drew upon the public activity. Sabbath does not exist in a vacuum, separated from daily life. It is the heart of it that fuels all that God does through us on all days. *One does not blaze with life without the other*.

While writing this, I realized something. I never stop moving. I “used to be” so good. Now, as much as I enjoy cooking, I frequently do as little as possible so as to save time. I sit down at the table and as soon as I finish eating I am up and on to the next task. To quote that famous theologian Kenney Chesney, I am living fast forward. One basic fact of life is *God’s got this*. The simple question is, do we trust that? When Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow, that was an appeal to trust God who not only gives us everything *very good* but also provisions for us in those times we will not be working, be it a double portion of mana before the sabbath, enough food from the previous harvest or grown “wild” during a Sabbath year, or those unexpected, unexplainable gifts that come not just out of left field but from completely outside the stadium.

Sabbath comes in many forms, many places. With church members in a cathedral side chapel. With friends on a hiking path ascending one of the “Munro” mountains in Scotland. The coastal village of Cullen was where I lived during my last appointment in Scotland. More than

once, I found myself sitting on a bench looking out across the North Sea, quietly singing hymns and remembering the Psalmist – *deep calls to deep*. Those quiet, centering Sabbaths formed me. They continue to form me, however much I work against them. How do we adequately define Sabbath? Maybe, like God, the Sabbath *is*...

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. “In a time when the best-rewarded jobs go to those willing to ignore the clock, to sacrifice family and health for material gain, this command should be heard.”² This quote does not contain idle words. I know how my own family suffered because of my inability to get off the hamster wheel, always spinning and going nowhere. A clergy friend acknowledges that that driving need that keeps us always responding to the demands of others (what I call a pinball life, being continually flipped and bumped in a different direction) leads to a punishing of ourselves and our family. But he also longs for Sabbath and finds it in surprising ways: “The Sabbath I take now has almost nothing to do with scripture, prayer, etc, but [I] find it a deep and spiritual blessing. That just being an attentive grandfather surely blesses me, and I hope it blesses my girl. I don’t know what any of that means, or if the experts would even call it Sabbath, but it surely feels like it.” That is how easy – and how hard – Sabbath is.

I would love to be able to tell you a personal success story. But I am still very much a work in progress. What I can say is that I am better than I was. If I had not had that opportunity, that blessing, to stare at ceiling tiles in that emergency room, how would I be living now? Still at 200 mph, still pinballing my way through, longing for Sabbath without being able to name it? Losing the Sabbath unhinges us from the center,³ casts us adrift from our beginning and our end. I have kept my wrist bracelets from both of my trips to the emergency room. They are my reminders to center, that the cost of losing Sabbath has implications for health, family, and

² Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 347.

³ Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, 102.

ministry. As the Clergy Health Initiative report so rightly named it, we clergy are indeed faithful *and* fractured.

Yet, Sabbath is never a “have to.” We enter God’s realm, and that is something that is *never* forced upon us. We are invited in love and we should respond in that same love. “If we simply do something out of love and yearning for God without trying to calculate what it will get us or even what it means, that intent and its action can carry us farther into becoming our true self in God’s image.”⁴ Theologians often talk about seeing in all others the *imago Dei*, the image of God. What we can overlook is that *I* am an *imago Dei* myself. For some people, that is hard to grasp. But when we participate in Sabbath, we begin to draw together the separate threads of our existence and find that they are all bound together in God. Which means that *I* am bound in God and not abandoned, nor ignored, but part of the family that God has been creating from the beginning.

Consider these two quotes: “The Sabbath is an experience, not a creed.”⁵ “What *we are* depends on what *the Sabbath is* to us.”⁶ When I am appointed to a new congregation, one thing they very quickly learn is that I *love* Christmas! I am always talking about it, and at any given moment I will ask them how many days it is til Christmas. No matter if it is November or March, the countdown is always on. In a Jewish calendar, the days of the week are numbered – First Day, Second Day, Third Day, etc. – until you reach Sabbath Day. The week is a glorious countdown to Sabbath. *Passion is everything*. More than anything done or said, this is what will infect people with a desire to know more and become involved.

⁴ Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 56.

⁵ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 15.

⁶ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 89.

“I now see the unfolding opposites of the day. We do less and are more, we stop earning and grabbing and have more, we cease from making and make more, we let Creation be and in our repose we see it to be more than we ever knew.”⁷

Keeping Sabbath holds the promise of renewing us as individuals and as renewing us as congregations/the church. We too often live as less than we are. Sabbath is not just an end to extreme individualism; it is the end to isolation. We are more connected and at the same time more lonely than any previous generation. An emoji is not a connection. An anonymous social media diatribe is not dialogue. God calls us to more.

In the final days of 1996, I was on a train heading from London to Cornwall. Somewhere near the border of Somerset and Devon, we passed yet another farmer’s field. But in this field was something extraordinary. There was a tree stump, a large and obviously quite dead tree stump, standing near a low hill. More than a stump, it had a good bit of trunk remaining, perhaps six or eight feet tall. It was chalky white and was one of those that looked so dry you were tempted to believe that if you looked at it hard enough it would burst into flame. But this tree was not quite ready for burial, for out of its side a shoot had sprung, a shoot that came out and then turned straight upward towards the sky, perhaps twenty feet high by that point. It was good wood, obviously alive and growing, spreading branches of its own. That became my Jesse tree, the shoot of new life growing from the stump of Jesse. What was seemingly dead and completely useless had instead life springing from it, new and vibrant. Cultivate Sabbath and let it renew life and more.

In Britain, it is common to be invited in for “a cuppa.” Sitting down with your cup of hot tea and your biscuits, you visit and talk and life becomes very real in the moment. It is a slowing down that Americans can only envy. Perhaps we can begin to think of Sabbath as our time to

⁷ Ringwald, *A Day Apart*, 75.

share a cuppa with God. We slow down, we sit down, we talk about anything, everything, and nothing, and it does not matter what time it is.

Individual clergy may even find that this quote resonates, that “[a]s I begin to say ‘no’ more often, I wonder if Sabbath might be winnowing my life into something more vital.”⁸ There can be a tendency to think of winnowing as something negative, maybe even painful. The Sabbath journey may indeed be painful at first – letting go of cherished traditions, even harmful ones, is rarely easy – but never negative. The extent of our blindness can surpass our darkest fears. In Harry Chapin’s song *Cat’s in the Cradle*, the father is rarely present in his son’s life, always too busy with travel and things to do. As he ages and begins to want to spend time with his son, he finds that his son is now too busy to spend time with *him*. As the last verse ends, “And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me he’d grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.” Failure to keep Sabbath merely leaves us forever spinning on the same wheel, passing on an image that is not of God but of something far, far less. A preacher I heard of once told the congregation, “I don’t spend time with you on my day off. That’s *work!*” What image do clergy see in their congregants? And what image do congregants see in clergy? Allow Sabbath to reunite us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is credited with saying, “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” I disagree, at least with the first part. Jesus offers us *joy*. How many extra African history courses would I have taken if Dr. Vickery had not been so filled with passion for what he was doing? *Not a single one*. When clergy get up in the morning, does the nature of ministry bring excitement for the coming day or more exhaustion than the night before? *Yes* to being useful, *yes* to being honorable, *yes* to being compassionate and making some difference and

⁸ Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, 92.

living well, but *YES* to being happy! If this life does not brim with happiness, then friends will only enjoy tales from the golf course because they certainly will not want to hear one more tale of misery about church. Allow the Lord of the Sabbath to surprise. But start accepting that you do not have to always be in a hurry to get things done. Mondays do not have to be manic. Nor does any other day. Sabbath rescues us.

The poet Robert Bly challenges us with these words:

Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you've never seen.

When someone knocks on the door, think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time, or that it's
Been decided that if you lie down no one will die.⁹

Remember the Sabbath and keep it *holy*. Clergy are not indispensable. Sabbath *is*. *Shabbat shalom*.

⁹ Robert Bly, "Things to Think" in *Eating the Honey of Words* (Harper Collins, 1999).

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