



Rest as a Tool of Justice

Sunday, September 18, 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday in Pentecost
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

Amos 8:4-7
Exodus 23: 10-12

Later today I'll be preaching at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Troy, while their pastor, Chris Hallam, who wrote the prayer of confession we used this morning, is away. Chris is in the middle of a series on Sabbath rest. I was really excited to step into that, partially because I love the concept of Sabbath. I think there are few things as liberatory and life-giving in our faith as a divinely-ordained commandment to rest. But I was also excited about it because I struggle to truly observe Sabbath and honor the importance of rest in my own life. Talking with many of you, I think you might have the same trouble. Northminster has been looking at various different angles of how we might approach and value the importance of Sabbath rest. You get a window into just one week of that series, so while there are many topics we could consider related to the need for rest, today we'll focus on rest as a tool of justice and liberation.

If you'll bear with me, we'll begin with a little American labor history: in 1910, President William Howard Taft declared that the average American worker should enjoy "Two or three months' vacation [...] in order to enable one to continue [their] work the next year with that energy and effectiveness which it ought to have."¹ Taft's proposal never caught fire, but even more moderate proposals for paid time off have had a long and complicated history in the United States. Up until World War II, it was the norm for only white collar, salaried employees to regularly receive paid vacations. It was the introduction of women in more workplaces during the war efforts that forced employers to consider the possibility of pregnancy and parenthood impacting one's ability to work regularly². (And we all know it took us a *real* long time to do anything about that!)³ Around World War II, as more

¹ Cornish, A., Shapiro, A. (2019, August 1). President William Howard Taft Wanted All of The U.S. To Have 3 Months Of Vacation. *NPR, All Things Considered*.

² Sholar, M. A. *The History of Family Leave Policies in the United States* | *The American Historian*. Organization of American Historians. Retrieved September 23, 2022, from <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2016/november/the-history-of-family-leave-policies-in-the-united-states/>

³ Thompson, D. (2012). The Only Advanced Country Without a National Vacation Policy? It's the U.S. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-only-advanced-country-without-a-national-vacation-policy-its-the-us/259317/>

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2022. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

employers were scrambling for folks to hire, seeing the real value of blue-collar workers, more management strategies considered offering paid time off as an incentive for potential hires when wages could not go up. In post-war efforts, paid time off was seen as a hopeful new horizon to get working families to take vacations, embrace the new interstate highway system, and bolster the economy. But actual legislation to guarantee the right to rest continued to lag⁴. Just this week the question of labor rights came to the forefront again, as railroad workers came together to fight for improved working conditions—one of which was more equitable policies for taking time off, with railroad companies notorious for having difficult-to-navigate “attendance policies,” that have left railroad workers struggling to attend to family needs, recover from illness, and maintain the dignity of rest⁵.

Now, you probably didn’t come to church this morning for a lecture on labor history (meet me for coffee later to talk more!), but this week as I read some more about this still-unfolding history, I was really fascinated by some of the trends and patterns for how American culture has envisioned the role of rest for hundreds of years. The cliff notes version of some of those patterns:

1. Rest is routinely prioritized for the wealthy.
2. Gender, immigration status, and socioeconomic levels are intimately tied with who our society eagerly grants rest to.
3. When economists look at the value of rest, it is almost always tied to potential productivity—not inherent well-being. Even Taft looked toward months-long vacations as a way of sparking more productivity upon one’s return to work, not an opportunity to affirm the dignity of American workers.

So we take this history, but then we come to our Bible, and we encounter this strange and counter-cultural concept of Sabbath. Sabbath is the promise with which God whispers in our weary ears and says “you are enough. No matter what you do or make, what outcomes you produce, or how successful you are. You are enough. And as a beloved child of God you are not only invited, but *commanded* to rest.

We live in a culture that tells us not to rest. But God calls us to another way of being. Church is one of the rare places where we are fully invited to simply *be*. To dwell in our inherent value, confident that we deserve love, community, and care no matter what we do or make or how we measure our success. Now, if you’ve ever been coerced into serving on Session, you may know that the no-strings-attached love only goes so far in the Presbyterian church, but at our core, I hope that you, and I, and

⁴ Berkowitz, M. (2001). A “New Deal” for Leisure: Making Mass Tourism during 185 the Great Depression. In S. Baranowski & E. Furlough (Eds.), *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture, and Identity in Modern Europe and North America*. University of Michigan Press.

⁵ Scheiber, N., & Chokshi, N. (2022, September 15). Workers Say Railroads’ Efficiency Push Became Too Much. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/15/business/economy/railroad-workers-strike.html>

Rest as a Tool of Justice

Sunday, September 18, 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday in Pentecost
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

each person we encounter in these communities can internalize that we belong and have value no matter what concrete service we share with one another. When the congregational nominating committee calls you up to talk about becoming a deacon—please don't tell them I told you that. But truly, God calls us to meaningful work, and also meaningful rest. There is difficult, but important discernment tied up in that.

Our two Scripture texts this morning point us toward one aspect of Sabbath that I think is particularly important, recognizing the need to not only rest ourselves, but to also help create systems and structures that prioritize rest for all. The history of paid vacation time in the U.S. has regularly left out populations with less power, but God's call invites us to center the powerless, and embrace Sabbath rest as a tool of justice and dignity. Our need for rest reminds us of our humanity, and it calls us to do better for one another, honoring the dignity of what it means to be made in the image of God, requiring and deserving rest. It's easy to think of rest as a passive action, the lack of doing something else, but as Christians we are called to pursue rest, and to fight for the right to rest for others, honoring rest as the liberatory tool that it truly can be.

In this passage from Exodus, Sabbath is established especially as a tool to uplift populations that might otherwise be overlooked or abused. For six years you may sow and harvest in your fields, but on the seventh, you let them lie fallow, specifically so that the poor may glean something from these fields. In the same way, each week the people are called to work for six days, but to rest on the seventh. In this passage in particular, the reason for that seventh day of rest is not for the well-being of the landowner, but so that slaves and laborers have a chance to be refreshed. Sabbath rest honors the dignity of who we were created to be. It honors our humanity, but even a step further it honors the dignity of all created beings. This call in Exodus includes provisions for oxen and donkeys, it asks us to grant rest to the very land we walk on, and it lifts up the reality that all created beings: those with limited power and those who take power away from others—have equal need for rest and restoration.

As the concept of self-care has gained popularity in recent years, we sometimes run the risk of treating rest and restoration as a luxury rather than a necessity. Even worse, as American history has shown us, rest sometimes becomes a tool for capitalism, a way to squeeze out a bit more productivity by

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2022. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

encouraging folks to take power naps and strategic time off so that they can come back to work more productive and efficient than before. The prophet Amos calls us to be wary of this, calling out “those who trample on the needy” by waiting impatiently for the Sabbath to be over to once again sell grain, trade goods, and cheat the poor in the marketplace. Even in these verses from Exodus, we could take the cynical view that a wise steward of labor might give their slaves a day of rest so that they will return with more vigor and productivity than before. But as we consider the character of God, and the wide arc of Sabbath instructions you have considered and will consider in weeks to come, I choose to believe that these instructions prioritize well-being over maximizing profits.

There’s a long tradition of understanding Sabbath rest as a subversive force for justice and dignity. Throughout the sin of American slavery, many thinkers and speakers turned to the importance of Sabbath as one of many reasons why enslaving human beings was an atrocious violation of the order of creation. We are made in the image of God. A God who required rest. A Godself and who commanded us to care for ourselves and one another with rest.

In 1843, Henry Highland Garnet, an African-American abolitionist and minister, gave a speech in Buffalo, NY that called enslaved communities to rise up in rebellion⁶. Here and elsewhere, Garnet particularity relied on a theology rooted in the inherent dignity that enslaved people deserved as beloveds made in the image of God. Garnet shares the prophetic words that slavery “tears the crown of glory from [a person’s] head, and as far as possible obliterates the image of God that is in him.”

Work without payment, work without ethical compensation, and work without rest aims to chip away at the image of God that is within us. When we believe we are defined by what we do and produce for others, we are tricked into forgetting our inherent dignity. God calls us to a more abundant way of living, and as people of faith we are asked to lift one another up on that journey to remember our value and dignity.

Now let’s be clear: Christians have not often been the best proponents of rest. Many of the very people who enslaved their siblings in Christ through American history used their faith to justify their actions, and to justify denying rest to those they forced into labor. In many contexts, the so-called, “*Protestant work ethic*” has socialized us to keep our nose to the grindstone, ignoring our physical and spiritual needs in pursuit of success. In our churches, many of us are weary, pastors and volunteers, elders and deacons, feeling overwhelmed that there are not enough hours in the day to do the good work that we feel we are called to.

And yet, God keeps whispering in our weary ears, “You are enough. You deserve to rest.”

⁶ Garnet, H. H. (1843, August). *An Address to the Slaves of the United States*. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1843-henry-highland-garnet-address-slaves-united-states/>



Rest as a Tool of Justice

Sunday, September 18, 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday in Pentecost
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

Rest is a tool of justice, and God calls us to help fight for it for others. It happens through small and large ways, through advocacy and through neighborly love. It's taking a meal to your friend going through cancer treatment so they can reclaim even one hour of rest. But it's also advocating for your employer to revisit their paid family leave policies, even if you don't plan to have children. At First Pres, I have been helping with the family we are co-sponsoring, recently arrived from Afghanistan, and I've been amazed by how much time and worry goes into paperwork and procedures for new refugees in this country. Maybe advocating for Sabbath rest is helping someone with their application for food assistance, since they only have a few hours in the day left to devote to that work. Rest is a tool of justice, and it might be that this week, the best thing you can do is take some rest yourself—not so that you come back to work more productive, but so that you come back to the world more loving, refreshed enough to see the goodness in the world around you and to help others access that same refreshment.

The call of Sabbath is not an easy one. But it is one that beckons us to the core of who we were created to be. It reminds us of how valuable we are, created in the image of God, redeemed by the love of Christ, and called into community for abundance and well-being. God, grant us the humility to rest when it is time, the grace to grant rest to others, and the courage to seek justice for all, with equitable rest at every turn. *Amen.*