

Sabbath and Guiltless Naps

by Jen Pollock Michel

I confess that I am more of a Sabbath-breaker more than a Sabbath-keeper, although it was ten years ago now that I began to rally some frail faith for practicing the habit of weekly rest. Ten years ago, I was the mother of three very small children: a preschooler, a toddler, and a small baby. The survival of our days depended on the masterful choreography of our schedule. To arrive on time to Bible study each week (the one event besides church that we managed with consistency), I would pack the diaper bag the night before, prepare breakfast and lunch, set the table, and put my Bible and notebook in the car. In the morning, we'd race there. At lunchtime, we'd race home. Hope was poised precariously on the success of keeping the baby awake in the car, feeding the kids lunch, and getting all three children to bed at the same time for their afternoon nap, the stretch of time needed for freelance writing, for laundry, and for the all-important dinner prep. My life was running at its greatest clip.

Sabbath felt like a guilty pleasure in my breakneck life. But as I was reading about the practice in Gordon MacDonald's, *Ordering Your Private World*, I began reveling in the deliciousness of this invitation. *Rest?* What would that feel like?

There's no forgetting the tsunamic feeling of life's everyday back then, with three children underfoot, a husband busied with career and graduate school, my foray into freelance work. There's no forgetting the heaviness of the chronic busyness settled squarely on my chest, never budging, never letting up, relentless with its demands. I was lean on time. How could I lend an entire day out? What would happen if I, like the mythical Dutch boy who saved Amsterdam by plugging the hole in the dike with his finger, let the trickle of responsibilities flow unimpeded? Wouldn't I drown?

Ten years ago, when I started to seriously consider practicing the Sabbath, these reflexive fears met me. Most new invitations from God seem to me like the offer of bitter medicine. I assume it will taste terrible though do me some good in the end. Sabbath, in one light, could be seen like this—all restriction and rules. It could be counted as just one more obliging way to pay the cantankerous piper. And maybe that was my fear: that in the practice of rest (and the dutiful effort to please God), I'd only find more anxiety in the piles of the undone.

But the Scripture never portrays the Sabbath as a dreary obligation. The Pharisees, of course, had wrung the joy out of it with their legalistic impulse. They were the first to criticize Jesus' disciples when they plucked heads of grain on the Sabbath to eat. "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Mark 2:24) Jesus rebukes them, reminding them that by their accounting, King David would have been a law-breaker. He was a man who entered the house of God and, because he was hungry, ate the holy bread of the Presence. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," instructed Jesus (v. 27). Jesus insists that the Sabbath command hasn't been given for God's good—but for ours.

Ten years ago, I took a risk on this: that God meant something for my great good in his invitation to mute, if only temporarily, the noise of my to-dos. So now I don't fold laundry on Sabbath. I

don't plow through email on Sabbath. I don't tackle long overdue household or work projects. These restrictions aren't rules to which I oblige myself. Rather, they are invitations.

Despite the pots and pans of Sundays (I cook a big breakfast for my family, and we often practice hospitality on Sundays), we let the hours of Sunday laze like a slow-moving river. And the mystery is always that when time slows, there seems to be more of it. Without the hurry, I recover some unexpected plenty. I read. We talk. We play games and laugh. The hours feel elastic and long.

Sabbath is a day meant for our great good, "the day in which we pause our striving and start abiding," write John Pattison and C. Christopher Smith in their fine book, *Slow Church*. Sunday is the day we risk on the strange notion (*the gospel*) that we can be loved and cherished by God for doing absolutely nothing.

As Pattison and Smith write, "Sabbath is an exercise in radical grace: in the midst of our sin and brokenness, God loves us. Our creator God looks down at us with absolute love; we set aside the Sabbath to meet that gaze."

Sabbath is the day that I cease to see myself as a tool of production. And blissfully, I recover the scale and proportion of my life, even my own self. No chore is as vitally important as I think, no email as urgent. I am not indispensable, and the world turns when I nap. Sabbath is one practice by which I chasten my desire to be in control and remember the force holding the world together: God. As it turns out, it's not anxiety we find in the piles of the undone. It's deliverance from fear. And worship.

And *rest*.

Prayer:

Dear God of Sabbath,

Help us to remember that if the world did not stop turning when you rested, it definitely will not stop when we do. Remind us that you invited us into Sabbath because you love us. May we find rest in you and leave our anxieties behind us.

We pray this in Jesus' name who taught us about Sabbath. Amen.

Questions:

1. How have you been about practicing the Sabbath in the past? Has it been more meaningful for you during busy seasons, or does it sometimes feel like an unreasonable thing to ask of you?
2. Do you feel guilty when you take a nap or take time away to rest? Why?
3. When you come back to your work after resting, do you feel even more behind, or do you gain perspective about the world being able to function without you?

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2014/june/delicious-invitation-to-rest.html>