

Sabbath and Privilege

by Lauren Winner

One of the persistent themes of my spiritual life over the last decade has been an effort to figure out what Sabbath-keeping might look like for a North American Christian in the early 21st century. I am not alone in longing for a Sabbath; in recent years a bumper crop of thoughtful books about Christian Sabbath-keeping have appeared, and almost every time I give a lecture or lead a workshop on something pertaining to Christian spirituality, someone in the audience asks me about Shabbat.

Over the years, a set of practices have begun to characterize my (admittedly inconsistent) attempt to keep Sabbath: not going shopping on the Sabbath, for example, and not using the Internet. I am always after my pastor not to hold committee meetings after worship on Sunday. Those practices are part of my attempt to step away from the rhythms of work and week, and, at God's invitation, enter into God's rest.

I was proceeding along happily—indeed, a little smugly—with my pursuit of Sabbath until one afternoon, after church, I had something of an epiphany while sitting at a restaurant with friends. (We might call it the Ehrenreich epiphany.) I was happily munching my arugula salad when, unbidden, a phrase from the nighttime prayer service of Compline flew into my head: “Watch over those ... who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil.” I looked up to see a waitress whose first language was not English and who, in addition to navigating work in a second language, probably worked a second job, and I began to understand just how deeply my Sabbath-keeping, my oh-so-spiritual rest, depends upon others' toil. That lunch, which was restful for me because I hadn't prepared it and I wouldn't clean up afterward, was made possible by the labor of workers who are quite likely to be underpaid, to lack health insurance or paid sick days, to work in unsafe conditions, and to experience sex discrimination on the job.

Beyond the labor of restaurant workers, my ability to rest one day a week—instead of devoting that day to vacuuming my house and scrubbing my toilets—relies on the labor of another woman, who cleans my house every other week. I like to tell myself I pay her well. But I'm pretty sure I'm not paying her enough to keep a Sabbath. My participation in the American service economy—my buying myself a few hours of rest by paying someone else to empty my trash cans and change my sheets—seems, among other things, to put me at odds with a principle clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy 5:14: “the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you ... nor your manservant or maidservant ... so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do.”

I could go on, multiplying the evidence for the realization I began to have that Sunday afternoon over my mozzarella panini: My American Protestant Sabbath-keeping was a leisure pursuit, and my efforts to keep Sabbath marked me not as one who pursued God's rest and God's justice; instead, my Sabbath marked me as privileged.

The point here is larger than Sabbath, of course. All of Christian spirituality has a political dimension. The politics of some spiritual disciplines is pretty obvious: Fasting (ought to) connect us to the hungry and prompt us to take action on their behalf. Hospitality (ought to) prompt

questions about whom we are willing to welcome and shape, among other things, our politics of immigration.

Less overtly political spiritual practices have politics, too. Consider keeping silence. In his recent book *In Pursuit of Silence*, George Prochnik argues persuasively that in the U.S. silence is increasingly available only to the wealthy, who have the resources to head off to a monastery for a silent retreat. “If we want more people to appreciate the importance of silence,” writes Prochnik, “we have to create more affordable environments in which to enjoy it ... We must encourage the kinds of urban-design projects that nurture appreciation of silence. We need more pocket parks ... Why not take some of the money seized from drug dealers ... and financial crooks and use those funds to buy up a few dozen fast-food franchises that can be turned into contemporary quiet houses?”

The question underneath Prochnik’s question is, who has access? Who has access to silence? Who has access to certain classical spiritual disciplines? Who has access to rest? As a 2008 study from The Working Poor Families Project found, “The average annual work effort for low-income working families is 2,552 hours”—that’s the equivalent of 1.25 jobs. The single mother who works more than a full-time job in order to keep food on the table does not have ready access to Sabbath.

Sabbath-keeping is not only about devoting one day a week to rest. That day is meant to shape the whole of the week. I am fond of reminding my students that, as the slogan has it, the labor movement gave us the weekend. Conversely, those of us who keep Sabbath ought to allow Sabbath to clarify just what it is we are working for during the other six days of the week: just labor practices, a living wage, paid sick leave for all workers. At Labor Day, let us remember to let our practice of rest transform our work week. Let us, one day a week, rest in God’s rest. Then let us return to the week, and work for a world where all may rest.

Prayer:

Dear God,

We come to you knowing that we have not always allowed others to rest. We pray for all who are working two full time jobs, who are struggling to make ends meet. Help us keep the Sabbath so we may be revitalized and work for a world where all may rest. Thank you for sending Jesus who offered to take our heavy yokes for we know our work for others is not in vain.

In Christ’s name. Amen.

Questions:

1. What do you abstain from on the Sabbath? How can you help others not have to engage in those activities on the Sabbath, too?
2. What is the connection between Sabbath and social justice? How can you use your resources to support a living wage for others?

3. What are the best places to find peace and quiet in your area? How can you help others have access to restful spaces?