

Sabbath

TEXT: Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on May 3, 2026

A couple of weeks ago we talked about the Ten Commandments as a group, constituting one of what I'm calling "Pillars of Belief," those beliefs that are more grounded in earthly life and that have a more direct effect on how we interact with each other and the world around us. In that sermon I mentioned that the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy" was important enough to get its own sermon and this morning I'm keeping that promise.

While I don't have actual statistics for this—or even know how one would go about collecting such information—I would bet that the Sabbath commandment is the most frequently violated in the Christian church today, although since many of the reasons for not keeping it serve to feed our personal or societal idols, the idolatry commandment may win out in sheer numbers.

But, except for complaining about sports teams who practice or play on Sunday mornings and make our kids miss church, Christians certainly ignore the Sabbath commandment, putting it on a list of misdemeanors if we regard it at all.

I believe we are almost completely unaware of its actual purpose and of how the slow erosion of its practice has carved a vast chasm through our society, culture, and the very planet itself. For Christians in the US in 2026, "Keeping the Sabbath" is almost completely out of reach for all but those privileged enough to afford passage across the ever-deepening divide of those who have the means to rest from their labors and those who do not.

Part of the reason we got here, I think, is that the purpose of the Sabbath has been warped and narrowed by centuries of misunderstanding in the church. Many came to believe that keeping the Sabbath meant showing up at church on Sunday morning—and in some places all day long—or doing volunteer work all day.

Especially here in New England, the Puritan influence on the Sabbath turned the day Jewish writers have called the "Cathedral of Time," the day eagerly awaited as a "bride" or a "queen," a day of joy and rest and family and community, into a dour duty.

The early Blue Laws, many of which are still technically on the books in various places today, actually criminalized almost every form of fun and pleasure on the day--making it illegal to laugh in church, to eat candy less than an hour and a half before church, or for a man to kiss his wife. In Nebraska if a child burped during church the child's parents could be arrested, and the number of places outlawing ice cream in some form or other is insane—at least six states.

We took the day that was supposed to be the most fulfilling and refreshing of the whole week and turned it into a day of fearful duty and grim self-denial. The general effect of those laws was to pollute the common understanding of what Sabbath was about, eventually leading most Christians to scorn the gift and let it gather dust in the closet. And we are the poorer for it.

Also, we have viewed the Sabbath Commandment, like all the others, as directed toward individual behavior, without noting that the reason individual behavior is important is because it takes all of us pulling together to work for the common good.

It's not only true, as the book of James tells us, that the person who breaks one commandment breaks all of them. It's also the case that individual behaviors ripple out, for good or for ill, across communities large and small, until a critical mass is reached and something widely practiced affects us all.

The Sabbath commandment is the longest of the ten. It appears twice—as they all do—once in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy—and there are some differences between the two listings for this commandment. You heard Cathy read them both, back to back, this morning.

The most significant difference between the passages is in the reason given for Sabbath observance. In Exodus the people are told to keep the Sabbath because, on the final day of Creation in Genesis, God rested. So we, likewise, should work six days and rest on the seventh.

But the Deuteronomy version references a different story. There the people are told to keep the Sabbath so that they don't enslave others as the Egyptians had enslaved them. In both versions the Sabbath is for everyone—every human, including the foreigner and the enslaved, every animal, and we learn in the book of Leviticus that a Sabbath is to be given even to the land itself, which is to lie fallow one year out of every seven, when everything that sprouts and grows there in that year is free for the taking, by human and animal alike, regardless of who the land belongs to.

That time off for the entirety of Creation is so important that in Exodus 31, God calls keeping Sabbath the sign of the covenant. It's the only one of the Ten Commandments that can't be found in other ancient law codes.

Keeping Sabbath is how the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to distinguish themselves from others. It's the thing that identifies someone as willing to be set apart, not just as moral people but as faithful people—people in covenant with something above and beyond themselves. That's what "holy" means—to be set apart for sacred purpose.

We think we're doing pretty well with the commandments if we haven't murdered anyone lately, but Exodus 31 begs to differ. The whole covenant is negated if we're not keeping the Sabbath. So, it's worth taking a few minutes to see what babies we might have thrown out with the Blue Laws bathwater.

We took back the ice cream, which is fine as long as we aren't milking the cow on the Sabbath to get it. Cows are supposed to get a Sabbath, too. But what else might we gain if we re-entered the covenant and really took Sabbath seriously?

While we generally think of the commandment as being about a day of rest, the text is joined with a command to work for the other six days. So, we can't get very far in trying to define a day of rest until we understand what the Bible means by "work." Our understanding of work is currently as warped as our understanding of rest—which of course it is, because the two are tied together.

The Sabbath commandment is universal and has only one exceptional circumstance. So whatever the verse means by "work" has to also be possible for humans who have all kinds of disabilities and of any age. And it certainly is not justification for current calls for work requirements to make people eligible for society's care. That's almost a complete inversion of its meaning.

And since the commandment extends beyond human beings, the meaning of "work" here also must be possible for elk and salmon, chickadees and worms, oaks and clay; because the Bible tells us that they must all be given a Sabbath when they are exempt from that labor.

The key verse for sorting this out is Exodus 20:9: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." That part of the commandment is identical in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. And the key word in that key verse is the word for labor, which is—in Hebrew—*abad*.

Abad is one of the central root words in the Hebrew Bible. The first time we encounter it, God is commanding Adam to do it in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:15. Most translations use a farming term for the word there—Adam is to *till* the earth and keep it. When it appears in the Sabbath commandment, *abad* gets translated as "labor." But those aren't the word's typical meanings.

The word *abad* appears as a verb 290 times in the Old Testament and 227 of those 290 times, the word is translated as “serve.” But the root word doesn’t just produce verbs. It occurs 96 times as a feminine noun, *abodah*, and in those places it’s translated as “worship.” And another whopping 803 times it shows up as a masculine noun, *ebed*, where it’s translated as “servant” or “slave.”

Putting all that together, we discover that, at its root, the commandment isn’t really about any specific activity, whether it’s eating ice cream, sawing logs, or selling insurance policies. It’s not about **what** we’ve been doing for the other six days, but about **the worship of God** our labors proclaim and the **service** to God’s creation that it renders.

I think it’s not just the “take a day off” part of this commandment that we’ve been getting wrong. We have also lost track of what our work on the other six days is supposed to look like. It’s not about how much we sweat, what we earn, or our productivity levels. It’s about whether or not the activity that occupies us for six out of every seven days—paid or unpaid—is a form of service to others that proclaims to the world the nature of the God we profess.

“Service” here doesn’t mean just what we would consider works of charity or whether we’re paid or volunteer. This is a commandment that humans are to steward for every part of the created order. All of it has six days of *abad*, of service, and one day of Sabbath. Or years in the case of the land.

The service of maples and crickets looks different than the service of cashiers and nurses; the service of bison and pheasants looks different than the service of oceans and soil; and the service of those who pray or write or call to bring cheer and healing to others looks different than the service of vultures, and wolves, and snow fleas; but the commandment is clear that none of them should be enslaved—none of them are to be forced to provide their service without a time of rest. And it is the uniquely human vocation to make sure everyone and everything is afforded that gift.

We serve each other—humans, animals, even the land itself—six days out of every seven. It’s a dance of mutual care and regard that is the root of what it means to worship the God who made it all. Then, for a full day, and with the earth a full year, every living thing can rest and love ourselves, just as we have loved our neighbors—human, animal, and plant—for the previous six.

All of it together is the expression of our love for God, and our proclamation of God’s love for all. That means that, by truly and fully keeping the Sabbath commandment, we fulfill the Great Commandment, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, every single week.

God wants stewards not slaves. Just as God took the time to create a command to forbid muzzling an ox while it treads on some very tasty grain (Deuteronomy 25:4), so God wants not just the ox but all living things to be able to enjoy the fruits of their labors.

It’s also clear from the commandment itself that taking a break from your own service doesn’t mean you can turn around and make others serve you that day. Not for pay, not as a volunteer, nothing. You can’t even make your dog fetch your slippers. Nada. That’s how the world is renewed and restored.

Sabbath is designed to be a hedge, not only against overwork, but also against the cruelty that is so often birthed by greed. It’s a warning to society to ensure that no one has to work 7 days a week to have the necessities of life. It’s a time given to all living things simply to be and to love themselves, remembering that when God summed up the work of Creation, God said that every bit of it was good.

For a full day we neither make nor respond to demands, with the sole biblical exception of helping those in acute distress, including the distress of animals in our care.

Sabbath is the capstone of loving your neighbor as yourself. By not making demands on others, we love our neighbors, and by ceasing to serve others for a day we tell our minds and bodies that we matter, too. Self-esteem, awareness, and reflection begin in Sabbath.

But Sabbath isn't just a day-long nap. There are activities that are encouraged on the Sabbath. The commandment itself doesn't offer much guidance, but other parts of scripture do. In Leviticus 23 we learn that it isn't just the seventh day of each week that's identified as a Sabbath.

Every Jewish festival also designates one of its days as a Sabbath. Mostly it's the first day of the festival; for Passover it's the last. And it's in those festival Sabbaths where we learn the kinds of activities that are encouraged on every Sabbath.

In short, the festival Sabbaths are times of inner reflection, repentance, healing, and renewal. A day to savor relationships, family, and friends and to invite God to have a place at in our home and our table. They are times of celebrating the abundance given by God through the earth and giving thanks. They are times to take inventory of the state of our lives and relationships.

They are times to look at all the non-Sabbath days of our lives and say, "So what am I doing, really? Is it important? Have I been serving in my work or just sweating? Have I been serving at all, or are my six "work" days spent sitting back and making others serve me and my interests.

In making fine furniture, the Shakers gave us the concept of worshipful work. Can we say that about the way we spend six out of every seven days? Sabbath is a day to take stock and to shift our priorities if necessary.

This is what makes the Sabbath a day of love for ourselves. It's not that we love ourselves just by doing something fun, sleeping in, or getting a day off from our job. It's a day when we check in with our own priorities, offer up our failures, experience the grace of forgiveness and God's fundamental goodness in ourselves and in everyone and everything around us. It's a weekly reset—a break from the grind that directs us to remember our purpose and take stock of the things our labors have wrought.

Broadly speaking, the provision of the Sabbath is to allow everything to revel in simply being what it is and to recognize that freedom as our truest form of worship. Every sabbath day a cow can be just a cow and not a source of food, drink, or labor. Every horse can just be a horse and not a source of our entertainment, exercise, or—for Clydesdales—beer.

Every sabbath year a tree can grow how and where it pleases and can share its fruit not just with people nearby but with the bears and the birds and the worms that turn it again into rich soil. And every sabbath day and year human beings can remember that we are made in the image of the God whose name means, simply, "I am" and try just doing that for a day.

We are so very far from where we need to be on both the work and the rest side of this commandment, even if we sit ourselves down in a church pew every Sunday.

The climate crisis is a direct result of our failure to give Sabbath to the land and waters. Our food crisis is a direct result of our failure to serve the animals and plants that have given us life for millennia. Think about the diseases we have wrought just by refusing sabbath to the animals that provide us food. Mad Cow. Bird Flu. Swine Flu—all birthed from the horrors of factory farming.

The physical and moral diseases of our world are a direct result of our failure to see our interactions with others as a form of service and our unwillingness to spend a day apart from the noise and take stock of whether the way we've spent the past six days honors God and really reflects the priorities we profess.

I'm as guilty as anyone here of violating the Sabbath; but every minute brings with it the opportunity to change course. That's literally what repentance means in the Bible—to change direction. Even just one degree of change can, over time, bring us to a vastly different place. For the earth, for its creatures, for our neighbors, for ourselves; let's return to God's covenant and keep the Sabbath. Amen.