

**Sabbath Joy**  
**Chris Currie**  
**Luke 13:10-17**

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Maybe a better sermon title would have been searching for Sabbath or desperately seeking Sabbath. Too late now though. Still, I feel like we think we all think we know what this passage is about and yet when we try to express Sabbath as Jesus intends, we either try to create our own Pharisaical formula or we just toss Sabbath out all together. The mean old rigid synagogue leaders and Pharisees are trying to establish a sense of order and just follow the rules, and here comes Jesus violating the Sabbath, healing an impaired woman, and dismantling all the rules and becoming a first century version of Rebel without a cause, shattering all the religious norms, questioning the existing order, and challenging authority. And maybe there is a thread of that running through this passage, even though I don't think Jesus wants to overthrow the Sabbath and just make it another day like any other day, but rather what I think is happening here is that Jesus is seeking to redefine what we mean by Sabbath and what its purpose is for us and for our life together.

Jesus himself points out the hypocrisy or some of the structural problems to the Pharisees with their interpretation of the Sabbath that they have laws and legal code allowing for getting your ox out of the ditch or caring for livestock but somehow restoring life to another human being or enabling one's neighbor to flourish goes against existing Sabbath code. It's not unlike the priest and Levite who are busy rushing off to lead worship or participate in a religious ceremony which leads them to purposely avoid the person mugged and left beaten on the side of the road. It's not that priest and the Levite are wrong for rushing off to worship or that worship does not matter or is not central to who we are, but it must cohere with loving and seeing to the flourishing of our neighbor or it risks ringing a bit hollow.

Jesus violates and redefines Sabbath. By healing people and doing the work of ministry on the Sabbath day. By setting women and men free from their ailments so that they may stand up straight, restored and resurrected, so that there is no human being outside of his reach who cannot be made whole and given the gift of freedom and gratitude to praise God. And so Sabbath it seems, is not for the pure, the perfect, the upright, or for the flawless, but Sabbath is for the unwell, the impaired, the dead in need of resurrection. Christian writer and speaker Rachel Held Evans in her book *Searching for Sunday*, says it this way: 'We think church (read Sabbath) is for good people, not resurrected people....we Christians don't get to send our lives through the rinse cycle before showing up to church. We come as we are — no hiding, no acting, no fear. We come

with our materialism, our pride, our petty grievances against our neighbors, our hypocritical disdain for those judgmental people in the church next door. We come with our fear of death, our desperation to be loved, our troubled lives, our persistent doubts, our preoccupation with status and image. We come with our addictions—to substances, to work, to affirmation, to control, to food. We come with our differences, be they political, theological, racial, socioeconomic. We come in search of sanctuary, a safe place to shed the masks and exhale. We come to air our dirty laundry before God and everybody because when we do it together we don't have to be afraid.'<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if that is where Sabbath begins, with this free admission that unburdens us from thinking we are in control of our lives or that if we work hard enough at it we can somehow religiously engineer or reengineer ourselves or all the people around us. To keep the Sabbath is our way of letting go of that illusion and offering up ourselves and all that we cannot control to God. This past week I read that Mark Zuckerberg's company Meta is spending billions of dollars creating a virtual world the goal of which is to so entice and immerse you in the world of Meta that you will spend money there and live your everyday life there in a virtual realm distinct from reality. We won't just be glued to our phones 24/7, but we will live our lives through our avatars in the virtual universe 24/7 and where in Zuckerberg's own words we will enter into a time 'when basically immersive digital worlds become the primary way that we live our lives and spend our time.' Meta wants to give us a virtual reality so enticing that we will always be stimulated, entertained, and immersed in the virtual world where we can constantly create whatever reality we want, discount tactile reality together where we can touch, smell, taste, and see in the presence of each other, and Sabbath is a reminder us that such a virtual reality will never make us happy or fill us and give us an identity we long for, but such things come only as a gift from God. The kingdom of God that we glimpse and celebrate is not a virtual reality but a Sabbath reality that reminds us that Christ's coming may violate our norms and our comfortable understanding of reality, but Christ's coming also raises what is dead in us, heals what is hurting in us, and transforms what is impaired in us, raising us up to become the true humanity we are in him. The Sabbath Day that Jesus celebrates causes everyone he encounters to flourish and to become the human being God intended them to be from eternity.

While the original intent of Sabbath in the Jewish tradition was a day of rest in honor of God's work of creation, many rules and codes followed as what could and could not be done as we can see is at issue in our passage today. Perhaps a good rule of thumb comes from writer and pastor Eugene Peterson who reminds us that the Sabbath day should be defined or delineated by praying and playing. According to Peterson, even

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, 'Dirty Laundry' in *Searching for Sunday*, 70-71.

austere and puritanical John Calvin 'led his congregation in prayers in the morning and in the afternoon went among the people of Geneva and played skittles,' a Genevan version of lawn bowling. Peterson reminds us that 'puritan sabbaths that eliminated play were a disaster,' but equally disastrous he warns are 'secular sabbaths that eliminate prayer.'<sup>2</sup> And perhaps what Jesus shows us in his activity on the Sabbath is not by prescribing for us a certain type of human activity, but rather showing us that the Sabbath is a glimpse of our true selves, a glimpse of true reality, a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, where we are fully restored, resurrected, and made whole, and where at the same time, we don't take ourselves too seriously.

There are certain smells, sounds, and tastes that can trigger our memories and transport us back to a childhood place or event or the exact spot at our grandmother's kitchen table. For me, any time I hear cicadas in the summer, the sound means something, whether it is twilight walks in my childhood neighborhood or a specific place or memory where the cicada sounds were identical to what I was hearing in that moment or maybe it was those summer evenings playing outside and trying to will the sun's light from slowly fading into the darkness, so we could have a few more moments of play before going inside. That moment where time and gravity bend and everything seems suspended is what Sabbath is all about. There is a rhythm and rhyme to it, but not a heavy purpose. In the words of theologian Karl Barth, 'its freedom from purpose' allows it to take on more of 'the nature of a game or song than work or warfare.'<sup>3</sup> I think that is what we miss in this passage is there is certain playfulness to what Jesus creates on the Sabbath, first leading a formerly crippled woman to stand up straight and begin praising God, and then at the end of the passage, not only the woman, but the whole crowd end up 'rejoicing at the wonderful things he was doing' (Lk 13:17). The serious and more purposeful people can just stand there and watch in grumbling and disbelief. There is always something that doesn't seem to add up with Jesus though...could Sabbath really just be about praying and playing in a world where our anxiety levels always seem to be running high. Pray and play is gonna fix all that? Or font and table are Jesus' answer to the meaning of life. Really? Baptism and communion or going to help me make sense of my life? Howt is a day for praying and playing going to move the needle or make much of an impact on our world? But Jesus insists playfully and firmly, that there is nothing more or no magic elixir or additional 12-step strategy. As Rachel Held Evans reminds us, Jesus is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, and 'baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 76-77.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/4, 77.

graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair.’<sup>4</sup> To keep the Sabbath is to get caught up praying and playing in the presence of A God who enjoys bringing dead things back to life (including our own hearts), and restoring humanity to flourish in this world.

In his New York Times column this week, David Brooks spend the whole column remembering the Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner who died this week. ‘Christians, he wrote in one novel, should get up every morning, read the Times (or watch the news or look at the world), and ask themselves, ‘Can I believe it all again today.’ If you say Yes 10 days out of 10, Buechner wrote, ‘then you probably don’t know what believing [really] means. But on the days you can Yes, ‘it should be a Yes that’s choked with confession and tears and...great laughter.’<sup>5</sup> There’s that laughter again...not derisive laughter or laughter meant to distract from the importance of faith or Sabbath or our own calling as Christians. But a laughter that gives us permission to take ourselves a little less seriously and God a little more so, in all our praying and in all our playing, until his kingdom comes.

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<sup>4</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> David Brooks, ‘The Man Who Found His Inner Depths,’ in *The New York Times*, August 18, 2022.