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 March 26, 2023

Sabbath And Community
Acts 2:42-47

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in **common**; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[i] to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke **bread at home^[k]** and ate their food with glad and generous^[j] hearts, ⁴⁷ **praising God and having the goodwill** of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Imagine this—it's Friday night, and the sun is just beginning to set.

People quickly finish their shopping, they drive home a little faster, some even hurry by running through the streets.

Why?

It's all so they can get home for the Sabbath,
 before the sun disappears into the night.

Once the sun sets, the day of rest begins.

People will light candles, say prayers, and share food, and fellowship.

Carol Betchel, in her Presbyterian Women study called, *Celebrating Sabbath*, describes being with **a Jewish family on the Sabbath**.

The **mother** lights 2 Sabbath candles

and offers a prayer welcoming the Sabbath to the home.

Then the **father** comes and stands beside her.

Then the **children** come to their parent's side for a blessing.

The priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 is said for each child:

May God bless you and keep you,

May God show you favor and be gracious to you,

May God show you kindness and grant you peace.

Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-2023, pg. 85.

Imagining this Sabbath scene helps us to understand
 the **transformative practices** of our Jewish brothers and sisters,

And it helps us understand the *importance of COMMUNITY* in Sabbath.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent,

And we are *continuing our study of Sabbath*.

We have talked about Sabbath *rest, celebration, freedom, surrender, and today, community*.

Because the truth is, Sabbath is not a solitary or isolated practice.

The practice of God's people celebrating Sabbath *came about in community*—it started when God rained bread from heaven called *manna* for the Israelites as they lived in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt.

God told them to gather enough for each day,

except on the 6th day of the week, when they were to gather twice as much, so they could *rest on the 7th day—the Sabbath*.

Just as *God rested* on the 7th day, after 6 days of Creation.

Sabbath has continued as a *communal practice* for thousands of years, And it is closely connected to the communal life of the *early church*.

Ruth Haley Barton in her book, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, says that Sabbath is like a *gift*—

A beautifully wrapped gift in your living room, and instead of opening it, we just talk about the pretty paper!

She says Sabbath is like a gift that *few people have learned how to open*.

And Sabbath is something far too many people are *trying to do all alone*.

Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 40.

Do you ever think of Sabbath *as a gift*, that we haven't opened?

And do you ever try to *do Sabbath all alone*?

Do you usually think of sharing it in community, or observing it on your own?

For many people, the term Sabbath means something *silent and solitary*.

It means solitude.

And that can definitely be an aspect of celebrating Sabbath.

I know I need that aspect of Sabbath for the health of my soul.

But in the Scriptures Sabbath is also *a COMMUNAL event*—
it was given *to and for God's people*, in community.

Sabbath is *about our relationship with God AND with one another*.

In Leviticus 23:3 it says: *Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, a holy assembly; you shall do no work: it is a Sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements.*

Sabbath was designed to be celebrated in community,
not just each person on their own.

In other words, Sabbath brings us closer to God,
And like the *origami triangle* I made with you earlier,
as we grow *closer to God, we grow closer to one another*.

Sabbath is something to *celebrate together*,
Much like we do today on Sundays in church.

After the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD,
the *synagogue* became the place for Jews to gather on the Sabbath.
They would share worship, study and fellowship together.

We see in the Gospels that *Jesus celebrated the Sabbath* in community.
He healed many people on the Sabbath, in the synagogue,
including the man with the withered hand in Matthew 12,
and the woman crippled for eighteen years, in Luke 13.

When we read about the *earliest Christians* in Acts 2,
we see that they too were constantly gathered in community.
We can assume that they celebrated Sabbath,
because Luke describes them as '*devout Jews*' from every nation,
and their activities of sharing food, prayer, study, and fellowship,
were common Sabbath practices.

Listen to what those earliest Christians did together:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers....All who believed were together and had all things in common... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[k] and ate their food with glad and generous^[l] hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

Can you imagine being part of that community?
 Can you imagine the *life* in it?
 The *inspiration* from it?

How do we carry on that kind of community, today?
 And where do we fall short?

I think that today we so often *avoid* that kind of community.
 We try to do life and Sabbath, *on our own*.
 And in *avoiding one another, we grow further away from God*.

Sadly, ***Sabbath is a countercultural*** practice.
 We do not live in a society that encourages weekly or daily rest.
 We live in a ***workaholic society***, where work and busy-ness is praised,
 and resting is often seen as laziness!
 Unfortunately, people do not and will not respect our Sabbath practices,
 because of the environment in which we live and work.

As Christians celebrating Sabbath,
 we are marching to a ***different drummer***, and we need to be aware of that.
 Sabbath celebration is not easy.
 We ***need help to truly celebrate Sabbath***, and to grow in our Sabbath journey.
 We need **community**.
 We need ***one another, just like we need God***.

Betchel says that much like the key to good real estate
 is “location, location, location”.

The key to celebrating Sabbath is ***“community, community, community”!***
 Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God’s Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-
 2023, pg. 88.

She points out that because Sabbath celebration is so countercultural,
 and not respected by our society,
 we must really ***rely upon one another to survive and thrive*** in Sabbath rest!

I wonder, ***how can you join with others*** to improve your own Sabbath-keeping?
 What helps you thrive in celebrating Sabbath?
 Is it prayer or study with others?
 Is it worship and fellowship together?

I know for me, I need the support of my husband to celebrate Sabbath,
 And I grow from the support of my clergy friends,
 When we gather for a meal, or a walk, or just good conversation on the Sabbath.

Barton says that often the people who are the “nones” (nones) or “dones”
 People who have quit the church,
 are people burned out from the church being too much like the world.
 They hate that church is so busy.
 So overwhelming.
 So stressful.

How can we as a church *encourage our people to celebrate Sabbath rest?*
 How can we hold one another *accountable* to truly rest?

I think it all starts with understanding how much we are *created for community*.
 We believe that our Triune *God IS community*—Father, Son, and Spirit.
 We believe that humans are made to be in community.
 We are *made to help one another*.
 The question is, are we living like that?

Last week we heard the *Exodus 16 manna story*,
 and it's connection to Sabbath rest.
 If we keep reading in Exodus 17,
 we see even more about the power of helping one another in community.
 Moses the leader goes to the top of a hill and raises his staff,
 so that the people of God will have victory in battle.
 But he grows weary.
 When he lowers his arms, the people start to lose.
 So Aaron and Hur decide to come alongside Moses and *hold his arms up for him*,
 helping the people of God win their battle.

Then in *Exodus 18*, Moses' father-in-law Jethro comes to him and urges him to
 seek helpers to judge the problems of God's people.
 Moses was used to acting as judge for every single problem in the community.
 Jethro says, this is not a good plan. You are going to burn out.
 So Moses listens to his wise counsel,
 and *appoints others to help him judge the people*.

We *need God*,
 And we *need community*—
 true community, where we help and support one another,
especially in the area of Sabbath rest.
 Sabbath is about knowing how much we *need God*,
 and how much we *need one another*.

Carol Betchel uses the funny analogy about *how bananas don't grow alone*.
 She quotes the Sesame Street song: 'Cause *bananas can't grow alone*'.

In the same way, we cannot grow alone as Christians,
 we need each other to *survive and thrive!*

Carol Betchel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, PW Horizons Study, 2022-2023, pg. 87.

We need people around us who are also celebrating Sabbath,
 holding good *boundaries*,
 and *delighting in God and in community!*
 If we try to do Sabbath all alone, we will not thrive in our Sabbath practice!

Betchel suggests that we *join small groups* of people who celebrate Sabbath.
 How could we do that, here at FPC?
 How can we hold one another accountable for our Sabbath practices?

On our *women's retreat we set a daily alarm* on our phones to remind us to pray.
 That alarm also reminds us of one another,
 and the lessons we learned on retreat about surrender, and calm.

How can we *hold one another accountable* to Sabbath-keeping?

We know that celebrating Sabbath in community is powerful, and transformative.
 It is life-giving.

In fact, years ago, a researcher discovered that *mortality rates plummet* on the
 Sabbath, and even sick and terminally ill people rallied for the Sabbath day
 because it was a chance to be with family and friends.

<https://signsofthetimes.org.au/2018/10/the-sabbath-community/>

We *need one another, just like we need God*.
 God wants us to *delight* in one another,
 As we delight in the *Sabbath!*

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes the ways in which Western society is increasingly isolated and individualistic. Putnam famously said that “***instead of having friends, we watch Friends on television.***

We no longer truly need each other.

We think we can fulfill all our own needs with the click of a button.

And in many cases, we can.

Because of this, we trade the kind of community that is forged around a Sabbath for a “sense” of community wherein we are not vulnerable to each other in real and tangible ways”.

Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2000, New York.

In his book, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Non-stop World*, AJ Swoboda talks about the kind of community we really need to celebrate Sabbath.

It is a community that is ***created out of love for other people, NOT from shared likes or dislikes.***

Now, think about that for a moment.

Most of the groups we join are made up of like-minded folks,
People who share our likes and dislikes.

But not the church.

The church is ***unified by our love for Jesus Christ,***
and our genuine love for one another—

even people we disagree with, even people we dislike!

Our ***commitment to one another is far deeper*** than our shared desires or wants.

Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Non-stop World by AJ Swoboda (2018: Brazos).

Swoboda says that there is ***a big difference*** between finding a church we like,
and serving the church Jesus calls us to love and lay down our lives for!

Talk about a ***challenging and inspiring*** message!

He says that Sabbath brings us together in ***radical community,***
Around our commitment to God.

Sabbath is designed for ***community,***

And designed for ***belonging.***

We need each other.

So, what about you?

What about ***us, at FPC Matawan?***

How will we celebrate Sabbath--in community?

How will we help one another to *survive and thrive* in our Sabbath journeys?

We need each other.

We *cannot do it all alone*.

May we *reach out in love and support* for one another,

And watch ourselves grow closer and closer to God.

May we *receive the gift* of Sabbath rest,

And *celebrate the Sabbath, together*.

And for the gift of Sabbath, all God's people say together, Amen.