

FINDING REST IN A RESTLESS WORLD

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Americans today live at a hectic and feverish pitch, and I suspect that most of us are not happy about it. It has helped to create a profound sense of disappointment, discontent, and anxiety. If we continue to live at such a pace, the frustrations will only continue and deepen. Christians are as susceptible to the cultural and social pressures that create this anxiety as anyone else. Are we left with no option but to cave in to these pressures, or does scripture help us find an alternative?

One of Paul's most famous and cherished promises is that the "peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus," if we will just "rejoice in the Lord always." To say it in a slightly different way, he asserts in the same passage that we need not "be anxious about anything" if "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving" we "let our requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:4-6). In other words, the implication is that all stress, tension, and anxiety can be eliminated from our lives if we rejoice always and pray. Perhaps even more well-known is Jesus' similar exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34), not to "worry (be anxious) about your life, what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." The antidote to such worries and anxiety comes in several forms. We need to realize, for example, that "life is more than food, and the body more than clothing." It is important to understand that worrying fails to "add a single hour to [our] life span." Remember that God takes care of the "birds of the air" and "lilies of the field," yet we are of much greater value than they. So we shouldn't worry about tomorrow, Jesus says, because "each day has enough trouble of its own." Recognize instead that God knows we have these basic needs

and so to be anxious about them means that we are “of little faith.” Most importantly, Jesus adds to what Paul has already emphasized about the need to rejoice and pray, by calling us to “seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness” with the result that “all these things,” over which we stress and about which we are anxious, “will be given as well.”

You might be thinking at this point, “I agree with all of that, and I know that it is all true. If only it was that simple.” There is no doubt that praying about everything and nurturing the ability to rejoice and be content, like Paul says, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves can reduce, if not eliminate altogether the anxiety and stress we all feel at various times in our hectic lives. But it is impossible to read the details of Paul’s own story not to realize that there were clearly moments in his life characterized by anxiety. Not to mention, we must acknowledge that in his own humanity, Jesus’ ordeal in Gethsemane and on the cross produced an almost unbearable stress and anxiety. If Paul and Jesus could not escape such moments, how is it possible for us? Nevertheless, Jesus tells us that pursuing the Kingdom of God is the means by which worry and anxiety can be successfully overcome. It might be helpful, therefore, to clarify what it means to “seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness,” since therein lies our hope.

While there are undoubtedly many characteristics of God’s kingdom and righteousness that can be said to help us deal with our anxiety, Walter Brueggemann suggests that one important way is to renew our sense of what it means to keep the Sabbath holy (*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*). Attaching such importance to this particular commandment comes as something of a surprise. Brueggemann rightly notes that most Christians do not have a particularly good understanding of, or even attitude toward, keeping the Sabbath holy. Perhaps it is because

they don't want to appear overly puritanical and legalistic. But it is more likely that they think its significance as one of the Ten Commandments pales in comparison to some of the others like those prohibiting idolatry, adultery, murder, covetousness, and stealing. It is, after all, rather simple to "keep the Sabbath." The great majority of American Christians think it is perfectly acceptable to keep the Sabbath rather haphazardly, thinking that it means simply going to church on Sunday rather than to the place where they work Monday through Friday. Somehow, we have come to believe that is an adequate understanding of what the commandment means and requires. But this rather lackadaisical attitude and unreflective response undoubtedly fails to take seriously what is meant by keeping the Sabbath and rendering it "holy." And by neglecting to do so, we deprive ourselves of one crucial opportunity God has given us to seek the kingdom, nurture righteousness, and thereby alleviate the burdensome anxiety we confront.

It seems rather self-evident to say that rest is a cure for anxiety. And while that is true, the fact that anxiety still plagues us indicates that we have yet to learn what real rest means and how to experience it. Furthermore, perhaps most importantly, we have not seen how the Sabbath gives definition to rest and provides the means by which to address our anxiety. Keeping the Sabbath holy is a far more radical concept that addresses anxiety in a way that is much deeper than the rather simplistic and popular notion about avoiding work on Sunday. Brueggemann argues that the Sabbath ordinance reflects the believer's new and unique identity, one that stands in stark contrast to the prevailing cultural identity that creates and sustains anxiety, and becomes one of the hallmarks of righteousness and citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Brueggemann contends that the present system leaves us "endlessly 'rest-less,' inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which may satiate

desire.” The result is that we “want more, have more, use more,” and, most notably, develop “a restlessness that issues inescapably in anxiety.”

There is no simple or one cure to the problem of anxiety. It is not so much a process as it is an attitude that is created, as Paul says, when our minds have been so transformed that we have escaped conformity to the world (Romans 12:1). Keeping the Sabbath holy can be an important part of that process. It is worth noting that only the commandment to keep the Sabbath is connected to holiness. The word means simply to be set apart. Certainly, God is understood to be the perfect expression of that which is holy. But Israel is also described as a holy nation. And, significantly, the Hebrews, themselves, are commanded to be holy: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The Sabbath, therefore, is a fundamentally important example of holiness, something that is set apart, and those who keep the Sabbath, likewise, are holy because they, too, should act like they have been set apart. In contrast to everything around them, they reveal a new reality; a distinct identity; in short, simply, they are different.

None of the other commandments are linked with holiness. Neither idolatry nor the vain use of God’s name nor any of the other commandments have that linkage. There is something unique about the Sabbath, therefore, that relates to holiness, distinguishes it from all the other commandments, and makes it especially important to keep. The fourth commandment bridges the first three about God and the final six about the neighbor. Rest, therefore, defines an essential feature of God, our understanding of and relationship to God, and the way we deal with our neighbor. Resting, therefore, and here is the key idea, is a quality that permeates the whole of existence.

In ancient Israel, keeping the commandment certainly meant resting on the seventh day (for them, that meant from sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday), and, as we all know, it entailed refraining from every conceivable kind of activity. Most Christians understand the Sabbath to mean Sunday, the day they typically don't go to their place of employment. But to emphasize that point is to verge on the legalism that troubles us and most certainly minimizes the Sabbath's real significance. In reality, the Sabbath has little if anything to do with Sunday or any other particular day. Placing the emphasis there is a profoundly shallow understanding of the commandment and completely misses the point as it relates to today's culture. The depth of the meaning and relevance of the fourth commandment is revealed in the relationship it reveals between rest, identity, pursuing righteousness, the Kingdom of God, and holiness, which together create the possibility of freedom from anxiety. That possibility is reflected in the two key words in Brueggemann's argument about the Sabbath: resistance and alternative. To comply with the Sabbath ordinance means to resist the pressure to conform to and identify with contemporary cultural norms that place so much emphasis on the values of doing and acquiring, thereby creating in the process the anxiety that results from our inevitable failure to do and acquire enough. Keeping the Sabbath holy is an alternative to that system that frees us from that anxiety. It means we are different.

To be used for United Methodist Women Sunday

Taken from Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*