

Sabbath

The last month or so has been unusually busy here at Essex Church, with the publication of our new book, as well as our annual report, and a trip to the Unitarian Annual Meetings in the middle of it all... and in the midst of all this business – in a change to the previously advertised theme (it was originally entitled ‘Up the Workers!’, to coincide with May Day, and was all about work) – all I really wanted to think about was rest.

As I mentioned earlier on in the service, I am very fond of the book ‘Sabbath’, by Wayne Muller, and I will draw on it a great deal during the course of this sermon. But first, let’s go right back to the bible, Exodus 20:v8-11:

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

Putting it very simply, the underlying principle of Sabbath is that by saying “no” to some activities, we allow ourselves to say “yes” to other things. In his book, Muller says:

“When we cease our daily labour other things – love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing – can be born in the space created by our rest. Walking with a friend, reciting a prayer, sharing bread and wine with family and neighbours – those are intimate graces that need precious time and attention.”

Jewish texts prohibit thirty-nine specific acts during Sabbath – these are mainly activities that were traditionally associated with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem – including spinning, weaving, hunting, building and transporting. Later, the Sunday Sabbath was officially recognised, when the Emperor Constantine declared it a day of rest for Christians throughout the Roman Empire. In both Judaism and Christianity, however, the Sabbath laws soon became overly legalistic and restrictive. Muller devotes a whole chapter to this unfortunate turn: he calls it ‘*Legalism and the Dreary Sabbath*’. In Judaism, at one time, laughter and play were forbidden on the Sabbath, sucking the joy out of the experience for everyone. In Christianity, there came to be an emphasis on long, arduous, Sunday services, and ever more stringent restrictions to stop anyone from enjoying themselves too much.

Muller quotes Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:

“Lots of people will swear allegiance to the Sabbath and criticise those who do not keep all the Sabbath laws. But their inner experience is not one of spaciousness. It is easy to talk of prohibition, but the point [of the Sabbath] is the space and time created to say yes to sacred spirituality, sensuality, sexuality, prayer, rest, song, delight. It is not about legalism and legislation, but about joy and the things that grow only in time. We need to remove the grimness from it.”

In a similar vein we can recall the words of Jesus as a warning against interpreting the practice in such a way that it suffocates us: *“the Sabbath is made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”*

So, as long as we can dodge these legalistic traps, there’s something of great worth in the tradition of Sabbath-keeping, and I reckon we would do well to reclaim it and make it our own. Here are some words from the Christian writer Kathleen Casey on how we might look at it afresh:

“Sabbath rest can mean different things to different people. It can be four or twenty-four hours. It can be daily, weekly, or monthly. The important thing is to take the time. For the ancient Hebrews it was a time to break the cycle of physical labour and allow for rest. For me and many others today, work is not particularly active, so physical rest is not a break in the cycle of days. I need a mental rest. I need a period of time to stop planning, stop problem solving, stop searching for answers.”

Our modern lives are often so busy and for any number of reasons it can be hard to say “no” to yet another obligation. Society demands ever more of us and there’s a sense that whatever we do it will never be enough. Often our sense of self-esteem and self-worth is entirely dependent on feeling useful or productive. And I’m not just thinking of paid work (for those of us of working age who are lucky enough to have a job in the current climate), but also voluntary, domestic and social responsibilities.

All these forms of work can end in burnout. If we don’t take steps to claim the rest we need, then we might just find that we simply get sick, and are unable to carry on at the high pace that is expected of us. If we are unable or unwilling to resist the

overwhelming pressures of society we may find that our body will simply take the decision for us and refuse to carry on. Wayne Muller, who wrote the book, was working at full stretch running a charity, serving on dozens of committees and projects, seemingly unable to say “no” to anyone, until the point at which he got seriously ill and was hospitalised (in fact he nearly died). This proved to be the catalyst for a lot of changes in his life and gave rise to many of the insights he offers in the book.

I would say that Sabbath-keeping is really countercultural and it would seem that it was ever so. Maybe that’s how it gets its somewhat surprising place up there among all the other commandments in the bible. The pressure to “keep on keeping on” is, and always has been, so great that we humans really need to be commanded to stop once in a while before we’ll sit up and take notice.

For a Unitarian take on the key aspects of the Sabbath I’m going to turn to UU minister Krista Taves:

“So what makes a Sabbath? Is the Sabbath simply about sitting and not doing? Well, it is, and it is also about much more. Taking the Sabbath is a covenant that we make with ourselves, with those we love, and with the God of our understanding. The Sabbath is what some would call ‘holy leisure.’ A good Sabbath has four principles: The cessation of work. Rest. Fellowship. Worship.”

I like the simplicity of that description. Let’s underline those four key principles of a Unitarian Sabbath:

- 1. Stop Work** (i.e. work in its widest sense – even if you love your work, change of scene is beneficial)
- 2. Rest** (i.e. go slow, relax, sleep – don’t go in for strenuous pursuits or other forms of work in disguise)
- 3. Fellowship or Connection** (i.e. spend Sabbath time with people you love)
- 4. Worship or Making Sacred** (i.e. do something which marks the day as special, celebrate what is holy)

Unitarians are free to learn from our forebears, and our brothers and sisters in other faith communities, and make traditions our own so that they work for us... though we always need to be mindful that we don’t do any disrespectful appropriation, or cherry-pick in a way that loses the power of the tradition altogether.

A characteristic I associate with the Jewish Sabbath is that it’s a practice which is very much supported by its central place in the family and the wider religious community. As with so many things in life, it’s harder to do it alone. Which brings us to the little handout in your orders of service... the ‘Sabbath Manifesto’ (see www.sabbathmanifesto.org).

Tristan [Jovanović] brought my attention to this project, and we ran something about it in the newsletter earlier in the year, and though you can read more about it on this yellow sheet in your own time I’ll give you a very potted history. This project was initiated by a group of secular Jewish artists attempting to renew the Sabbath for themselves (though they welcome people of all faiths and none to join in). They’ve set up a website, sabbathmanifesto.org, on which they have posted ten principles which they suggest you explore and observe to help you take a Sabbath rest in the modern world. They positively encourage people to interpret and play with the principles in a way that works for them. In their promotion to date, they’ve put quite a lot of emphasis on the first principle, ‘Avoid Technology’, and held a “day of unplugging” back in March when they particularly encouraged people to turn off their phones and log out of email, facebook, twitter etc. for 24 hours.

I was intrigued enough to give it a go. The challenge of avoiding technology was especially challenging for me, as one who practically lives on the internet, but for that very reason I suspected it would be worthwhile. I must admit I’ve been a bit variable in my observance so far, but on those occasions where I have managed a full 24 hours (using the Jewish Sabbath, from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday) I have found it to be a very good experience which completely changed the quality of the day – I spent the time reading, cooking, and pottering in the garden – and was able to completely forget my the ever-looming to-do list for a while. I’m still trying to make little adjustments to make it work better for me but the experiment is ongoing. I’d like to invite you to consider giving the practice of Sabbath-keeping a go yourself and maybe even set your intentions right here and now. Consider now what might work for you...

How long could you realistically imagine carving out for Sabbath time in your life – a day a week? Half a day? An evening? Or, given the particulars of your life, would it be more feasible to do something little and often – an hour a day set aside? Or alternatively a weekend each month?

For you, what would it mean to stop working? Would it be as simple as unplugging the computer, or switching off the phone, and walking away? Putting all your paperwork back in a box until Monday? Or do you have domestic responsibilities that you couldn’t set aside without getting someone else to cover (for example, getting a babysitter, or respite care). Is that something that you could imagine doing?

What would it mean for you to rest? Once you’ve stopped working, what will you do with that time? Is it as basic as needing more sleep: having a lie-in, or an afternoon nap, or an early night? Are you going to get outside into nature and have a walk? Will you put your feet up and read a book, do some knitting or a crossword?

What would it mean for you to connect with loved ones? Could you get into the habit getting together with friends or family for a simple gathering? Or maybe keep in touch with old friends with a letter written in longhand – a suitably ‘slow’ form of communication? Or even set the intention to cultivate new friendships and reach out to form new connections.

How would you make it sacred? This is something that diverges from the more strictly secular rules of the ‘Sabbath Manifesto’ and returns to its religious roots. Could you introduce some form of ritual into your Sabbath time: light candles and pray at the start and end of the Sabbath day, or spend some time in silent meditation?

And finally, who else could you do this with? As with so many practices I reckon it helps if you’re not doing it alone. Are there perhaps friends or family members you could share this practice with – even if it’s just to check in with each other about how it’s going and compare notes – or maybe you could even make a habit of getting together for a Sabbath meal?

I’d be very interested to hear of your intentions and indeed how you get on with it if you do give it a go. To close, just a few more words from Krista Taves:

“Keeping the Sabbath says something about us. It says something about our values, about our self-worth, and about our way of being in the world. It says that we take seriously the covenant of care. Take care of yourselves. Take care of each other. Find a time to withdraw, even if for a short time, from the demands of your days. Rest, as fully as possible. Be with those you love. And celebrate the holy any way you can.”

Amen