
The View from Blackwater Bluff — Charles LaFond

How can we recover the Sabbath in our lives?

Sabbath was designed to be a gift from God, one that God taught by example in the Creation story when God rested on the seventh day. As a diocesan theologian and priest, I am interested in the stewardship of rest and renewal. I wonder what it might take for us to return to a time in which we actually keep the Sabbath "holy."

Sabbath is part of the stewardship of our lives because without Sabbath- we become exhausted shells – panting and hollow, useless and unhappy. In New England, many of our forebears were Puritans whose theology of Sabbath was in constant battle with the "Protestant work ethic," by which salvation was achieved from an angry God rather than accepted as a gift from a loving God. The Nazis said, "Work will set you free." That was a lie then and is a lie now.

To recover the Sabbath, we need to continue in our recovery *from* certain aspects of our Protestant and Catholic roots.

Our Catholic heritage (through the letters of St. Paul, for example) teaches that the church is the "body of Christ," even while knowing it has scars and pockmarks from past diseases and self-inflicted wounds. Augustine's theology of depravity, which taught that we are basically evil and only streaked with good, is well on its way out. We no longer define ourselves as depraved, but rather as the beloved of God. We are basically good and streaked with evil. This healing of our theology has restored the church, the body of



Christ, to its original beauty – a theological makeover, if you will. Vatican II affirmed that the Church is the People of God, underscoring the value of the whole body of believers.

But recovery from our Protestant roots will take more time. The Calvinism that formed the Protestant work ethic undermined any view of us as God's beloved children and it also undermined the making of Sabbath.

Nevertheless, soon we will be planning summer vacations. Families will make visits to "shrines" throughout the country – Nashville, Disneyworld (my personal plan), Williamsburg, Gettysburg, and other of our nation's "holy sites." We mark each place with an event and that place becomes pregnant with meaning and nostalgia.

But in the scriptures, God chooses first to mark a *time*, not a place, as holy. As Abraham Heschel points out, instead of designating a

mountain or an altar as holy ("qadosh" in Hebrew), we read, "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." No place or thing was endowed with the word "holy." The label "holy" was reserved for a time – Sabbath time.

When scripture and early church writers call us to be "in the world and not of the world," the world they refer to is not the creation – which, after all, was created "very good." The world to be avoided was the human tendency to conspicuous consumption, self-anesthetizing workaholism, the wasted noise of busyness, and the frantic lust for power and control. In our desire for more, more, more - we work harder and harder and harder – longer and longer and longer. We have lost the stewardship of rest that so informed our ancestors' experience of God, life and each other. Now we use Sabbath for the recovery of strength for more work.

When people come to Blackwater Bluff, my farmhouse in Webster, they remark at the "restfulness of it." They say it has a gift of sleepiness – and they are right. There are pillows everywhere and blankets and wood stoves and cozy places to take naps. The house is silent and the stars are bright. As I get older I am giving up the desire to be important and am taking on the desire to be rested. Learning to make a Sabbath - to be good stewards of rest - is a process; and I think it is one which could transform our church and our lives.

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