

God of work and rest, teach us to listen to your voice and follow your example with every breath of our lives. Amen.

Last week I spent a few days at one of our ELCA camps in northern Minnesota. I first experienced [Wilderness Canoe Base](#) when I went on a trip to the Boundary Waters with my high school youth group.

I fell in love.

As many of you know, I ended up spending several summers in northern Minnesota, working at [a different ELCA camp](#), leading and coordinating Boundary Waters canoe trips.

There is something life-giving about the north woods to me.

The day last week that I arrived at Wilderness Canoe Base, the temperature was in the 90s and it was sunny and gorgeous. I sat out on the deck of the cabin where I was staying, which almost hangs out over the lake, it's built so close to the edge of a cliff. The only noises were the birds and the bugs and the wind, and the occasional motor of the pontoon boat that the staff at the camp uses to get back and forth from the mainland to the islands, where most camp programming takes place.

It's a good thing that I enjoyed the sunshine that first day, because it rained most of the rest of the time I was there!

But it was still gorgeous. Watching lightning over the lake – noticing how the colors of the trees changed when they were wet – almost tripping over the frogs that came out to play in the puddles.

By the time I needed to leave camp to make the long drive back home, I had remembered all the reasons I fell in love with the north woods to begin with.

They are peaceful and beautiful, and – most importantly – I feel close to God when I am there.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy includes the commandment that I tend to find the most difficult one to keep. But last week I remembered what makes this commandment so important.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work, and neither shall any person or animal in your household. (Deut 5:12-14)

So many things clamor for our attention – work, family, household responsibilities, second jobs, yardwork – it is easy to forget that God calls us to intentional times of rest.

Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal – those commandments aren't too hard for most of us. But honoring the Sabbath can be difficult. So let's talk about it.

There are two primary reasons given for the existence of this commandment.

First, God rested, and so people also ought to rest. At the very beginning of the Bible, we hear about God creating the world, with different things spoken into being each day for six days.

But by the seventh day, God had finished creating everything. And so, after a full week of work, God rested. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, and declared it a day of rest. (Genesis 2:2-3)

As God's followers, we are called to follow God's example as closely as we can. So, one reason to observe the Sabbath is to be like God, who created it, and was the first to use it as a day of rest.

God dedicated one full day of the week to rest, so we should too. That's simple enough.

The second reason behind the Sabbath is the one described in today's reading, and it's a bit more complicated. God's people once were slaves in the land of Egypt. In thanksgiving for God liberating them from slavery, God's people are to set aside one day a week to honor God's work in granting them freedom – so they are to do no work on the Sabbath.

As we well know, many of God's people have been enslaved in times and places other than ancient Egypt. But this commandment was first given to God's people shortly after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. That experience was fresh in their minds.

In thanksgiving for God's actions in the Exodus story, the Hebrew people set aside one day each week to honor the life God had redeemed. The Sabbath was a celebration of their freedom, and a show of appreciation for the work God had done on their behalf.

God's people have been freed.

And so we show appreciation by observing the Sabbath.

The logic should be familiar to Lutherans. We believe that we have been saved by God's grace, through faith and not through our own works. There is no need for us to do good works in order to gain God's favor.

And yet, in thankful response to God's work on our behalf, we choose to follow the Law that God has given. We try our best to live as God wants us to do, as our way of showing thanks for God's grace.

These two concepts, held side by side, were the basis of Martin Luther's theology and of the Protestant Reformation.

Lutherans are guided by the instruction of Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

In other words, according to Ephesians and Martin Luther and the book of Deuteronomy, we aren't commanded to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy as some kind of self-improvement technique. Observing the Sabbath is a way to show respect, honor, and appreciation to God.

Taking a weekly day of rest gives us the freedom to worship God, and to honor all of God's creation – including ourselves.

A day of rest helps us to spend time doing life-giving things.

As Jesus tells us, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" – which is to say, observing the Sabbath does us good – in body, mind, and soul. (Mark 2:27)

That's what I felt I was doing last week at Wilderness Canoe Base. Honoring God, and all of God's creation, including myself.

I was showing appreciation for God's liberating work by enjoying the luxury of time away from work.

And it's so much easier to do that when I'm a 9-hour drive from the office, in a place with no internet or cell phone service, on an island with no roads and no cars, and limited running water, and very few other signs of civilization as we know it!

It can be a lot harder to honor the Sabbath at home.

Most of us have spent our childhood in school every weekday, and our adulthood at work every weekday. We could take a day on the weekend to devote to Sabbath-keeping.

But often, we end up taking on a second job, or going back for more school, or we spend the time doing housework or yardwork or other things that we do not find to be life-giving. We shuttle kids to soccer practice and swim lessons, which may feel like Sabbath to them, but perhaps not to parents and caregivers.

Sometimes we have no choice – we can't make ends meet without a second or third job.

Sometimes we can't find another way to do it – our weekday responsibilities leave no time for keeping house except on the weekends.

Sometimes we know that our kids will not get to enjoy the activities they love, and even need, unless we sacrifice our free time for them.

Sometimes our society is unfair because it is so difficult for many of us to find ways to honor the Sabbath and still get by in life.

When we can't get out of this cycle of work, chores, and obligations, to find some time for rest, we're no better off than the slaves were in Egypt – or at least we're no better off than people in Luther's day.

According to one study, the average worker in the US today spends more time working each year than the average European peasant in the 13th or 14th centuries – to the tune of 200-400 hours per year.

<https://www.theladders.com/career-advice/the-average-american-worker-puts-in-more-hours-than-a-medieval-peasant>
http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1599&context=br_rev

If you figure a 40-hour work week, that's an extra 5-10 weeks of work that we do each year compared to a medieval peasant.

The same study also notes that, given a choice between more pay or more leisure, Americans almost always choose more pay.

This is not what God wants for us.

Whether it's the fault of our competitive capitalist society, or our own internal ambitions, or some combination of factors, the way that we are living our lives today rarely allows time for true Sabbath.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John (10:10) that he came so that we can have life, and have it abundantly! Not in scarcity or fear, not in drudgery or in suffering. God created us to be very good! (Genesis 1:31) And we are meant to have life that is vibrant, fulfilling, abundant!

And in order to do that, we need to take the command from Deuteronomy seriously: Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work, and neither shall any person or animal in your household. (Deut 5:12-14)

How do we do that?

For starters, we can take a page out of the playbook of Jesus and the disciples.

They were going for a walk on the Sabbath, because they wanted to. And they got hungry. And so they picked some grain to eat. It's important to note: they weren't stealing. This was grain that farmers would have left on the edges of their fields for travelers to eat on their way past.

They were hungry, so they ate. They wanted to travel, so they did.

It reminds me of life in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. We would always encourage campers to leave behind their watches or any other timekeeping devices when they ventured into the wilderness. While on trail, you eat when you're hungry, drink when you're thirsty, sleep when you're tired, and go adventuring whenever possible!

We can honor God by doing life-giving things on the Sabbath.

Enjoy the goodness of creation, and praise God for it!

Sing and pray and worship with a community of believers.

Celebrate the freedom that God has granted us from all kinds of oppressive forces!

The Sabbath was made for humankind.

And it is good for us to honor it.

For your spiritual practice this summer, I invite you to find ways to rest, worship, celebrate our freedom in Christ, and enjoy the goodness of creation! In short, let's observe Sabbath together. For the sake of the health of our body, mind, and spirit, and in Jesus' name. Amen.