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Ted Goshorn Date

The Effect of Regular Sabbath Practice on the Members of Eastman First United Methodist Church

By

Ted Goshorn
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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Susan Hylen
Project Consultant

_____

Jennifer Ayres
Director of DMin Program

Abstract

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By Ted Goshorn

Sabbath is God's design for how humanity is to spend its time, with theological, ethical, and sociological implications. That is the focus of this doctoral project, grounded in the application of research at a local United Methodist Church. The nature of sabbath itself, from a theological and biblical standpoint, is explored, along with standards for its practice. The paper then explores the application of that research on a particular congregation. Reflections and future directions conclude this paper's content.

The Effect of Regular Sabbath Practice on the Members of Eastman First United Methodist Church

By

Ted Goshorn

Berry College, B.A., 2006
James Madison University, M.Ed., 2009
Emory University, Candler School of Theology, M.Div., 2015

Project Consultant: Susan Hylen, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

My young family faced a monumental shift in the summer of 2012. At the end of May, I would leave a comfortable position at Mercer University to begin a new career in ministry. That shift involved a new role, pastor of three small United Methodist churches, and pursuit of the Master of Divinity degree at Emory University. As I made this shift, we would continue to reside in Macon, my wife retaining her job teaching at a local middle school, and continue to own our house and raise our two year–old son there. My new roles required significant new weekly travel as I would commute to Milledgeville for church and Atlanta for school. Months earlier, we had chosen our way into this shift aware of the significant challenges ahead but, in May of 2012, facing the coming reality, it all seemed overwhelming. We wondered how we would manage it all.

That same month, we heard a sermon on sabbath practice at Martha Bowman United Methodist Church, where we attended. The preacher, Jay Harris, noted the call of sabbath in scripture to put time for God and for ourselves first, above the priorities and obligations of work, and to trust that if we did so, God would provide the time to meet all the demands we faced. Sitting at our kitchen table later that week, Dana (my wife) and I decided to try out this call to sabbath practice. We would each cease all work Friday at dinner time, not to resume until we rose to go to church on Sunday morning. We decided we would trust God, just as the sermon had said, and see how we fared.

Now, nine years later, we have a firmly rooted familial practice that has never let us down. We have learned first-hand how sabbath countermands the tendency of work to devour all

time, as Karl Barth notes.[1] Without sabbath practice, work creates "the illusion that all time is for working,"[2] leaving little to no time to put God and self first. Sabbath, conversely, aligns time and priorities not only putting God first but also binding families closer together, placing work more often as subordinate to the demands of God and family.

Throughout the research and implementation of this project, work's tendency to devour and the illusion that all time is for work spoke powerfully to the very nature of work as experienced not only by my family but also by the lives of families in the church I serve. Our family experience and that of families at Eastman First United Methodist Church (UMC) motivated the choice of sabbath practice as a topic to pursue for this Doctor of Ministry project. The resultant research led me to discover that sabbath has implications both broader and deeper than I had known, even considering our years of experience as a family. My passion for this topic grew and fueled the work chronicled below.

At Eastman First UMC, families said they wanted lifestyles that are less busy and more focused on their highest priorities of God and family. This message came through family units of every age complaining about their busy lifestyles with a certain resignation that life was just that way. That complaining included the recognition that their obligations—those things that caused their busy lifestyles—often diminished or rendered null their actual priorities for life. This was especially true among retirees, who found themselves just as busy, if not even more busy, than when they were part of the workforce.

This Doctor of Ministry project finds its genesis in the desire to help these church families, of every age and style, live a life with greater congruency between their stated priorities

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[1] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* Vol. III: The Doctrine of Creation, Part One (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 214.

[2] Angela Carpenter, "Exploitative Labor, Victimized Families, and the Promise of the Sabbath," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 1 (2018): 82.

for God and family and their actual lifestyle. This project designed a response to those desires by researching and then implementing a customized approach to sabbath practice based on the particularities of this congregation. After teaching about sabbath and simulating rest, families were asked to commit to a sabbath plan they themselves designed within certain parameters set by this project. The consequence of practicing sabbath for those families who committed to such a plan was a reshaping of life around central priorities of family and faith relationship. Once aware of the benefits, about a third of family units across the church chose to commit to a plan.

Those families who did not commit to a sabbath plan revealed three unforeseen challenges to the establishment of sabbath practice: participants were too confused, too busy, or too achievement-oriented. Their experiences, especially those of being too achievement-oriented, revealed imperfections in the conception of the project and areas for growth in the future. The experience of working with the membership of Eastman First UMC reveals what this paper will illuminate: that sabbath practice, a robust biblical concept that forms an ethic for living, establishes the desired outcomes for those who choose to practice it but that, more often, the all-consuming, "devouring,"[3] nature of work inhibits understanding and adoption of this spiritual discipline.

To begin, this paper opens with a look at the nature of sabbath itself: its theological, ethical, and modern implications. First reviewed is *The Sabbath* by rabbi and mid-twentieth century scholar Abraham Heschel; the gold-standard on this topic. This paper then looks at the conception of sabbath from an ethical standpoint based on popular and scholarly literature and concludes with the implications of sabbath practice on the gig-economy and modern workforce. Attention then turns to the application of these principles at Eastman First UMC, including

[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* 214.

ethnographic research done with the church and the development of a two-pronged approach to the project design; namely, informing and forming about sabbath practice. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the implementation phase and yet provided unique opportunity for the study of sabbath practice during the period of quarantine common across the country, including here in Dodge County, during the spring of 2020. This report then concludes with the results of the project innovation and concluding reflections upon those results.

ABOUT SABBATH

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SABBATH

Abraham Heschel, a rabbi and scholar from the mid-century twentieth century, challenged my personal conception of sabbath, revealing it as oversimplified compared with the biblical witness. Heschel opens his magisterial work *The Sabbath* comparing space to time, stating that "[t]he meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space."[4] By space, Heschel means the things with which humanity busies itself, such as "the manufacture of tools, the art of spinning and farming, the building of houses, the craft of sailing–all this goes into spatial surroundings."[5] Time, as opposed to space, is the "heart of existence,"[6] where "the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord."[7] In other words, by orienting life around time, humans move away from the natural propensity to fill space by engaging in work and other achievement-oriented activities and into a time-oriented life that celebrates and revels in the divine-human relationship. For Heschel, this is

[4] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1951), 10.
[5] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 4.
[6] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 3.
[7] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 3.

the basis not only of sabbath but of spiritual existence as a whole, making sabbath not only a sacred interlude but absolutely central to human existence. "Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time,"[8] for "[t]he higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information but to face sacred moments."[9] For Heschel, sabbath converts humanity, via spiritual means, from a spatial existence to a time-based existence where they live life via sabbath practice, just as God has intended life to be lived.

The move to create sacred moments through sabbath might seem to suggest sabbath's central focus to be rest and relaxation between periods of activity, with such activity remaining the center of human existence. Heschel, however, contests this definition of sabbath—the one I carried into this project. Sabbath merely as relaxation or rest from labor is a perversion of the intention of sabbath, for sabbath is an end unto itself, "the climax of living."[10] This means not only ceasing to work but also ceasing to think about work, ceasing any activity that would be understood as labor in order to enter into sabbath to "learn…the art of surpassing civilization."[11] God created "tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose"[12] on the seventh day, the apex of the creation narrative, a moment in which ceasing from work does more than simply restore: it declares that God created the world and that the world will continue without the help of humanity.[13] In doing so, this sabbath moment causes humanity to move from an existence centered on its own creativity and power (an idolatrous construct), to a time-centered existence,

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[8] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 6.
[9] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 6.
[10] Heschel, *Sabbath,* 14.
[11] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 27.
[12] Heschel, *Sabbath*, quoting *Genesis rabbah.*
[13] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 13.

focused instead on God's creativity and power. Such a shift in focus leads humanity to release its need to control and create and instead to realize that God created humans to enjoy this life.

For Heschel, placing sabbath, rather than activity, at the center of existence leads to enjoying this life, which leads to freedom. Sabbath is freedom for humanity; freedom to enjoy this life and freedom from the ways of labor and toil that wear down on humanity. Heschel says that sabbath, rather than being a day "to remember sins, to confess, to repent, or even to pray for relief of anything we need,"[14] should be a day "for praise…[;] fasting, mourning, [and] demonstrations of grief are forbidden."[15] The sabbath is to be about joy, "a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, a symphony for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above."[16] God teaches, then, through the sabbath about the nature of life God designed for humanity; a life lived in freedom realized through sabbath. Quoting twentieth-century pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christian ethicist Christine Pohl makes this point, noting that, "our life is not only travail and labor; it is also refreshment and joy in the goodness of God. We labor, but God nourishes and sustains us."[17] For both Bonhoeffer and Pohl, congruent with Heschel, joy in God and God's created order is the meaning of sabbath.

If sabbath means enjoying the passage of time as God has ordained it, and if sabbath leads the practitioner to a deeper awareness of who God is, sabbath can rightfully be understood as a form of prayer.[18] Sabbath attunes the practitioner to God, like any other form of prayer,

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[14] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 30.
[15] Heschel, *Sabbath,* 30.
[16] Heschel, *Sabbath*, 31–32.
[17] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 68, in Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 57.
[18] Frances Rice McCormick," Sabbath Rest: A Theological Imperative According to Karl Barth," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1994): 546.

tuning the ear to hear from God.[19] Such listening includes the practice of learning to say no to things in life, resisting the temptation always to do more and be more to more people.[20] Resistance to doing and being more should come to the practitioner through the regular practice of sabbath, according to Michael Fishbane, an American scholar of Judaism. This saying no, this resisting the temptation always to do more and be more, leads to what he terms "divestment."[21] Rather than carrying the negative connotations of stopping work, or of being lazy, as some are wont to think of sabbath, divestment means deliberately letting go of those things humanity ascribes to God that are not of God, those activities and obligations and commitments that draw away from the ability to hear God and rest in the centrality of that relationship. Sabbath, then, corresponds to prayer, as noted above, where humanity can hear from God "the value that the earth is a gift of divine creativity, given to humankind as a sacred trust."[22] Ceasing work becomes nothing less than a celebration "of the completion of creation,"[23] just as Heschel had noted, with the creation of tranquility on the seventh day serving as the apex or capstone of the created work.

As the apex of creation, sabbath also reminds humanity of who created and who is created, a fact that should lead to further divestment, as Fishbane put it. Without such understanding from sabbath practice, the formula becomes reversed, with humans idolatrously creating on their own, especially creating a sense of security.[24] Humanity's scramble for security does "incredible amounts of personal damage" as humans "manipulate and exploit other people

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[19] McCormick, "Sabbath Rest," 549.
[20] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 134.
[21] Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 125.
[22] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement,* 126.
[23] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement,* 126.
[24] Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 31.

in order to get ahead, to climb the corporate ladder, so that we can be more secure,"[25] according to theologian Marva J. Dawn. The sabbath is the antidote to this laborious work, a "day to cease striving…to no longer have all the answers or quick solutions, to be in charge of our time and schedules, to possess controlling authority, or to find easy gratification. What a relief it is not to have to try and be God, nor to create our future, nor to establish our security."[26] For Dawn, echoing Heschel's understanding of sabbath as reorienting humanity toward living a life centered in God's creation design, sabbath removes idolatrous impulses to play God and, instead, teaches faith in God's provision. Dawn notes that "[o]ne of the reasons the sabbath is so freeing is that when we cease working, we dispense with the need to create our own future."[27] Sabbath is relief from the normal human impulses to create, to secure, and to possess. In providing such relief, it teaches rest in God not just from the wearing down of labor but in faith that God will provide and in teaching that security belongs to God, not to humans. This reverses the typical human order, marked by those natural human impulses, to the created order, with humans as the created and God as the creator.

Understanding sabbath in this way of relief, freedom, prayer, and as the apex of creation, gave my preconceived notions of sabbath greater depth and breadth. Sabbath, rather than simply a break from labor, reorients life to its own centrality in God. Rather than an antidote for the ways in which labor wears down the human spirit, sabbath serves as the beginning point of a life lived in joy; the reorientation of the spirit of humanity to the joy and peace of God and to trust in God as the creator by understanding the self as the created. Yes, it provides rest and recovery, but this is secondary to the divine purpose of instilling within humanity the harmony that should

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[25] Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly,* 31.
[26] Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 30–31.
[27] Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 28.

define it, a harmony gained from dedicating a day to live as God has ordained time and placing that day at the center of human existence. To get there, humanity must move away from an existence oriented around the concerns of space, of enlarging its territory, of increasing its share, of creating, and toward an existence oriented around time, to resting in God's ordering of time as God's created beings, thereby finding the desired harmony and repose.

Ethical Implications of Sabbath

Scholars witness to sabbath not only as central to human existence but as also having ethical implications; a reality first awakened in me by current popular authors. Two contemporary pastors, C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, writing a guide to organic church growth, note the ethical implications of sabbath practice. For them, sabbath causes the practitioner to shift from a survivalist and individualistic mindset to a compassionate concern for the other.[28] Sabbath practice "deflates the anxious and destructive pride that supposes we have to 'do it all' by ourselves and through our own effort."[29] It also teaches that what God has provided to each is enough, that what provision exists is God's first and is to be shared, and to trust that God will provide.[30] In this way, sabbath teaches an ethic of living that is markedly different to that of a world quick to steal and destroy in a self-centered attempt to survive.

Modern scholars bring depth to this ethical side of sabbath. According to Protestant theologian Jan Lochman, sabbath is "the basis of Christian ethical thought."[31] Similar to Dawn's understanding of sabbath as relief from striving for security, Lochman notes that sabbath invites

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[28] C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 138.
[29] Smith and Pattison, *Slow Church,* 138, an uncited quotation of Norman Wirzba.
[30] Smith and Pattison, *Slow Church*, 142–44.
[31] Jan Milič Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom: The Ten Commandments and Christian Ethics,* trans. David Lewis (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 67.

the practitioner away from "an ethos of anxiety"[32] because it reminds and cultivates a sense of reliance upon God. Labor without rest and without the perspective sabbath provides leads ultimately to seeing security and, indeed, the self, as actualized by industriousness and success. According to Old Testament professor Ryan Bonfiglio, who elaborated on this point in a lecture during a Doctor of Ministry course at Candler, a day set aside for rest primarily reminds the human that "we are not in control" and that we "do not matter as much as we think."[33] Such a sobering reality not only humbles; it also liberates. Lochman notes, "the Fourth Commandment prevents us from absolutizing our achievements and from the blindness and servitude to which this leads."[34] Through releasing the anxiety produced by achievement and industriousness, sabbath teaches an ethic of humility, understanding the self as created in light of its creator.

Sabbath's instruction in humility augments the ethical side of sabbath by leading the practitioner to understand the natural limits of human activity. For Karl Barth, "a being can only be free when it can determine and limit its activity."[35] A life lived without sabbath leads to a life lived in pursuit of limitless activity, believing that such activity secures life and serves to glorify the self, just as one would glorify a god. The tendency of work is to "devour,"[36] and so sabbath must serve as an antidote to the very nature of work. This, however, is a consequence of sabbath rather than its point, for sabbath, according to Barth and in line with Heschel, is a beginning and an end unto itself.[37] That beginning and end, found in creation just as with Heschel, also reminds and grounds the identities of humanity with God rather than in its labors. For Barth, this is

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[32] Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom*, 68.
[33] Ryan Bonfiglio, "The Sabbath and Social Justice," *DM 722: Issues in Old Testament Interpretation* (class lecture, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, October 23, 2019).
[34] Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom,* 72.
[35] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 215.
[36] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 214.
[37] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 98.

central to understanding sabbath, and indeed is a definition of sabbath's inherent beginning and ending, because an identity grounded in labor can lead only to an ethic defined by the self and thus lead to injustice and exploitation, rather than an ethic of life defined by God that leads to justice. That is because, for Barth, sabbath fundamentally teaches love.[38] It does so through its establishment of limits. "Love has a definite, limited object. Love is a relationship which is itself limited and defined by this object. It is in this way that God loves. And the reason why He refrains from further activity on the seventh day is that He has found the object of His love and has no need of any further works."[39] Thus, Barth says as noted above, "a being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity,"[40] just as God demonstrated on the seventh day of creation. Humanity should limit its activity not only in light of God's love for the created but also out of humanity's desire to return such love. Without setting such limits, humans are not free given the nature of labor to bind humanity to constant and frenetic activity that inevitably produces anxiety.

For Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, the ethic of anxiety, formed by the devouring nature of labor and grounded in a futile and idolatrous search for security and limitlessness, is nothing less than enslavement.[41] He pulls this powerful word from the story of the Exodus. Brueggemann compares and contrasts Pharaoh's unceasing desire for bricks, which he links to modern economic principles of production and consumption, to God's desire for humans to rest, recovering their full sense of self, their identity as God's beloved. The Ten Commandments, coming in the narrative of the Exodus on the heels of the flight from slavery

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[38] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 215.
[39] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* 215.
[40] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* 215.
[41] Walter Brueggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 6.

into freedom, tells this tale of release from bondage. Sabbath invites all who follow its practice, beginning with the freed Israelite slaves,

> to awareness that life does not consist in frantic production and consumption that reduces everyone else to threat and competitor. And as the work stoppage permits a waning of anxiety, so energy is redeployed to the neighborhood. The odd insistence of the God of Sinai is to counter *anxious productivity* with *committed neighborliness.*[42]

For Brueggemann, this concept of neighborliness articulates the ethical result of the practice of sabbath, as it releases practitioners from anxiety born of unceasing work. Neighborliness, for Brueggemann, is the opposite of productivity, for sabbath has the power to transform how a community sees itself and its relation to the world around it. The practice of sabbath promotes a reimagining of the world, in line with its creator, of "all of social life away from coercion and competition to compassionate solidarity… [S]abbath is not simply a pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms…[S]abbath is an invitation to receptivity, an acknowledgement that what is needed is given and not to be seized."[43] Justice comes through in just this way as humanity approaches itself and the created order not to seize but to give, not to force but to invite, not to run at a break-neck pace but instead to pause and rest. This is the formulation given in Exodus, where the Fourth Commandment explicitly links the command to rest to the created order (Exod. 20:8-11); a created order Brueggemann defines by an ethic of neighborliness.

Sabbath's call to neighborliness as the antidote to the ethic of anxiety is congruent with the ethic Barth describes and others, like Lochman, elaborate to clarify; namely, that any definition of sabbath must include its impact for justice. According to Old Testament scholar

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[42] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 28.
[43] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 45.

Patrick Miller, the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5:12-17 specifically points the justice provision inherent to sabbath.[44] In fact, this ethic, this need to cease work and rest to promote God's justice, comes quite close to a natural law for the ethical treatment of the vulnerable in society.[45] Miller states, "[t]he keeper of the Sabbath…brings one's life into 'harmony with the intrinsic rhythm of the cosmos, instituted by divine fiat and observed [first] by God.' It is rather surprising that the Sabbath Commandment is where one may come closest to a kind of 'natural law ' operating in the Ten Commandments."[46] This natural law comes through in the rhythm of life marked by time spent in work and rest, time defined by the centrality of sabbath rather than the centrality of labor, which should lead to justice for the community. Miller states that "the commandment and the principle it evokes anticipate the possibilities of oppressive toil and economic bondage and cut them off at the pass, building into the 'routines' of life just and neighborly treatment of those vulnerable to mistreatment, intended or otherwise."[47] This comes through in Deuteronomy not only in its explicit connection to the Exodus narrative, but also in its command to allow slaves and animals to rest, noting that all of creation should be defined by a work-rest rhythm with sabbath at its center.

Where labor produces a natural anxiety born of the need to create, achieve, and be limitless, sabbath produces a rest that leads to neighborliness, the just treatment of one's community, and the vulnerable of society. To pursue limitlessness or to focus on achievement and production leads inevitably to entanglement with the devouring impulse of work always to do more and be more to more people. The anxiety produced by such ceaseless work takes over

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[44] Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 134.
[45] Miller, *Ten Commandments,* 126-127.
[46] Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 126–127, quoting Jon Levinson, "The Theologies of Commandment in Biblical Israel," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 32.
[47] Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 134.

"at the point where planning assumes the perverted form of a desperate and ultimately enslaving effort to make ourselves secure independently,"[48] says Lochman, echoing Brueggemann. Sabbath teaches its ethic for just treatment of neighbors and the vulnerable through releasing humans from such anxiety. The biblical witness of the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy makes the connection between that release from anxiety and focus on neighborliness by directly linking sabbath practice with rest in the divinely created order of limited and ceased work and with the need for those with power to give rest to those without, as Deuteronomy's version of the Fourth Commandment notes.[49] The practice of that rest through sabbath ultimately grounds humanity in its identity as God's created and beloved, made for limits and the cessation of labor, rather than an identity defined by the enslavement of work and achievement.

When placing together the ethical implications of sabbath with its design for rest and reorientation of life to center around God, sabbath becomes a robust ethic for living as God designed for humanity at the outset of creation. Sabbath can teach humanity not only about humanity's divine purpose, not only about its divine identity, but also about the responsibility humans have to each other, and the way in which work—unceasing, limitless work—can undermine that ethic, even unconsciously so.

[48] Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom,* 68.
[49] Miller, *Ten Commandments,* 134.

MODERN IMPLICATIONS OF SABBATH

This last point about unconscious undermining is evident especially in an article on the exploitative practices of the gig-economy, particularly through the on-demand workforce. Christian ethicist Angela Carpenter chronicles the work of those with an employer who understands the labor pool to have limitless availability.[50] In these gig-economy jobs, workers are given little notice of when they must report to work. Their schedules are irregular, dictated by the demands of the warehouse or factory where they work, meaning that some weeks contain few hours while in other weeks shifts may consume most of the employee's waking hours. This leads to exploitative behavior (and wreaks havoc on family life), even if unwittingly made by the employer, because the company understands the worker always to be available. With these gig-economy jobs typically requiring little formal education and experience, employers are more likely to terminate an employee's position for failure to report than they are to try to reach a mutual agreement with the employee because the employer views the labor pool as more or less limitless. Thus, the employee must report to work when demanded or risk losing their livelihood. This arrangement means the employee can make no firm plans for childcare or doctor's visits or any other normal component of a schedule, because she or he must always be on, must always be available, must understand their work as having no limits and as having primacy in their lives.

Such a gig-economy position also leaves no room for the establishment of a regular sabbath practice that can place God at the center, much less create a robust ethic for living. Carpenter sees these jobs as a symptom of a larger societal problem rather than as an anomaly of the nascent gig-economy. With the establishment of workplace gyms, daycares, coffee bars and restaurants—even free meals at or near one's workstation—corporations of all sizes send a

[50] Carpenter, "Exploitative Labor," 77–94.

strong message that life exists for work through the illusion of convenience.[51] She notes, "[r]ather than freeing up time for spouses or children, these structures create the illusion that all time is for working," resulting in a "personal identity that associate[s] self-worth with high productivity."[52] That resultant identity for these corporate, often well-paid middle or upper-class workers, is no different than the on-demand workers at warehouses as the resultant message is the same: life exists for work. For Carpenter,

> this is not simply an issue of too many hours being claimed by work. Rather, it is a lack of any theoretical limits to working time and what this suggests regarding the importance of other aspects of life. This means that any time in a person's life is increasingly liable to the claims of work, suggesting that human life is for the sake of work, rather than work existing for the sake of human life and flourishing.[53]

Conveniences provided by employers create the illusion that life exists for work, trapping workers, managers, and executives in the same struggle against the devouring nature of work to consume time and identity.

This almost inevitably leads to a societal understanding of "work as people's religion,"[54] as work becomes the center and defining attribute of life. Carpenter turns to Barth's ethic derived from sabbath, as noted earlier, to explain how it serves not only as an antidote to the kind of exploitation natural to economic systems, but also as a corrective to societal understandings derived from economics, such as Brueggemann notes about production and consumption. She underscores how the practice of sabbath and the creation of purposeful breaks in the schedules of

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[51] Carpenter, "Exploitive Labor," 82.
[52] Carpenter, "Exploitive Labor," 82.
[53] Carpenter, "Exploitive Labor," 84.
[54] Carpenter, "Exploitive Labor," quoting Joan Williams as quoted in Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play when No One Has the Time* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014), 89.

workers of all stripes can undo these problematic societal understandings and instead create an ethic of neighborliness. For Carpenter through use of Barth's ethic, sabbath teaches interconnectedness by reorienting human life around the love and creative design of God, replacing "work as people's religion"[55] with God at the center of human life. Then, and only then, can life flourish.

APPLICATION OF SABBATH AT EASTMAN FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The application of sabbath as practice at Eastman First UMC, defined by the research noted above, began with a focus group formed as a means of ethnographic research. It sought answers to questions such as how the church currently perceived sabbath and what they thought of the idea of setting aside regular time for its practice. These findings informed this project's innovation; a two-pronged approach designed to both inform and form participants around sabbath practice. The implementation of this innovation began in late February, 2020, and was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of our church on March 15, 2020. After Easter, I surveyed and retooled the approach of the innovation, noting that the current period of quarantine provided an excellent incubator for sabbath practice. Moving forward, this paper considers each of those steps in turn, noting the progression from design to implementation. This section concludes with the results of the project innovation.

[55] Carpenter, "Exploitive Labor," 84.

FOCUS GROUP

With my understanding of sabbath now greatly deepened by the research noted above, I turned to how to communicate to the church this robust ethic for living. I saw in their lived experience the necessity of living a life oriented around sabbath, both to form their identities and to promote justice in the world. I wanted to teach it as that central orientation, rather than simply as an antidote for the stressful life; my initial understanding. With all this in mind, the strategy for communication developed into the design of this project; a two-pronged approach focusing on 1) teaching about and 2) simulating the experience of sabbath practice.

That work of determining how to communicate began with a focus group that started meeting in September, 2019. Participants, representing a cross-section of the church, came together both for a Bible study about sabbath and as a sounding board for me to learn what would and would not work for the church as a whole. A few weeks into our conversation, I brought up the Carpenter article cited above to serve as a conversation starter. The group members empathized with the plight of those workers and saw the connection to the biblical mandate of neighborliness, but they struggled with the connection to sabbath. For them, sabbath meant Sunday with all its connotations of church attendance, blue laws, and family meals of old. They quickly noted the decline of blue laws and family meals but retained a strong sense of sabbath as referring primarily, if not solely, to the Christian duty to attend church. While they demonstrated remarkable openness to conceptualizing sabbath as referring to more than simple duty to attend church, this response indicated to me that the education this congregation needed about sabbath was significant.

To delve into sabbath as more than rote attendance, I had assigned the book *For Sabbath's Sake*—a mass-produced paperback that offers what I now recognize to be an

oversimplified understanding of sabbath similar to my previous understanding.[56] Yet, reading it together only heightened confusion, rather than clarifying what is meant biblically by sabbath, demonstrating the difficulty of reconceptualizing the idea of sabbath for these church members. Their notions of sabbath were so far removed from the basic principles presented by Trent's book that even to imagine sabbath as purposeful rest for the sake of enjoying creation and life proved challenging. Many participants felt that if they set aside time, as mandated by God, that time must be marked by other spiritual disciplines like prayer or reading their Bibles.

As we studied sabbath over succeeding weeks, the group members did gradually shift away from their traditional conception. A new challenge then arose: making a plan. I shared with them about sabbath practice; about creating a regular, routine practice around which to orient our lives toward God, just as I had discovered through the research. This practice, I noted, should bring joy and be grounded in the things that bring us joy, just as Heschel, among others, had noted. I read the quote from Heschel, cited earlier, that sabbath was not a day for mourning or religious devotion but a day to experience the joy of God. I then encouraged them to think of the things they would do during that sabbath time, hobbies perhaps, or spending uninterrupted time with family, and to make a plan to set aside six contiguous hours for sabbath every week. Several participants tried this out for a few weeks, reporting back not only that they had wonderful experiences, but also that they now understood the larger sabbath principle that we had discussed throughout the study. Many, however, struggled, and never quite succeeded, in making a plan. A few reported themselves too busy, too consumed with their labors, which were too important, to be able to sacrifice so much time. Others attempted a plan, setting aside the time, but filled that

[56] Dana Trent, *For Sabbath's Sake* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2017).

time with spiritual disciplines. The focus group ended its work with these mixed results but having helped me tremendously in considering the design of the project.

The findings from the focus group clarified that I would need to dispel common misconceptions about sabbath as a part of my communicative work. With so many in the group considering Sabbath as referring to a duty to attend church, I surmised that the congregation as a whole would likely have the same understanding. I would also need to address the idea of duty since so many of the participants were struggling to embrace the notion that sabbath could be used for anything other than additional spiritual practices. In fact, the participants who felt this way demonstrated a remarkable irony: they saw sabbath as a duty to labor with spiritual practices that should be endured rather than enjoyed. This demonstrated to me that a perception of spiritual practices as laborious, devoid of joy, and done out of duty pervaded the church as well. I thus avoided any mention of sabbath as duty, wanting to work around this common misconception.

PROJECT DESIGN

The focus group experience, combined with the research, informed the project design. I coupled this with my observation of work practices and the aforementioned struggle of families and individuals to align how they actually lived their lives with their stated priorities. Now I understood sabbath to mean not just that reorientation to prioritize what really matters but the reorientation of all of life itself toward the Creator of life. Humanity is, however, "inured to Pharaoh's system…the departure into restfulness is both urgent and difficult, for our motors are set to run at brick-making speed."[57] This describes life as I find it in Eastman and, indeed, as I have found it wherever I have served a church or university. The question then became how to

[57] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance,* 19.

teach sabbath as I had come to understand it to a church for whom sabbath meant church attendance and laborious religious practice.

For the project design, I decided on that two-pronged approach that would both inform and form the people around sabbath. The goal of such a project was to transform not only the prevalent conception of sabbath but also the lived experience of Eastman First UMC families. Faith itself should transform when it forms, according to Richard Rohr, who notes that "[b]eing informed is different from being formed, and the first is a common substitute for the second."[58] He defines this by contrasting learners with the learned: "learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists."[59] This convinced me that any effort to teach about sabbath must form as well as inform.

In an effort to form the people, I wanted to create an experience of sabbath rest that would speak to the nature of rest as forming our identity in God. Rest forms a gateway through which to experience that deeper identity, the wellspring of the justice ethic inherent to sabbath. Brueggemann notes that sabbath rest ushers humanity into "an arena in which to recognize that we live by gift and not by possession, that we are satisfied by relationships of attentive fidelity and not by amassing commodities."[60] In this way, humanity "may come to know…a rest rooted in God's own restfulness and extended to our neighbors who must also rest. We, with our hurts, fears, and exhaustion, remain restless until then."[61] Barbara Brown Taylor succinctly makes the same point when saying, "[r]esting every seventh day, God's people remember their divine creation…made in God's image, you too shall rest."[62] Such rest creates "a foundational

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[58] Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), xviii.
[59] Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram,* xix, quoting Eric Hoffer without specific citation.
[60] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance,* 85.
[61] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 89.
[62] Taylor, *An Altar in the World,* 130–31.

discipline for personal welfare, health, [and] benefit,"[63] a discipline that orients toward God through "the practice of being with God."[64] Rest can be a gateway toward a more comprehensive understanding of sabbath.

Rather than rest as an antidote to the stressors and anxieties of life, in this project rest is the gateway toward that ethic and centrality of life with God created by sabbath practice. The project design used rest as the means by which participants would discover the depths and joys of all that sabbath has to offer, as detailed by the research and my lived experience. In that way, sabbath rest is connected to contemplative practices.[65] Mid-century monk and scholar David M. Knight notes that, "[t]he essence of Sabbath is leisure. And the meaning of leisure is that man was made not only to work in this world or on it, but in the most fundamental sense simply to be for God. Man's being is more important than his doing, because everything man does, he does in order to be more totally in God."[66] It thus became apparent that a contemplative practice could yield the effect of rest, simulating what sabbath practice should provide. For that contemplative practice, I chose *Lectio Divina.*[67]

Project Implementation

Implementation began in February, 2020. The prong that informed came through a sermon series, launched on Ash Wednesday and extending through the season of Lent, that informed the congregation about sabbath. A common experience of *Lectio Divina* through a church-wide Sunday School class formed the second prong, one in which participants

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[63] Jama L. White, Amanda M. Blackburn, and Mary K. Plisco, "Rest as a Virtue: Theological Foundations and Application to Personal and Professional Life," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 43, no. 1 (2015): 98.
[64] White, Blackburn, and Plisco, "Rest as a Virtue," 102.
[65] David M. Knight, "Contemplation: Integrating Prayer and Work," *Sisters Today* 48, no. 4 (1976): 234–236.
[66] Knight, "Contemplation," 235.
[67] See Appendix II for an extended conversation about the relationship between *Lectio Divina* and Sabbath.

experienced (and thus were formed by) divine rest as a simulation of the rest that occurs during sabbath. Surveys, interviews, intentional conversations, and the sermons themselves would link the two and produce the data by which to assess the project.

I rooted the sermon series in the design of labor and time that God set at creation. Rather than confront misconceptions head-on or begin simply by educating members about the biblical witness of sabbath as I had done in the focus group, I opened up the conversation through engaging a very common experience throughout the congregation: the devouring nature of work. If being too busy is the chief problem for families, the sermons took the tack that such busy lifestyles come as a result of human nature's tendency to be devoured by work, as Barth put it. That tendency comes from the desire to be more, do more, and create more. The sermon series challenged that notion, asking reflectively if we really did always need to do, create, or be more. This approach allowed me to bring alongside our work lives the various components of sabbath discovered through research: the need for rest, for identity formation, for justice, and for the joy of living in God's created order. I hoped that the sermon series would prompt members of the church to question their schedules and commitments, question their quality of life, and find ways to align their schedules better with God's design for their time.[68]

A survey conducted after the first sermon revealed that those desires for rest and closeness with God that I had surmised early in my tenure here remained. After the first Sunday's sermon, Shirley Adler,[69] a member of the congregation remarked through the survey, "All things to all people. That was me and I was proud of it. Stay busy I was as told when I retired. Nope. I volunteer four or five times a week. The days I wake with nothing to do

[68] See Appendix I for details on each of the first three sermons.

[69] Church members were asked when submitting surveys to use a pseudonym if they did not desire to have their real name disclosed. All names disclosed were thus self-reported.

[are]very joyful and peaceful. I wish I had learned this before I retired. Great message!"[70] Such remarks are indicative of the comments of many respondents, whether via the survey or anecdotally, who expressed their desire to have known earlier in life about sabbath as a practice and God's desire for a life lived in harmony with that rest.

With the sermon series teaching about rest, the church-wide Sunday School experience simulated the experience of rest through contemplative practice; its goal being to usher families through the gate of rest into choosing to commit to sabbath practice. The church-wide Sunday School class began on March 1 and continued on March 8, 2020, with forty-nine participants ranging in age from nine to ninety-six. Rest was simulated through a group process of *Lectio Divina* as described by spiritual director and nun Thelma Hall in her book, *Too Deep for Words*.[71] For Hall, a life of contemplation, experienced through *Lectio*, brings humanity into a stream that leads to God, both to experiencing God's love and to living a life of loving action.[72] That gateway leads to the loss of the "illusory self"[73] to find the true self, the *imago Dei,* centered in the love of God. There, in that center, the contemplative person discovers that God has drawn "us in prayer [to] where we can lay claim only to what is given, not achieved."[74] This language of giving, rather than achieving, of being centered to find the true self in rest as opposed to the illusions gained away from that center in God, is synonymous with the language used to describe the outcomes of sabbath practice: the design of a life oriented around the Sabbath.[75]

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[70] Shirley Adler, respondent to "Sermon Series Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 1, 2020.
[71] Thelma Hall, R.C., *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).
[72] Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 9.
[73] Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 20.
[74] Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 20.
[75] See Appendix II for an extended conversation about the relationship between *Lectio Divina* and Sabbath.

For two Sundays, I engaged in this formative practice with the goal, as Hall notes, of "introduc[ing them] to the power of the word of God in scripture to speak to the most intimate depths of our hearts, to gift and challenge and change us, and to promote genuine spiritual growth and maturity."[76] To do so would be to move away from narcissistic tendencies, god-like inclinations about which I was simultaneously preaching. For those two weeks, I surveyed the group after each practice of *Lectio* to discover how they were experiencing it and to see if the desired outcomes were being achieved. For some, like the self-named "Swampy," *Lectio* brought recognition of the egocentrism noted by Hall; "I spend too much time doing things that don't involve God,"[77] she notes. Others made the connection to sabbath explicitly, without the question or content of the prayer time alluding to sabbath at all. Donna Cadwell remarked, "God wants more for us than just working. He wants us to honor him by observing sabbath but we get the gift of rest and relaxation."[78] Many others, however, focused on rote calls to obedience; the comment "I am required by God to honor him by observing the sabbath"[79] was indicative of many other comments. Even with the experience of rest through the practice of *Lectio*, many participants struggled to get beyond the construct, perhaps unchallenged their whole lives, that any devotion to God requires laborious duty.

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[76] Hall, *Too Deep for Words,* 7.
[77] "Swampy," respondent to "Combined Sunday School Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 1, 2020.
[78] Donna Cadwell, respondent to "Combined Sunday School Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 8, 2020.
[79] Wynell Bond, respondent to "Combined Sunday School Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 1, 2020.

Interruption of Project by COVID-19

I had just begun to process these findings, looking ahead to the next three weeks of practicing *Lectio* together and preaching through the series, when, on March 14, 2020, the church closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We made the decision the day before based on new information from Dodge County public health authorities who were responding to a rapidly changing situation. Because of the late notice of our closure, I had no means by which to move our services online, so both the sermon series and church-wide Sunday School ceased. The first two-plus weeks of implementation had yielded much useful data, leaving me reflecting about how to shape the coming weeks around the lessons from that data. However, when we returned to worship on March 22, now online via Facebook Premiere, rather than return to the project I shifted the focus of worship and my sermons to speak to the common fear evoked by the uncertainty of our unprecedented times. Through Easter, my sermons addressed such concerns, wanting to offer comfort and practical tips for handling the all-too-natural anxiety of the moment, placing on hold the implementation of the project.

Despite all that, for the first weeks of the closure, I regularly had contact with church members asking questions and seeking more information about sabbath practice. The two weeks of preaching and experiencing *Lectio* had created a buzz in the congregation, one that did not simply die away because of the church closure. During the interlude before returning to the project, I found that several church members had begun to practice sabbath on their own. The pandemic in its early phase, with stay-at-home orders and many working from home, created what I had hoped *Lectio* would: a simulation of sabbath. Whether from preaching or from *Lectio*, the information about sabbath had stuck with many regular attenders of the church and, helped by their now more relaxed schedules, they had begun practice and desired more information

about sabbath. Most of those inquiries wondered how to maximize the use of shelter-in-place time, recognizing that this disruption to their regular schedules provided an opportunity to establish new rhythms that would include sabbath. In their questions, I found opportunities to complete this project, albeit now in a socially-distant way.

To adjust the project to this new reality, I began with a survey of the church after most had been sheltering-in-place for a month. Fifty-one individuals responded, representing almost every family attending Eastman First UMC and a few families we had picked up after having moved to online worship. Asked on a one to five scale to rank their agreement with various statements, a significant number (4.24 on average, where a 3 meant no change) reported that their family "meant more to them" because of the increased time provided by quarantining.[80] While they spent about as much time on work as before (2.66 on average, where a 3 meant no change) and while work mattered the same as before (3.01 on average, where a 3 meant no change), because of the increased time with family most indicated they were significantly more focused on what matters in life, living out their priorities better now than before (4.47 on average, the highest response to any question, where a three meant no change). All respondents noted, through narrative comments, the need for regular sabbath practice after returning to life as before COVID-19, based on their experiences during shelter-in-place. Those narrative responses focused on finding more joy in life, more peace, and a life lived in greater congruence with priorities for family and God.

The remainder of the survey asked respondents to identify how they were spending their time, what they found valuable, and what they hoped to understand better about sabbath.[81] Those

[80] "Work and Habits Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 31, 2020.
[81] "Work and Habits Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, March 31, 2020.

remaining questions gave fuel to the development of the rest of the sermon series, launched the Sunday after Easter, April 19, 2020. I used the online worship service to mention their survey results, to talk about how the shelter-in-place order had created the perfect incubator for sabbath experience, and how almost all of the church had become convinced of its necessity. I then reflectively asked the question of how to maintain the goodness found in forced sabbath time when life became more normal, stating that the remainder of the sermon series would speak to that.

The survey results from the next sermon in the series, retooled based on this data gathering, demonstrated that the church had moved past the conceptual block that all religious devotion must be laborious duty.[82] Polling a cross-section of the church, I asked ten individuals to respond to my sermons with their unfiltered reactions, serving as a socially-distant focus group. Leigh Law noted that, "[t]hrough the series of sermons that you have preached on Sabbath, things have flip-flopped…Before, sabbath felt like an obligation I had to do in order to be a good Christian…Now, I can have fun!"[83] a comment indicative of several others.

Noting the resonance of this, I used God's desire for humanity to find joy and tranquility through sabbath, to borrow Abraham Heschel's words, as a way of summing up and ending the sermon series.[84] Within that final sermon, I suggested they approach a sabbath plan this way:

> find a regular block of six hours in your schedule where you will practice sabbath: time with family, engage in things that bring you joy, rest. During those six hours, cease all work, ignore all alerts to your phone; choose instead to engage in things that bring you joy and spend time with people near and dear to your heart. Allow yourself to be bored if

[82] See Appendix I for detailed information on this sermon.
[83] Leigh Law, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.
[84] See Appendix I for detailed information on this sermon.

> that's what happens. Make that regular block of six hours non-negotiable. Practice your plan weekly for a month. Only then will you be able to evaluate its effect on you and your family.[85]

A survey released simultaneously with the worship service asked members of the congregation to record their sabbath plan, committing (as they recorded in the survey) to practicing it for a month, then evaluating its impact. I had chosen this formulation for a sabbath plan based on what I understood to be faithful to the ideal of sabbath, as presented in the research, and what was a reasonable challenge for the congregation. The six-hour block arose specifically out of the initial focus group with whom I had begun my research as the right level of challenge for this congregation. The remainder of the plan came straight out of previous sermons.

Results of Project Innovation

With many families convinced by their quarantine experience of the necessity of sabbath practice, a sizable proportion of the church committed to a sabbath plan following the final sermon's call to do so. Nineteen individuals responded to the survey, or thirty-seven percent of those who had responded to the first survey asking about the impact of the quarantine on their families. Those nineteen individuals represented a total of thirty-nine people, or twenty-eight percent of our average worship attendance (which was 140 when meeting in-person pre-pandemic). After a month, I surveyed those who had committed and found that all those who had established a practice a month before still held that practice, appreciated it, and found it remarkably beneficial for their lives and relationship with God.

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[85] Ted Goshorn, *Whatever You Do, Do It In Love* (Eastman, GA: eastmanfirst.com online blog, April 26, 2020), available online at: https://eastmanfirst.com/2020/04/26/finalsurvey/, accessed June 9, 2020.

For those who had established a practice and kept it for a month, the practice had the desired outcomes. Lacey Eason, a young mother of two in our church, remarked,

> Taking time to purposely not work and/or be "productive" seems opposite of the American workaholic mentality...and it's so wonderful to know that taking time to rest and enjoy family time each makes God happy and is encouraged. Sabbath time has become "happy time." The girls [her two children] like that Ken [her husband] and I are not too distracted to engage and play with them.[86]

At the other end of the spectrum of life, Martha Wright, a retiree with grandchildren, notes,

> I truly believe that it has made me a better person and brought our family closer, even though they do not live with me. We have opened up on so many things in our conversations. The fun and laughter that we once had, we have again. I am aware how important it is to enjoy life, a reason for living and knowing that God is in the midst of it all. It renews my spirit, mind and heart.[87]

Both comments are representative of the survey's findings; namely, all who chose their way in to sabbath practice and maintained it for a month experienced tranquility, the reorientation of their lives toward their priorities, and toward their relationship with God. While that experience does not satisfy the fullness of what it means to practice sabbath (for it neglects the ethics enumerated by Brueggemann, Miller, Lochman, Carpenter, and Barth, and fails to take into account the fullness of what it means to come to terms with the true self as Hall and Merton describe[88]) it forms the starting point, the point to which I had hoped to bring the congregation based on where

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[86] Lacey Eason, respondent to "Sabbath Plan Follow-Up Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, April 19, 2020.
[87] Martha Wright, respondent to "Sabbath Plan Follow-Up Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, April 21, 2020.
[88] See Appendix II.

they began. Their plans remain faithful to the concept of sabbath, as I had come to know it through research, by encouraging not only purposeful rest but reorientation of life around sabbath. My hope is that, with continued practice, that reorientation will alter their very identities, leading to the ethical outcomes described by the research. The project successfully met its goal for those who chose their way into a sabbath practice.

For those who had indicated their conviction of the necessity of sabbath in the survey during the project's interlude but who chose not to commit to a plan, the question remained of what kept them from actual engagement with sabbath practice? To be sure, the difficulty of changing habits for any person was almost certainly a significant factor. Beyond that facet of human nature, from review of the survey data, reflection in the time since completing the project implementation, and further reading, I surmise there were three barriers to sabbath adoption, barriers I term too confused, too busy, and too achievement-oriented. Those too confused misconceived sabbath, never quite understanding it correctly enough to implement a strategy properly. For those too busy, the obligations of work and other commitments formed too great an impediment to establish a sabbath plan. The final category reveals the inherent difficulty of shifting identities away from definitions based in work and obligation toward the *imago Dei*.[89] Such difficulty led some to see sabbath not as spiritual discipline but as yet another self-help mechanism to improve satisfaction in life. My reflection on this final barrier revealed to me how the project design had unintentionally created that impression.

Those in the too confused category demonstrated this barrier through follow-up surveys. For Gail Knox, times with family counted as sabbath, regardless of whether they were impromptu or planned. She reports, "I have realized many times are Sabbath by identifying

[89] See Appendix II for extended conversation about the connection between contemplative practice and the *imago Dei.*

family dinners, birthday shared, outside activities, and FaceTime calls. These experiences have made me more conscious of the true meaning of Sabbath."[90] She echoes others who reported any unplanned time with family or moments where they felt whole and complete and restful as sabbath practice. Comments such as these miss the essential point that the practice of sabbath must come from the *intentional* setting aside of time on a regular basis. Others in the survey similarly identified "falling onto the couch at the end of a long day"[91] as sabbath because it was restful, missing again the need for intentionality. These individuals represent others who demonstrated continuing confusion about the nature of sabbath.

Comments like these reveal that, for some, the sermon series failed to dispel certain misconceptions, inhibiting a true understanding of sabbath. As much as I feel I educated the congregation about the need to set aside time intentionally for it to be true sabbath practice, for some that message was not received. I underestimated the amount of growth required by several members of the congregation to realize a sabbath practice. Before engaging the church with this content, most in the congregation thought that sabbath meant coming to church on Sunday, so much change in conception was required in order to engage with the true meaning of sabbath. There were several for whom this concept changed, as noted above in comments like those from Leigh Law, but there were others for whom sabbath remained a confusing concept. In hindsight, I might have slowed down, extending the sermon series or offering some sort of additional means of engaging with the information between Sundays. Had surveys asked questions checking on respondents' conceptualization of sabbath, I could have made adjustments to facets of the project in real time. This might have helped some who were too confused.

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[90] Gail Knox, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.
[91] Catherine Harrington, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.

Others commented that they were simply too busy to engage, whether in their past or currently. Ken Hall elaborated on this point when he noted,

> there still are essential responsibilities that require immediate action on Sundays. Unexpected tasks that require your time to fix. Prior to retirement we had little time for sabbath. Our jobs required some weekend work and we often traveled on Sundays for work. This left little time to do chores around the house. Often Sundays were catch-up day for chores.[92]

For the Hall family, they could now find time for sabbath because they were retired, not because they had intentionally chosen a different, sabbath–based, lifestyle. In further conversation, Ken noted that he would not have implemented sabbath when he and his wife were working because they would not have been able to find the time. His comments corresponded to many others, including those of Lacey Eason whose family did adopt a sabbath practice in the end. She notes in the focus group before adopting a plan for her family, "I think the biggest barriers [to sabbath practice] include general busyness, failure to complete work deadlines during the week, and societal pressure to 'perform, perform, perform.'"[93] Comments like these highlight the challenge of setting aside obligations and demands simply in order to rest.

For those too achievement-oriented, the power of work to "devour,"[94] as Karl Barth put it, came through loud and clear. Even with the experience of sheltering-in-place convincing almost all of the church of the power of regular sabbath practice, many were unable to choose their way into it. I had hoped that the disruption to regular schedules forced by the quarantine period, having given time back to most families that was previously spent commuting and apart

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[92] Ken Hall, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.
[93] Lacey Eason, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.
[94] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* 214.

at jobs, would make it easier to establish new rhythms that could last past the quarantine. Sermons preached after Easter certainly focused on that, with an eye toward helping church members choose their way into a sustainable practice that worked both during and after quarantine. Several families did indeed adopt a practice. For others, the feedback I received indicated that work and other obligations were simply too great a challenge to make it viable to give up time on a regular basis. For them, their work was too demanding, too important, to be put on hold even for six hours a week. Courtney Butler, an executive with a major insurance corporation, commented along these lines for her and her husband, Jon, a banking vice president:

> Jon is trying hard to help small businesses. That requires long hours for him and has bled into weekends. With my job, a lot of the stress for me was in the beginning as I was spearheading getting our 7,000 employees converted to a work-from-home environment, which is not anything that we've ever done before.[95]

Courtney goes on to explain that she and her husband must continue this work both out of duty to their employees and constituents but also out of a desire to achieve and advance, echoing Lacey Eason's comments on the need to "perform, perform, perform."[96] Others feared the consequences of letting go of control over their obligations, even for a few hours. Susan Coffee, a local business owner, noted that she "could not stop working on her business or else it would get away from her."[97] For these individuals and those reporting similar comments, the process of *Lectio,* the simulation provided by quarantining, and the education of the sermon series failed to establish the sense of self as grounded first and foremost in God, specifically in God's love, rather than in work. Their comments demonstrate an inability to move away from that

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[95] Courtney Butler, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.
[96] Lacey Eason, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group."
[97] Susan Coffee, member of "Sabbath Study Focus Group," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished.

understanding of "human life [as] for the sake of work,"[98] and instead toward an understanding of life as for the sake of flourishing in light of God's ordering of time through sabbath.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In asking people to shift away from work as central concern to God as central concern, this sabbath project asked participants to shift their very identity. I underestimated the challenge of this shift, an unintentional consequence that, in hindsight, should have come as no surprise given the research I had done into senses of self and the necessity of being defined by the *imago Dei*. That research gained clear voice through works like Carpenter's, who refers to those whose lives are consumed by their labors as having "work as [their] religion."[99] Such a notion jibes with scholars like Heschel and Hall, who knew work and other obligations to be consuming of one's identity. This means that any commitment to sabbath for one whose identity is grounded in labor or achievement will inevitably require a significant shift in basic self-understanding in order to grasp and commit to a sabbath plan. Hall highlights this fact when she notes, "we don't engage in this way [of identity shifting] because we fear the loss of control when we surrender to God, allowing that false self to be stripped away."[100] A few pages later, Hall refers to Paul Tillich whose theology of faith gives depth to the significance and challenge of this shift. He opens *Dynamics of Faith* by stating that "[f]aith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern."[101] He goes on to note that such faith as ultimate concern must, by definition, be "an act of the total personality,"[102] including

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[98] Carpenter, "Exploitative Labor," 84.
[99] Carpenter, "Exploitative Labor," 89.
[100] Hall, *Too Deep for Words,* 75.
[101] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 1957), 1
[102] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 5.

both the conscious and unconscious mind that are "taken into the center which transcends each of them."[103] This is the same center to which so many others referred in the scholarship I reviewed, especially Barth. Tillich notes that such a center can be consumed by other "cognitive, aesthetic, social, [and] political,"[104] concerns that can consume if they "claim ultimacy for a human life."[105] Perhaps for those who struggled to leave behind their work and obligations, labor had claimed ultimacy, and thus this project asked them to swap out that ultimacy for a new, God-centered, ultimacy—a tall order for which this project did not equip them. Perhaps no project could, only a gradual change over a long period of time. Yet, if I had recognized the prevalence and significance of this challenge early on, I would have adjusted the project to address it.

The nature of work as of ultimate concern restates Barth's commentary that work tends to devour, which means that work, when of ultimate concern and central to identity, can devour sabbath itself by reframing sabbath as a self-help construct. The desire for self-improvement through self-help schemes feeds a natural sense of achievement by putting development of the self within the control of the individual, rather than ceding such control to God. This project had an implicit bias of sabbath as such a self-help scheme that revealed itself only after a period of reflection. Reading Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* for personal study revealed to me how I approached members of the church by offering a self-improvement scheme through the practice of sabbath. The offer came through implicitly, for in sermons and conversations alike I always sought to point to God's divine plan for humanity and our duty to ascribe to it. Even with such pointing, I never challenged the notion of self-improvement implied by sabbath practice; namely, that a better lifestyle was possible for families

[103] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 5.
[104] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1.
[105] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1.

and individuals if they would work for it by adopting a sabbath plan. The stated goals of this project imply self-improvement: to better align life with stated priorities and find more rest and peace. Neither goal pointed toward sabbath as an act of worship nor as a form of prayer. Not only is such a notion hypocritical, for no one can work for, or achieve, sabbath, but it also takes the focus of the practitioner away from God and toward the ego, filling that human penchant to be too achievement-oriented. Richard Rohr notes that,

> any attempt to engineer or plan our own enlightenment is doomed to failure because it will be ego driven…If we seek spiritual heroism ourselves, the old ego is just back in control under a new name. There would not really be any change at all, but only disguise. Just bogus "self-improvement" on our own terms.[106]

Rohr goes on to say that change only occurs when circumstances force it, and they are usually unpleasant circumstances. A review of data from families who did adopt and sustain a sabbath practice reveals that indeed some circumstance in their lives, such as a job loss;[107] exhaustion from obligation, even in retirement;[108] or the loss of a beloved spouse;[109] created a need to reorient life and find divine rest. Those who already had that need latched on to sabbath practice as the answer they sought to address the challenge presented by the need. Those who had no similar experience responded as Rohr indicates, seeing the self-improvement angle but being resistant to change because humanity resists leaving its comfort zone.[110]

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[106] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 66.
[107] Ken Eason, respondent to "Sabbath Plan Follow-Up Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, April 19, 2020.
[108] Patty Morrison and Martha Wright, respondents to "Sabbath Plan Follow-Up Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, April 19, 2020.
[109] Shirley Adler, respondent to "Sabbath Plan Follow-Up Survey," *Eastman First United Methodist Church,* unpublished, April 19, 2020.
[110] Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 66.

By implying that sabbath is yet another self-help scheme, I inadvertently undermined the opportunities presented elsewhere to reform identities away from ultimate concerns in work, obligation, achievement, and the like by moving toward ultimate concern in faith. That ultimate concern must find its grounding in the nature of humanity as *imago Dei.* The move to rest, taken simply as a commitment made by the individual out of religious devotion, leads ultimately to this redefinition of the self, according to Karl Barth. He notes,

> [w]hether he be farmer, artisan, servant or maid, he is just the man who for six days had to be these things and to perform the corresponding tasks, but whose being and existence are more than all these things and his work, who in and with these things and his daily work seeks to be a man, this man, male and female, and as such to be before God. That he does not strive in vain towards this goal; that his work cannot devour him but consists of steps toward this goal, is confirmed at the end of each week by the proffered freedom, rest and joy of the workless Sabbath which he is granted.[111]

This gradual work of redefinition happens slowly, but surely. According to Walter Brueggemann, "Sabbath is an arena in which to recognize that we live by gift and not by possession, that we are satisfied by relationships of attentive fidelity and not by amassing commodities…Thus Sabbath is soul-receiving when we are in a posture of receptivity before our Father who knows we need them."[112] Sabbath creates the means all on its own for such receptivity, leading to a natural remembering, perhaps a mindfulness emanating from the true self Hall mentions: namely, to recover one's identity as created and not the creator. Barbara Brown Taylor notes this reality: "[r]esting every seventh day, God's people remember their

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[111] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* 215.
[112] Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance,* 85.

divine creation. That is what the first Sabbath candle announces: made in God's image, you too shall rest."[113] This is just the point Bonfiglio and Lochman make; a realignment of the self in light of its status as created, not creator.

This reflection suggests that, perhaps, forming and informing around identity should have preceded any call to practice sabbath, for where an identity is already grounded in God, sabbath practice comes more naturally. Sabbath itself, however, can foster that sense of realignment through participation out of a sense of duty. I rejected such an approach early in the project design process fearing it would dissuade the congregation from even trying sabbath. Many of those participants thought of sabbath only as laborious devotion, a fact that I interpreted as a barrier. I thus adjusted the project design to compensate for this barrier, but in doing so I encouraged the implicit bias mentioned above and overlooked the power of religious devotion. At other times in ministry, especially in an Adult Confirmation curriculum I wrote and run yearly, I implore participants to stick with a spiritual discipline until they feel it making a difference, for practice reveals potency. Here, I did the opposite, shying away from encouraging such devotion, assuming that misconceptions about spiritual practice would inhibit experiencing the benefits of sabbath practice. This contradicts the pietist roots of our church's Wesleyan tradition and overlooks how duty can inspire habitual use of a discipline. When duty is first pointed out and Christians are educated in the nature of that duty, Christians "will take better care of themselves and apply themselves to whatever pertains to their own edification and that of their fellow men."[114] Such a formula seems, at first, almost too simplistic, but the results of this project suggest that perhaps more individuals would have found the spiritual benefits of a shift of

[113] Taylor, *An Altar in the World,* 130–31.
[114] Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1964), 94.

identity formation had I not abandoned imploring sabbath as a religious duty. In fact, this project could have capitalized upon the sense of duty that leads so many to work rather than rest, asking that participants apply their dutiful attitudes to this particular spiritual discipline. Doing so might have helped shift identities toward the *imago Dei*, leading to greater adoption of sabbath practices.

CONCLUSION

The regular practice of sabbath, after a period of forming and informing, leads to a reshaping of life around central priorities of family and faith relationship for those who commit to its practice, just as sought in the project design. Even with the barriers and challenges noted above, several families were able to choose their way into a practice that resulted in outcomes both desired and in line with the biblical ideal of sabbath. Surveys and reflections upon those families who did not commit revealed challenges in the project design, especially as it relates to identity formation, and the power of work and obligation to distract from living a life marked by the very ideals and priorities espoused by those rejecting sabbath practice. Such also revealed the implicit bias, and seductive nature, of self-improvement as it relates to sabbath practice. This is not to condemn these individuals and families, but rather to note the sheer nature of work to devour and of the achievement and success-oriented culture in which we live. Recall that Angela Carpenter in her examination of sabbath as an antidote to the exploitative practices of the gig-economy notes that workplaces that encourage work-life balance by providing gyms, places to eat, coffee shops, basic medical care, and childcare, actually do the opposite: they promote the illusion that life exists for work, resulting in a "personal identity that associate[s] self-worth with

high productivity."[115] Carpenter's observations point to the false self of Merton and Hall,[116] one that finds reinforcement through work without the worker realizing that such a process is occurring. Deconstructing that sense of identity and exploring how humans develop their senses of self, both from ways derived from an achievement orientation and ways derived from centering in God, now becomes the task for me as pastor of this church. For too many in the congregation, sabbath practice was one step too far. An understanding of identity development, specifically what happens when the identity is brought before God and centered through spiritual discipline, forms the next faithful step for those who simply could not say no strongly enough to the devouring demands of work and obligation. This project is complete, but it yields a future direction for my work as pastor of this community of Christians who often know what they want, know that what they want is in line with what God wants for them, and yet find themselves unable to live that life.

[115] Carpenter, "Exploitative Labor," 82.
[116] See Appendix II.

APPENDIX I: SERMON DETAILS

First Sermon: Make Our Lives Have Meaning | *February 26, 2020*

Given the human propensity to be consumed by work, it made sense to begin the sermon series on Ash Wednesday, a date on which we remember and understand what is meant by our humanity. That sermon grounded itself in Psalm 90, with a focus statement of: "[w]e want lives that matter, work that's meaningful and will last. But hard work won't make it so. Only confessing the frailty of human life so that we can confess that we are not God, for only God can establish the work of our hands."[117] It asked the people, via a function statement, to "practice sabbath, for we need the weekly reminder that we are not God, that only God can establish work that will last, that will matter."[118] This introduced the whole concept of our humanity, as defined by sabbath itself. It introduced the topic of sabbath indirectly through a hard look at the reality I understood congregants knew all too well: that no matter how hard we work, we cannot create lives that matter and make a difference. This church, both in character and in the individual lives that comprise it, wants such a life and often struggles when hard work does not result in the life desired for themselves and their families

Second Sermon: Work/Rest Rhythm | *March 1, 2020*

Having established the basics of the human condition as it relates to work, the next sermon, preached on the First Sunday of Lent, went directly to the issue of God's ordaining of time. Based on the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20:8–11, it focused on how "God ordained

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[117] Ted Goshorn, *Make Our Lives Have Meaning* (Eastman, GA: eastmanfirst.com online blog, February 26, 2020), available online at: https://eastmanfirst.com/2020/02/27/make-our-lives-have-meaning-ash-wednesday-sermon/, accessed June 9, 2020.
[118] Goshorn, *Make our Lives Have Meaning*.

a work/rest rhythm to life. Such [a rhythm] orders our lives; and to live outside of it, whether through a work/work rhythm or a rest/rest rhythm, is to live a chaotic life."[119] The sermon asked the people, via a function statement, to "make time for sabbath rest. This is the purposeful setting aside of time, weekly, to cease work and enjoy the tranquility and peace of God."[120] This sermon thus first directly introduced the concept of sabbath.

Third Sermon: Building Godly Families | *March 8, 2020*

The next sermon, preached the following Sunday, took this point further, connecting sabbath with establishing a life of congruency between our stated priorities and how we actually spend our time. Comparing and contrasting Psalms 127 and 128, this sermon focused on how "sabbath instills proper priorities, such that our work is God's work, rather than toilsome trouble as we try on our own to provide for our families."[121] It then called upon the people, via a function statement, to "make time, practice sabbath regularly, to invest in what really matters."[122] In this way, the series sought to move the people toward an understanding of how purposeful rest orients life toward the things they said they wanted.

Fourth Sermon: On Demand Lifestyles | *April 19, 2020*

This was the first sermon preached when picking back up with the project after the initial interruption of COVID-19 and resulting stay-at-home orders. With the survey results regarding the quarantine experience of the church now informing my preparation, the series reopened with

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[119] Ted Goshorn, *Work/Rest Rhythm* (Eastman, GA: eastmanfirst.com online blog, March 1, 2020), available online at: https://eastmanfirst.com/2020/03/01/work-rest-rhythm-march-1-2020/, accessed June 9, 2020.
[120] Goshorn, *Work/Rest Rhythm*.
[121] Ted Goshorn, *Building Godly Families* (Eastman, GA: eastmanfirst.com online blog, March 8, 2020), available online at: https://eastmanfirst.com/2020/03/08/building-godly-families-march-8-2020/, accessed June 9, 2020.
[122] Goshorn, *Building Godly Families*.

a sermon based on the Fourth Commandment as found in the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5:12–15. The sermon focused on how "sabbath reminds us of our true identities by causing us to disconnect from work so we can reconnect with God through the things that God made us to delight in."[123] It asked the people, via a function statement, to "choose your sabbath activities by this standard: does the desired activity drain or fill up?"[124] This sermon thus sought to dispel the myth of sabbath and spiritual practice as laborious duty.

Fifth Sermon: Whatever You Do, Do It in Love | *April 26, 2020*

This sermon was based on Jesus's reminder that the sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath (Mark 2:23–28), and focused on how "sabbath, rather than being a precept to keep out of religious devotion, is a free gift of God for human flourishing."[125] It asked the congregation to come up with their sabbath plan, their way of intentionally marking off time for sabbath practice, a time that would be non-negotiable each week. The function, in helping lead to this request, noted that the congregation must "accept the gift of sabbath by living into humility, saying that God knows best for our time. In release of control over our time, there is freedom and life abundant."[126] The sermon series portion of the project thus ended.

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[123] Ted Goshorn, *On Demand Lifestyles* (Eastman, GA: eastmanfirst.com online blog, April 19, 2020), available online at: https://eastmanfirst.com/2020/04/19/3083/, accessed June 9, 2020.
[124] Goshorn, *On Demand Lifestyles*.
[125] Ted Goshorn, *Whatever You Do, Do It In Love.*
[126] Goshorn, *Whatever You Do, Do It In Love.*

APPENDIX II: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *LECTIO DIVINA* AND SABBATH

The rationale for why more humans do not engage in the contemplative life, according to Thelma Hall, sounds much like the rationales for why sabbath practice is difficult: "we don't engage in this way because we fear the loss of control when we surrender to God, allowing that false sense of self to be stripped away."[127] If humanity engages in contemplative practice, however, drawing into that center in God and going through the pain of stripping the illusory, old, self away, the meaning of faith is discovered. Faith, as mid-century theologian Paul Tillich defines it, is "'to accept the fact that I am accepted in my total unacceptability.'"[128] Thomas Merton, a mystic and Benedictine monk, reinforces this point by noting that salvation is to be freed simply to be the *imago Dei* of our creation.[129] To act otherwise is to act out of vanity, of egocentrism born of the false self. Such sin includes the "thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge, and love…"[130] Sins like these align themselves with the sins resulting from our achievement-orientation, from the quest for limitless work, and from the belief that humans can be god-like. Rather, if I am "true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself and find myself nowhere."[131] In these ways, contemplative practice parallels the outcomes of regular sabbath practice, for both strip away the false self of achievement, success, and limitless work, and replace it with an identity grounded in the love, joy, peace, and rest of God.

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[127] Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 20–21.
[128] Hall, *Too Deep for Words*, 30, uncited quote.
[129] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1961), 37–38.
[130] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 35.
[131] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 37.

To draw close to God through contemplation, then, and through *Lectio* specifically, is to experience what sabbath rest prompts the practitioner to experience. With the outcomes having resonance, the practice of *Lectio* can simulate the rest provided by sabbath, even though the practices are not synonymous and are lived out in very different ways. Within this project's design, the practice of *Lectio* whet the appetite for more of the kind of rest that centers in God and reorients life, an appetite that can find its satisfaction in sabbath practice, specifically the practice of rest. In doing so, the project expected those who attended the Sunday School class and heard the sermons to be more likely to choose, and keep, a sabbath practice of their own.

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