**A Sabbath Way of Life** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Mark 2:23-3:6 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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In Amsterdam, (in the Netherlands) there's a fascinating trend gaining momentum: *people are intentionally disconnecting from their digital devices and embracing offline experiences.* One notable initiative is the **Offline Club**, which hosts digital detox hangouts around the city. Let me tell you about one remarkable event they organized *in a 400-year-old church.*

Imagine stepping into a centuries-old church, its ancient walls echoing with whispers of history. On this particular evening, 250 people gathered within its hallowed halls, all without their phones or other electronic distractions. The atmosphere was magical—a true escape from the digital noise that permeates our lives. Here's what happened during this extraordinary event:

1. **Unplugging from Technology**: Attendees left their devices behind, choosing to be present in the moment. No screens, no notifications—just genuine connections.
2. **Reading and Discussion**: People sat down, opened physical books, and engaged in meaningful conversations. The church became a haven for literature lovers, fostering an environment where ideas flowed freely.
3. **Collaborative Art**: Participants came together to create a collaborative piece of art. Imagine the strokes of paint, the blending of colors, and the shared creativity—all without the distraction of screens.
4. **Live Music**: The air resonated with live piano and opera performances. Music, unfiltered by earbuds or speakers, enveloped the space, touching hearts and souls.
5. **True Conversations**: Without digital distractions, attendees engaged in authentic conversations. Faces lit by candlelight, voices rising and falling—it was a reminder of the power of human connection.

The Offline Club's mission is simple: *to encourage mindfulness, reflection, and a break from the digital world.* And it seems Amsterdam is leading the way in this movement. *Pop-up cafes* are also embracing the concept, inviting patrons to leave their phones at the door and immerse themselves in reading and face-to-face interactions.

So, perhaps we can all take a page from Amsterdam's book and occasionally go *"offline."* Whether it's in a historic church, a cozy cafe, or a quiet corner of our own homes, disconnecting from technology can be a refreshing and enriching experience.

I want you to think about this in terms of our text from Mark, chapters 2 and 3, this morning—a story about *sabbath and rest.*

First, some background:

*Sabbath* is given and commanded as *a day of rest*, being modeled after the idea that God rested after all the work that God had done to create the world (Ex. 20:8-11). In Deuteronomy, sabbath is also described as a sign of *liberation.* Taking a sabbath rest is proof that we are no longer enslaved and forced to work without rest (Deut. 5:12-15).

Jesus is in alignment with many rabbis when he asks the question, *“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”* Pikuach nefesh is a Hebrew term that means to *save a life* or *save a soul.* It is a principle in Jewish law that means saving a life *takes precedence* over most other Jewish laws, including observance of the sabbath.

The particular Pharisees around Jesus go silent when he asks this very rabbinic question. But they are not there for a real discussion, for wrestling with moral and ethical questions about healing and sabbath. They are there to conspire against Jesus and to collude with the Herodians, as these verses attest.

In an engaged dialogue about Jesus’ question, one might ask probing questions about the situation. Is the man with a withered hand at risk of dying? Could his healing wait until the next day? Is the hunger of the disciples so great that they might die if they do not gather grain on the sabbath?

But in this passage Jesus seems to be *expanding* the concept of saving a life (or killing or allowing death to occur) to the larger categories of *doing good* and *doing harm.* This is a move also made by Jewish scholars and rabbis throughout history. In fact, people of goodwill, whatever their religious affiliation or ancestry, continue to wrestle with ethical questions of how to live a balanced, healthy life that also affirms and actively supports the inherent worth and value of all other life.

In these verses, Jesus teaches that sharing food with companions and friends is an act of doing good, equivalent, or at least parallel to King David feeding his companions with consecrated food. Similarly, the compassion Jesus extends to the man with a withered hand is an act of doing good that may even save his life, especially if the man’s livelihood depends on the use of his hands.

Jesus’ acts in these verses do not strain him with unnecessary effort, and they contribute to *freedom* and *flourishing* of life. By his actions, Jesus teaches that the *rest* possible with *freedom* is different from *passivity.* He acts for *liberation* and *wholeness.* He also demonstrates that wholeness is not just for some but for *all.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Notice, too, that these words in Mark say as much about what kind of *work* makes for sabbath living as they do about *rest* itself. This kind of work allows for and honors *real rest.* It is naturally in rhythm with *rest.* It is what many are striving for when they talk of *work-life balance.* But work-life balance presumes work that is forever trying to consume more of one’s time and energy. And it puts the focus on balance, or quantity, of work and rest, rather than on quality.

Consider this in terms of what Jesus says in Matthew 11, which may be one of the most comforting passages in scripture:

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*

It is an invitation to *sabbath living.*

Eugene Peterson helpfully paraphrases this invitation to the modern world in The Message:

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.*

Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Sounds like something our overworked, sleep deprived, and stressed-out society needs in spades.

This is interesting because over the past 25 years or so, there has been a swell of interest in sabbath observance among *some* American Christians.

For example, the influential 1997 collection Practicing Our Faith included Dorothy Bass’s essay on sabbath, while Ched Myers’s 2001 book The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics highlighted the communal dimensions of the practice. More recently, MaryAnn McKibben Dana’s Sabbath in the Suburbs (2012) addressed the practical realities of sabbath observance, while Walter Brueggemann’s Sabbath as Resistance (2014) interpreted the sabbath command as central to the economic ethic of the Old Testament and of Christianity, in sharp contrast to the unceasing economic demands of other ideologies. This renaissance in sabbath-keeping—*or more precisely in the idea of it*—is a welcome corrective to the accusation of *legalism* or *ritual formality* that has long haunted Christian discussion of the (characteristically Jewish) sabbath.

But this revival focuses, perhaps inevitably, on the *family*, the *home,* and the *sacred community* as the place in which the gift of the sabbath is received. Even Brueggemann, despite his consistent economic focus, laments that “*‘soccer practice’* invades the rest of the day” and calls on Christians to resist the *“seductions”* of an exploitative world *“by discipline, by resolve, by baptism, by Eucharist, and by passion.”* In other words, this sabbath revival is a renewal of sabbath piety, and a needed and welcome one. It’s no substitute, however, for direct engagement with *sabbath politics.*

*The war on leisure,* after all, extends *beyond* Sunday. Commerce and work, and the political power that gathers around them, are eroding the concept of sabbath—of divinely ordained rest—*in every aspect of life.* In fact, the erosion of rest is active just below the surface of many of our policy debates over *work, family, and retirement.*

There is, it must be conceded, a compelling reason for the war on leisure. Forcing people to work more will, in general, lead to greater economic growth. In that sense, what Brueggemann calls *the gods of the commodity economy* have been productive, if also cruelly demanding. After all, a person who is sleeping or playing with children, cooking dinner for friends, or singing a hymn is not doing anything to increase the GDP.

But in the single-minded pursuit of economic growth, we risk losing something essential to human life. It is what scholars of religion have called the *“sanctification of time,”* the punctuation of the *ordinary* with the *special.* It’s the idea that conditions such as pregnancy and childbirth, sickness, and old age are to be honored *for their own sake.* Honoring time and life comes with a dollars-and-cents cost, compensated primarily by *spiritual* and *cultural* benefits—benefits our politics aren’t good at recognizing or protecting.

And at the heart of the matter is the *sabbath itself.*

Fore­shadowed in the *creation story*, God’s command *to rest* sets Israel apart from the Exodus onward. *It is a costly command*. The people, their foreign residents, and even the animals must *rest.* The land must rest. The widow must be released from her debt—at least for the length of a night’s sleep—and from the incessant demand to work in repaying it. *Isaiah* rails against the abuse of the sabbath to gain competitive advantage, which undermines the ability of anyone to enjoy rest. This *mandated idleness*—15 percent of life—was so costly that it had to be *general,* universal. But these costs all underscore the drastic, unyielding, *world-shaking* claim that life—even the life of an ox—is in some sense its own end and not an instrument. In short, *idleness* is sacred in the Bible because it identifies the world with a living God whose greatest gift is *rest* and who rescued the people from slavery *in a land where no rest was allowed.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Maybe those people in Amsterdam participating in the ***Offline Club***in that 400-year-old church are onto something. Maybe we should start an Offline Club here …

1. Nanette Sawyer, *“Jesus’ Very Jewish Question About Sabbath,”* The Christian Century, May 24, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Benjamin J. Dueholm, *“The War Against Rest,”* The Christian Century, November 26, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)