

Sabbath. What does Sabbath look like? What does it mean? More importantly, how does it feel to hear that word, to even say the word Sabbath?

Say it with me...Sabbath ... Sabbath ... Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy....

Honestly for me, when I say it ... I feel like an absolute failure most of the time.

For some, there might be a sense of guilt, or a heavy weight of judgment. Or maybe you cringe at the word because you think you could do better in observing it? Maybe it feels like another rule, another "should do", which makes it feel like a burden, or something you need to check off the list to finish the week out. Maybe it feels constricting from the things you want to do ... or need to do to finish your week. Sometimes, I hear from others, that Sabbath is supposed to be a day of rest, but they don't have time for that -- there's too much to do. There's work to be done. Mouths to feed. An income to be earned. There is no time for a day off in our economic times of struggle. Still others think observing Sabbath is a downer on the party of what they want to do for fun.

To be honest, I feel I stink at Sabbath. In fact, as an intern, I am supposed to build learning goals for my year here with you all ... and one of those goals this year, believe it or not, was how to have better practices of Sabbath and self-care!

I've got a stack of books at home, which have been given to me over my seminary years, on how to have better boundaries on saying no, establishing self-care, and observing Sabbath ... have I read any of them? No. See, I'm downright horrible at Sabbath.

But I could either beat myself up over what I think I should be doing, or I can pause and listen to what our texts really might be holding for us today about Sabbath.

There is a solid image for me in all of these texts today, which I can't seem to hide from: God's hands.

God's mighty hand and outstretched arms are what we hear in Deuteronomy. A text which repeats the 3rd commandment of Exodus to observe the Sabbath. But it's WHY we do it which is important to remember: because God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, out of a land of slavery which required daily service, a system which never provided rest. It was God's mighty hand and outstretched arm which provided this gift. And it's on the Sabbath we get to -- not have to -- but get to remember that gift, and honor it. The Sabbath was made for us, not us for it.

In Corinthians, we hear of clay jars holding a treasure. Clay jars which are made from the dirt of the ground by hands. These clay jars are a metaphor of our very bodies. We are made from the dust. We are fragile and breakable. But it is God's great hands which have formed us. It is God's great and mighty hands which provide comfort to those afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, or struck down. God's hands. God's arms at work again. A gift of love and care for us, for all.

Finally in the Gospel, again reflecting and arguing over the way to live a proper Sabbath between Jesus and the Pharisees, we hear about another hand: a man's withered hand. Jesus calls for the man to outstretch his hand, and in that moment, he is healed and made whole. A gift of love and care.

So how do we practice the Sabbath? Maybe the Sabbath isn't so much about what I am doing, but about what God is doing, for me and through me.

God is providing -- always providing. God calls us time and time again to not fear, but to have courage, and trust in God's gift for creation; a gift of wholeness.

We are withered. Our systems are withered. Our clay jars are fragile, and will eventually crack when we don't rest.

I learned this the hard way, while returning from seminary one January. Minnesota is cold. That January term, it got to -36 degrees with the wind-chill. I was in classes all day from 8-5 for two weeks, and then staying up late studying and writing papers. I was away from family, worrying about how they were handling my absence, and I wasn't sleeping well. I came down with a horrible head cold by the end of the first week. I pushed on. Not listening to the needs of my body, and the concerns of my professors and peers. On the airplane trip back home, I had a grand mal seizure. My body and mind finally took matters into their own hands, and said -- "we're shutting you down ... cutting you off. You need rest. You need to pause; your clay jar is going to crack if you don't; you are withering away. Take a Sabbath!"

It was a much needed learning lesson for me, early on in my seminary days. We are fragile clay jars. Yet we also house a valuable and priceless treasure; God's grace and care for others; God's great light which shines through the darkness.

A professor of mine once told me to always pay attention whenever Jesus shows emotion in the text. Today's gospel is very special because Jesus shows emotion: anger and being grieved. The ONLY other time we see Jesus angry is in the turning of the tables in the temple. This was because the outer court where the market had been set up at the Temple, was in the Court of the Gentiles -- a place God had specifically asked to be designed into the Temple so that ALL people could come and worship at the Temple. Jesus got angry over this exclusion of others coming before God and finding their wholeness in God.

Here in our gospel, Jesus gets angry again. Because wholeness and inclusion is being kept from another.

The Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. Maybe the Sabbath is not about what I'm doing or not doing, but about what God is doing and providing.

We are withered. Our systems are withered. Our clay jars are fragile, and will crack when we don't rest.

How many in our society today are kept working and not having rest because of low paying jobs? How many are kept in a system of slavery because corporations demand that their workers give more and more, otherwise they will not be moved up for promotions. How many of these clay jars are under such stress, they eventually break?

We are fragile clay jars. We are all part of withered systems.

But we are also called to be the hands of God in the world to each other. As the withered hand is called to be outstretched by Jesus to be healed and made whole again, so are our own hands called to be

outstretched in receiving the body and blood of Christ to make us whole in his love and forgiveness for all. This gift is the treasure housed in our very selves- in these very clay jars every day. But what do we do with this treasure?

We go out from here, and we witness many outstretched hands, asking for Sabbath -- for rest from a world which keeps demanding an attitude and lifestyle of go-go-go.

Maybe it's the barista, the grocery clerk, the homeless. Hands which provide for us and which also reach out to us for wholeness. People who work 2-3 jobs just to survive; how do our withered systems offer them rest? How do we observe the Sabbath and allow others to honor and live into its great gift too?

Maybe this is why Jesus was angry. Maybe this is why we should be angry too. A man with a withered hand would not have had the means to work and take a day of rest. Majority here, probably don't have to work 2-3 jobs to pay the bills. It is angering, it is heart-breaking when we realize others are kept in a system of slavery. God stretched out God's hand to deliver all from slavery, but we have reverted back again to systems of profit and exclusion.

Christ stretched out his arms on a cross to show God's great love for all. Christ comes to us in our fragile clay jars, even our cracked jars from this world's abuses on us and on ourselves to each other, and still says -- take eat -- this is for you, I'm given for you. I will make you whole. Pause and rest in me.

Maybe one of the greatest gifts we receive in worship on this Sabbath, is in our gathering together in spite of our brokenness. When we gather, we are fed. We are held together by God's mighty hands and outstretched arms. Our call is to be angry and grieve when others cannot enjoy in this feast of wholeness and love with us all together. The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.

We all benefit when we all are able to rest. We all get more out of life, when we help each other and care for each other. The Master Potter has formed us and given us a great gift. Let us share it! Let us be the outstretched hands and arms to break the systems of bondage which hold us all captive, excluding so many from rest and wholeness. May our hands and arms be the arms of Christ for each other to collapse and rest into. And may we see and come to know a Sabbath which is a gift for us, for our wholeness, and for everyone's wholeness. Amen.