



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

The Practice

SCRIPTURE:
Exodus 20:
8-11

July 9, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

We are talking about joy this month. Last Sunday we spoke of the source of joy—not so much the source of joy for us, but the fact that we give God joy. As God’s own children, we are the source of God’s joy. Jesus says that that over and over again.

Today we are continuing to talk about joy and to do so, I want to talk about sabbath. Okay, I get it—seems like a stretch. But stick with me. I am choosing to talk about sabbath today because joy is not something we simply experience; it is something that is born of spiritual practice and discipline. There are many spiritual disciplines. Study of the faith nourishes the soul. Serving those in need is a spiritual discipline. Worship is a spiritual discipline. There are many practices that enrich our faith. And one such discipline is Sabbath observance. In our time, Sabbath observance is crucial. Sabbath observance is one of the ways we can cultivate joy in our lives. And joy needs to be cultivated.

Here’s what I mean. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he says, “Rejoice in the Lord.” If we are the source of God’s joy, Paul says God is the source of our joy, so rejoice in the Lord. Actually, I wish he had said that, but what the apostle actually wrote was, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Always? That’s a pretty high bar, don’t you think? Rejoice always? Rejoice when the weather is nice, I can do that. Rejoice when your team wins or when you get a promotion or when your friend comes to visit or when you have a good dinner conversation—all of those things can be reasons to rejoice. Rejoice often? That’s a meaningful challenge and a worthy goal. But always? How is that even possible?

Seems like Paul must have known someone like this. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc-tRZ91m9XA&list=RDCMUCXryuawoKbAlgtw4UiSRm-vA&start_radio=1

That kid is so exuberant. He just can’t keep it in. Every little thing just makes him joyful. He might rejoice always, like the apostles exhorts, but I must confess, I’m not that kid. Did you notice the kid in the green shirt? I’m more like the kid in the green shirt. He was not having it. He looked like he was thinking, “Look, this is just preschool and she’s just singing a song. There is no need for you to fall all over yourself laughing. Get a grip.”

Maybe you tend to be like the kid in the video. Rejoicing always, but not me. I’m more like Alexander. You remember “Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day.”¹ It was a favorite children’s book when my kids were coming along. It begins:

“I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there is gum in my hair. I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and now my sweater is wet, and I knew it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good very bad day. Then we had lima beans for dinner, and I hate lima beans. And there was kissing on TV, and I hate kissing. And I knew it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good very bad day.”

What I love about this book is the mom. The mom speaks great wisdom. She doesn’t say, “Oh, it’s not that bad, they are just lima beans. It could be worse; some kids have to eat brussels sprouts.” She doesn’t say, “It will get better, just be patient.” No, when Alexander complains, she just says, “Yes, some days are like that.”

Mom is right. We all have terrible horrible no good very bad days. If you haven’t, just wait. You will.

So, how do we blend this exhortation to rejoice always with the reality that we all have terrible days? And not just that, we all have so-so days. Not terrible, but not great; just a long walk of ordinariness. In other words, we all have days that do not support rejoicing, so how do we cultivate joy in the world in which we live?

I have learned that joy is cultivated by spiritual

1 Judith Viorst, *Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day* (1972) Anthenum Books.

practices. God knows what life in the world is like and so God says: Here's what you do. Take a day every week and stop. Rest and remember. That's what 'sabbath' means—to cease, to stop.

There is undeniable wisdom here. As human beings, we have limits. That's not a bad thing; it's just part of what it means to be the creature and not the Creator. There are limits to our energy, there are limits to our knowledge, there are limits to capacities. We are finite. So God commands that we stop. That the normal routine of each day be set aside so we can rest. And that word alone may be what you need to hear today. Maybe what you need more than anything else is to just stop. Rest. It's a commandment.

But I have come to believe that sabbath is about more than rest—more than simply stopping. Sabbath is actually, at its core, about what we don't stop.

Or ask it this way: What is supposed to happen to us when we do stop? What is supposed to happen in our hearts, in our faith? What difference does it make if we practice sabbath?

It is important to notice that the sabbath commandment is not just about rest, but it is also a day to remember—particularly to remember not just the sabbath, but to remember the purpose of every day. To remember the purpose of the day is a way of saying we need to remember what our lives are for.

Let's begin here: We are going to live every day investing in something. We are going to spend every moment in school, on our phones, going about the demands of work, preparing meals, cleaning up after meals, paying the bills, going to the gym. Every moment will be spent. But the question is: When we get to the end, are we doing what we were supposed to do?

There was a moment when Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" In other words: What are we for? Jesus said, "Love God with all that you are and love one another." That is what you are for.

But with everything else going on, it's easy to miss, or forget, or get distracted. With everything else we need to do, it is easy to assume our days are for other things. But Jesus says you were created to love. And here's the connection: When you live what you were created to do, it's joyful. It's not always fun. It's not always happy. But it's joyful.

This is why God gives us this practice of sabbath. Sabbath is not just stopping what you are doing. Sabbath is the day to slow down enough that we can remember that every day is a day to love God and love one another. When we remember what we are for, joy is closer at hand.

While at Montreat last month, I worked closely with Rev. Rocky Supinger. I first met Rocky when he was a pastor here in Kansas City back in 2004. He now serves as a pastor to youth at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Rocky was on the planning team of the youth conferences where Sarah and I spoke and it was his job to make sure Sarah and I were doing what we needed to do. It was a big job and he did it well.

Rocky told of a woman he knows named Sarah Cunningham. She, too, lives in Chicago. Sarah's son, when he was a teenager, let her know that he was gay. It was the truth of who he was and he wanted her to know. She told him she loved him and that's all that mattered.

But it made her more aware of how hard these conversations can be in some families. So, in 2015, Sarah attended a Pride festival in Chicago and she wore a homemade button that read, "Free Mom Hugs." She stood on the street with her arms out offering anyone a hug who wanted one. Turns out a lot of people wanted a hug. One young woman told her she hadn't been hugged by her mother in four years. "Free Mom Hugs" went from being a button to being an organization.

In 2018, Sarah posted on Facebook: "If you need a mom to attend your same-sex wedding because your biological mom won't, call me. I'm there. I'll be your biggest fan. I'll even bring the bubbles." People took her seriously and she found herself standing with people at their weddings. The need was more than she could keep up with, so she recruited other moms to join her.²

Sarah Cunningham remembers that each day is a day to love God and love neighbors—sometimes even neighbors you don't yet know. If I understand the text, this is why God commands sabbath. It's not a benefits package, it is a commandment because God knows that we all have terrible horrible no good very bad days. And God knows that we have demanding days. And God knows that we have dull days. And confusing days. And busy days—and all that can distract us or rob of us joy. Because all of us can forget the most basic purpose

2 I am grateful to Rev. Rocky Supinger for sharing this story, which he included in his sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois on June 25, 2023.

of the day: You were created for love; to love God and love neighbor. So God says, I'll tell you what. Take a day every week. Take a day to reconnect with God and reconnect with neighbor and remind yourself that you are created for love. When you remember what you are for, joy will never be far away.

So, let me ask you: Who needs to see you? Who needs to hear from you? Who needs a word of encouragement or a text of acceptance? Who do you know who

needs you to meet them for breakfast or to take a walk? Who do you know who needs to be reminded of the love you have for them?

Write their name down on that doodle pad or the bulletin or take out your phone and put their name on your calendar. And then before we come back next Sunday, show some act of love to that person. It doesn't have to be big—just enough to remember that this is what we are for. And then tell me if it felt joyful.