Emily launched new series on Sabbath, subtitled, “Savoring Life.” Emily situated the Sabbath command—“six days for work, but the seventh is a Sabbath, so rest already!”—as an act of resistance to the power of Empire. In the case of ancient Israel, Empire = the Egyptian taskmasters and the Babylonian oppressors of a later era.

First command in Hebrew Bible (Gen 1) goes: “Multiply and fill the earth!” We’ve pursued it with reckless-joyful abandon. You’d think this other command—take a day off—would be welcomed with equal enthusiasm. But the powers of Empire conspire against us.

Labor movement fought for 40 hr workweek, time and 1/2 over-time and paid vacations. Today that seems quaint. Our Empire is consumer driven and driven it is, relentlessly driven 24/7. This little gadget means many of us are an annoying buzz away from a work-related communication, vacation or day off be damned.

Sabbath command honors the dignity of work, six days of seven being devoted to it, but erosion of our middle class makes work for many a patchwork of part-time low paying jobs with irregular hours. Sabbath becomes as complicated as natural family planning

Also a religious distortion of Sabbath command: it makes us feel like taking a Sabbath is a burden rather than relief from a burden.

Dispute about Sabbath reflected in gospels [handout]: First of three parts: Mt. 11: 28-30: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Term “yoke” refers to Rabbi’s interpretation of Torah (a term that referred to the Law of Israel and more generally to Scripture). No one thought of Scripture as something
you could learn apart from the help of a rabbi. Everyone understood Scripture interpreted in many ways. Rabbi Gamaliel had one yoke, Shimei another, Hillel, still another. This is Rabbi Jesus describing his yoke.

Jesus is saying, compared to the yoke of other rabbis, my understanding of Torah’s is light, not heavy. Aim of Torah is to give you rest from your burdens not add to them.

Remember Jesus sees himself as rabbi for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—the “people of the land” who were not able to observe Torah in the way Pharisees (the most popular religious part of the day) prescribed. Main reason: economic disadvantage. They had been taxed into subsistence living by Roman occupiers. (Pharisees drawn from privileged class, the lost sheep of the house of Israel from more oppressed class.) They couldn’t get to temple for prescribed feasts, couldn’t afford prescribed sacrifices, etc.

Many interpretations of Torah regarding Sabbath observance had become burdensome to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Command meant to provide relief had imposed instead a burden.

Significant: ensuing examples of Jesus’ “light burden yoke” are about Sabbath. Sabbath command, more than any other, set Israel apart from surrounding nations. If we had to pick one command as the gift of the Jews to the world it would be Sabbath.

Jesus interpretation of Sabbath command represents his interpretation of Torah (Law) and Scripture itself (his yoke).

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple
is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” [Gospel of Mark adds an important line here: “Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”]

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Matthew, Mark, Luke all have this sequence with slight variations. By recounting two separate episodes (picking grain, healing of man with withered hand) they are emphasizing the point. Further powerful emphasis: Jesus words and deeds here provoke Pharisees to do all that they can to oppose Jesus. Something about Jesus yoke, his interpretation of Torah (Scripture) was deeply provocative, so much so, it led to his eventual expulsion. Much deeper controversy than how to observe Sabbath—it’s a controversy about the heart of religion. Notice a few things:

Pharisees are using Torah (Law/Scripture) to accuse Jesus and the people he stands up for (lost sheep of the house of Israel). In the fist instance, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath” Sabbath”. In second, “they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?” so that they might accuse him.”

The Pharisees are using Torah/the Law/Scripture to accuse Jesus and those who take on his yoke (lost sheep of house of Israel).

Jesus, on the other hand is using Torah/the Law/Scripture to defend those who are being accused.
This is key for two reasons: First, Jesus is not disparaging the Law. Later, Gentile Christians, including major leaders like Martin Luther, driven by Anti-Semitism, would denigrate Torah. As if Jesus wasn’t Jewish himself. Jesus is not dismissing Torah. He is interpreting it differently than Pharisees. He offers his own yoke.

Matthew’s gospel adds this emphasis: “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” Rene Girard, proponent of scapegoat theory says our human tendency to resolve our internal conflicts by organizing around someone a little bit different than the rest of us and accusing them of some crime then expelling them, is the foundation of human society. Before we did anything else to contain our violent tendencies, we did this and we still do it. He says, in addition, it is the foundation of all religion. He says sacrifice, a practice common to every religious tradition, is simply the ritualization of the scapegoat mechanism. The child that is sacrificed, or later, the goat or sheep or turtledove, is not guilty of any crime, is innocent.

Jesus, who exposes the scapegoat mechanism in order stop us doing it, also came to end sacrifice. This is anticipated in the prophets who said, “I [God] desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

So Jesus is about defending all the victims of scapegoating, declaring them innocent when the community has declared them guilty of some trumped up charges.

This is further stressed in the gospel of John where Jesus names the Holy Spirit, Paraclete, Defender of the Accused.

So the yoke of the Pharisees (their interpretation of Torah/Law/Scripture) is marked by using these to accuse, whereas the yoke of Jesus (his interpretation of Torah/Law/Scripture) is to use it to defend those who are accused.

In both instances, Jesus doesn’t dismiss the law about Sabbath. Instead, he uses the law to defend people whom the Pharisees were accusing for their lack of Sabbath observance.
In other words, Torah/Law/Scripture has two voices: one is the voice of accusation, the other is the voice of defense in the face of accusation. On voice is against us, the other voice is for us.

To take on yoke of Jesus (embrace his interpretation of Torah/Scripture) is to tune out the one voice and tune in the other.

Let’s apply this to Sabbath, taking regular time to rest. In theory, we know it’s a great idea. A summary of the research from “Being Busy is Killing Our Ability to Think”

“Information overload keeps us mired in noise. In 2011, Americans consumed five times as much information as 25 years prior; outside of work we process roughly 100,000 words every day. [Absorb that for minute] Little good comes from being distracted.... Among many qualities that suffer, recent research shows creativity takes a hit when you’re constantly busy. Being able to switch between focus and daydreaming is an important skill that’s reduced by insufferable busi-ness.”

How might we adapt our brains so they were more inclined to embrace rather than resist a Sabbath rest?

I want to suggest we focus on noticing the difference between the accusing voice in our heads and this other voice that Jesus prefers:
The one that is for us, that promotes our well-being, and defends us against accusation.

The source of the accusing voice can be the internalized voice of Empire. That voice might be the one that says you had better be working harder than your co-workers if you want to get ahead. It might be the one that says “you better check the news, or your FB feed—who knows what you might be missing?” [fear of missing out is essential for consumerism]. It might be the voice of your boss or co-workers who send emails after hours, implying it’s what good workers do. Note to self: I gotta stop doing that.
Or it might be a religious voice: the accusing voice that says, “You’re supposed to take a day of rest, what’s wrong with you?” Oh, that subtle religious voice that presents itself as the voice of God but is often the voice of the accuser itself. [Remember, the voice of Empire and the voice of Religion have been singing duets together for a long time. The voice of Jesus is neither.]

QUIET REFLECTION

Instructions: quiet not silent: babies and others make noises,
Start with half a minute to simply focus on your breathing as a way to quiet your thoughts....
Then I will repeat the words of Jesus from Mt. 11 2X over the next minute.

For final minute I will repeat words of Jesus about Sabbath for your reflection

See if during or after this exercise, you have a mood-shift about Sabbath. Or if you start having some creative thoughts about how you might observe Sabbath.
11 28 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

12 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” 3 He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. 5 Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? 6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

The Man with a Withered Hand

9 He left that place and entered their synagogue; 10 a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. 11 He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” 13 Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Matthew 11:28 – 12:14