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Study guide

The spiritual discipline of rest

By Robert C. Blezard

Ours is a 24/7, go-go world, where the one who hesitates is lost and the one who dies with the most toys wins. We're working so hard, and it's depleting our physical, mental and emotional energy. The Bible is crystal clear that being busy all the time is *not* how God wants us to live. Taking on rest as a spiritual discipline can help bring balance into our lives.

EXERCISE 1: WHAT IS REST?

Everyone may have their own idea about what constitutes rest, but there are likely commonalities among the differing notions.

- What does “restful” mean to you?
- What’s the difference between “enjoyable” and “restful”? What things in your life may be enjoyable but not restful? Restful but not necessarily “enjoyable”?
- What things, experiences or practices put you in a restful state?
- What physical benefits are essential for you to derive in order for something to be considered restful? What essential emotional benefits? What essential spiritual benefits?
- Does rest necessarily have to include benefits in all three categories—physical, emotional and spiritual—in order to give you rest? Why or why not?
- Do you get enough rest? Why or why not?
- How can you get enough rest?
- As a study group, come up with a common definition for “rest.”

EXERCISE 2: STOP, IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!

Follow this train of thought: After God created the world in six days, the Almighty *rested* on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). In the Bible’s original Hebrew, the root of the verb translated as “rested” is *shabbat*, which means to cease or stop. In turn, *shabbat* is the Hebrew word for the Sabbath day that Jewish people observe on Saturday, the seventh day (and Christians on Sunday, the Lord’s Day).

So, Sabbath is a word that not only names the holy day as “stop,” but also conveys what the day is all about: resting and ceasing. The idea is cemented in the third commandment: *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it* (Exodus 20:8-11).



Study guide: **The discipline of rest** *continued*

Discuss:

- What is your understanding of the sabbath day? How did you come to that understanding?
- How do you keep the sabbath day holy? How did you come to that way of keeping it?
- What does it imply that “sabbath” literally means “stop” or “cease”?
- What does the actual commandment from Exodus 20 tell us about how God wants us to keep the sabbath day holy?
- To whom is the third commandment addressed? To the individual? The family? The community? The world? All of the above?
- Everyone is commanded to cease from work, not only the people but also the animals. What does that say about God’s intention for the sabbath day?
- Why would God enshrine as a commandment for us—and the whole world—to stop work one day out of every seven? How would a complete “day off” once a week benefit us? Benefit you?
- How would modern American Christians have to change in order to keep the sabbath as it is prescribed in the third commandment? Why have American Christians strayed so much from the sabbath?
- How would you have to change in order to keep the sabbath as it is prescribed in the third commandment?
- If American Christians began taking sabbath seriously and stopped—really stopped—working on the sabbath, how would that change our culture?
- Jesus taught that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). How does that underscore God’s love and concern for us to stay healthy and strong?
- How do you keep the sabbath day holy? What changes would help you, and why?

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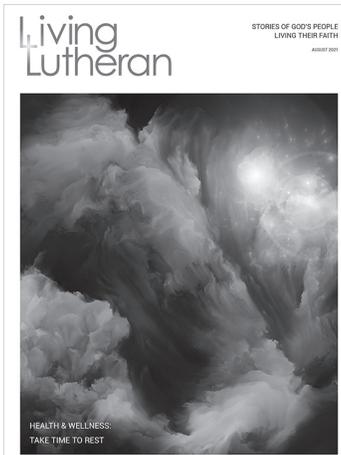
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EXERCISE 3: REST AND RECREATION

Many people don’t have enough time for rest and recreation. Sometimes it’s a matter of being too busy with work and the other things that have to be done. Other times it’s a matter of poor planning or failure to make it a priority. We can spend our time doing unessential things that are not restful.

The words “rest” and “recreation” are often paired because there is a close connection between them. Rest and recreation go together, but there’s more to rest than just relaxation and fun. Rest leads to “re-creation”—creating anew. Rest restores and “re-creates” us to be the people God wants us to be.

- Do you get enough rest? If not, why not? Would you like to rest more? How would it benefit you?



Study guide: **The discipline of rest** *continued*

- What are the blocks that keep you from being well-rested? To what degree is it each of the following: busyness, poor (or nonexistent) planning, poor priorities? Other factors?
- What steps could you take to get more rest?
- For you, how well does rest lead to recreation? Explain. How could you improve your experience of rest in order to more fully re-create?

EXERCISE 4: HEALTHY SLEEP

How many hours of sleep do you get a night? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says seven hours of sleep is the minimum needed for most adults, and that 35.2% of Americans don't get enough sleep.

Not only are sleep-deprived people more likely to experience daytime drowsiness, an inability to concentrate and impaired memory, they are also more susceptible to depression, heart attack, heart disease, asthma, stroke, cancer and diabetes, the CDC says.

- If humans as a species need seven or eight hours of sleep per night to be healthy, isn't that how God created us? Explain. And if God created us to need adequate sleep for healthy living, shouldn't we make it a priority? How can we make it a priority?
- Do you get sufficient sleep at night (at least seven hours)?
- Do you get as much sleep as you want? Explain.
- Do you get as much sleep as you need? Explain.
- Do your sleep habits affect your life in any way?
- As a study group, research the issue of sleep for your own edification, and then share it with the congregation.

EXERCISE 5: SLEEP AND JUSTICE

The *Living Lutheran* article explores the economic and racial implications of rest. People who have low incomes and need to work two jobs to make ends meet simply may not have enough time to rest. And this predicament is more likely to be experienced by people of color. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the 2020 poverty rate was 7.3% for non-Hispanic white people, but 18.8% for Black people and 15.7% for Hispanic people.

"Racism leads to underpaid people of color and inadequate employment that deprives them of their capacity to nourish themselves with rest," Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a professor at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, told *Living Lutheran*.

This may be borne out in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's statistics that show white people are the least sleep deprived at 33%, but the rate is 48.8% for Black Americans, 40.4% for American Indians, and 46.3% for those who are Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders.

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Study guide: **The discipline of rest** *continued*

- How does your work schedule affect your ability to get at least seven hours of sleep?
- What's the connection between income level and the ability to get adequate sleep? Why might it be harder for poor people?
- Look at the disparity in adequate sleep between white people and people of color. How would you explain the difference? Is there a noneconomic explanation?
- In what way might adequate sleep be a matter of racial and economic justice?
- How can God's people help with this social justice issue? Would a guaranteed living wage help?

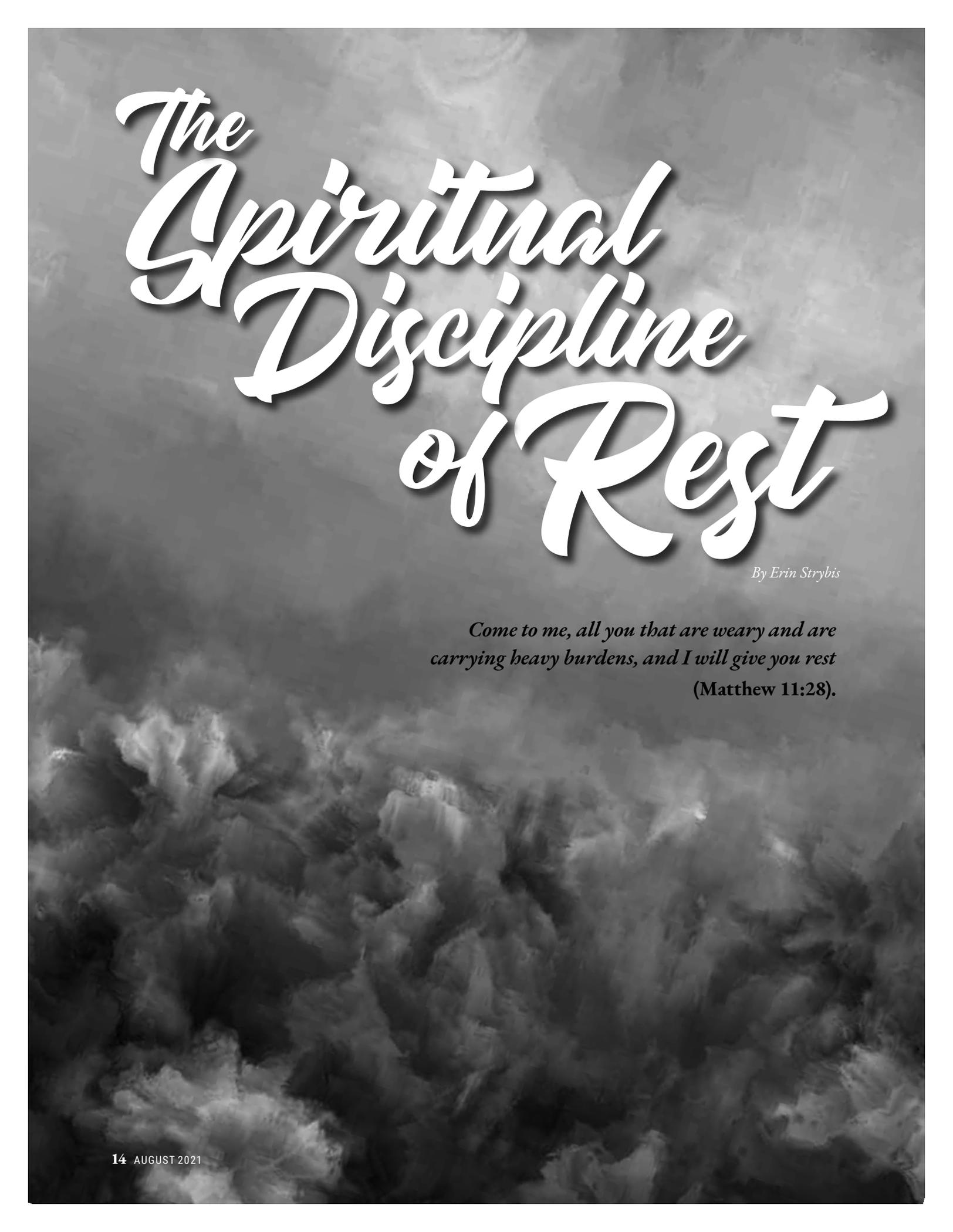
For action: As a study group, explore this issue and come up with ways to educate others. Draw up an advocacy action plan and present it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

EXERCISE 6: REST AS A DISCIPLINE

Discipline requires intention, commitment and follow-through. To improve our physical health we take on certain disciplines, such as working out twice a week, eating healthy foods and avoiding junk food. To improve our spiritual health we adopt disciplines such as reading the Bible, praying daily, attending church and giving generously. How might our lives be improved if we take on rest as a spiritual discipline?

- Are disciplines easy to adopt and keep? Talk about the intention, commitment and follow-through that is necessary.
- What disciplines do you practice? Why did you take them on, and how have they improved your life?
- In what ways might getting more rest improve the quality of your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health?
- In what ways and for what reasons could practicing rest be seen as a spiritual discipline?
- What specific practices could you adopt or habits could you cultivate that would enable you to embrace rest as a spiritual discipline?

For action: As a study group (ideally, or as an individual), come up with a 30-day plan for practicing rest as a spiritual discipline. Be as specific as you can about expected actions and the timetable for accomplishing them. Commit to follow it as rigorously as you can. When the 30 days are up, share experiences of what you learned. Consider making rest a lifelong spiritual discipline.



The Spiritual Discipline of Rest

By Erin Strybis

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are
carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest
(Matthew 11:28).*

Last August, Sarah Coomber completely uprooted her life. The strain of the COVID-19 pandemic had convinced her and her husband, both ELCA members and Minnesota natives, that after nearly two decades in Washington state they needed to move home, near family.

“Packing up our Washington life, buying a new house, moving and getting our son enrolled in something resembling ninth grade in the pandemic year was a heavy lift,” recalled Coomber, an author and writing consultant. “By the time we got semi-settled in Minnesota, we were tired and had a lot to process.”

By October 2020, Coomber and her husband knew they needed a breather. That led them to Spent Dandelion, a retreat center in Two Harbors, Minn., owned and operated by Anna Madsen, an ELCA pastor (spentdandelion.com). For a weekend, the couple immersed themselves in nature and conversations with Madsen, discussing topics such as vocation, caring for themselves as parents of a child with special needs, and reclaiming rest.

“We unpacked our hearts and heard ourselves and each other say things we hadn’t quite articulated or even realized in the midst of our busyness,” Coomber noted. “Anna reminded us that, no matter what our future looks like, God is in the midst of it, active in every single moment. Acknowledging that in itself [brought] rest to our hearts and minds.”

In five years of hosting guests at Spent Dandelion, Madsen has witnessed numerous such stories. “Anxiety and exhaustion are being lifted up as pressing matters, not just of one’s physical well-being but also spiritual well-being,” she said. “People are desperate for rest.”

Called to rest

For many, taking time to rest—whether it’s an extended retreat or simply a pause in a busy workday—can be a challenge.

“So many of our society’s dominant narratives mitigate against rest,” said Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a professor of theological and social ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif. “We get seduced and sucked into constant activity, and a lot of it is good, worthy, important activity, but it obliterates space for rest. I really think that the capacity to hear the Spirit and to [flourish] as a person are built partly by having rest.”

As part of her work, Moe-Lobeda has led student groups focused on rest and self-compassion as spiritual practices. She sees rest as a spiritual discipline because, for most of us, it requires intentionality. “I consider rest a deeply spiritual thing because I think the Holy Spirit within us is partly God’s longing for our well-being,” she added. “One of the things the Spirit does—if we listen—is guide us toward well-being.”

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An expert in ecojustice and director of the seminary’s Center for Climate Justice and Faith, Moe-Lobeda looks to creation for lessons on rest. She points to farmers leaving the fields fallow for a time so that the soil can be renewed. “The earth itself teaches us to rest,” she said. “Trees go into rest in the wintertime and come back much more alive and vital and pulsating with life in the spring after they’ve rested.”

And in Genesis, God rests on the seventh day and blesses it as holy. As people created in God’s image, we, too, need rest.

Yet rest often evades us. Moe-Lobeda has a theory as to why.

In her studies as an ethicist, for many years she claimed that humans’ “primary call was to love God and self and others and all of creation with God’s justice-seeking, earth-honoring love.” (This call rings true for the ELCA, whose tagline is “God’s work. Our hands.”) ¹⁷



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Today she believes “that’s our second calling. Our first calling is to receive and relish and trust the love of God.”

Madsen added, “We can’t do good if we’re not healthy and healed ourselves. [Rest] is about respecting our own createdness and that we are valued by God.”

Moe-Lobeda offers the example of parenthood. Parents both desire that their children thrive in work and rest well. Thus, our Holy Parent wants the same for us. “Yes, we are called to love,” she said. “First, we are called to receive that love. I hold that to be a theological claim. It’s grounded in the idea of grace.”

Madsen has seen firsthand how a new understanding of rest can be transformative for her guests at Spent Dandelion. “It’s a blessing to hear rest isn’t indulgent, but a calling,” she noted.

Luther on rest

Anthony Bateza is an assistant professor of religion at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn., specializing in Martin Luther, moral theology and Christian ethics. Like Moe-Lobeda, he thinks of rest as something graceful, which “makes [the concept] very resonant in our Lutheran theology and voice.”

He defines rest as intentionally stopping work in some way, with or without a goal or purpose for that stoppage. “Rest is part of what God intends for creation and part of Godself. All things are created and connected to God,” he said. “Rest is for all people, not just Christians.”

With the proliferation of self-care messages in popular culture, however, Bateza acknowledges that rest can become its own kind of burden, turning what he believes is a gift into an obligation. “We have to take time to learn how to make rest a part of our lives and resist ways that rest is either imposed or denied,” he said. “We have to be disciplined to use it well.”

Bateza points to Elijah’s mountaintop moment as an example of quality rest (1 Kings 19). “There’s something in the fact that we can hear God more easily when we feel that we’re at rest,” he said. “There has to be time for prayer and quiet stillness. A reminder it’s God that’s doing the work. ... The awareness is part of the work [of rest].”

Furthermore, he distinguishes rest as connected but not synonymous with sabbath. “To me there’s a porous boundary between the two,” Bateza said. God wants us to have rest and to honor the sabbath, but that comes with its own set of rituals. “It’s about what God has given, what God expects and having time to commune with God.”

Bateza said Luther believed “sabbath was really a gift God offered,” and he recognized the value of rest. At the same time, he was incredibly driven, writing and lecturing at a breakneck pace during the Reformation, and he often lamented his long hours.

Luther “found his time with his children to be quite restful,” Bateza said. “Previously a friar, he felt surprised with what a wonderful gift [fatherhood] was. He [also] valued time to sit and talk and drink with friends and colleagues. There’s a series of writings of his called ‘Table Talk.’ It might be easy to see that as an extension of work, but [these writings depict] an intentional setting-aside of time and space for reflection and conversation and letting the Spirit move.”

In addition, Luther was critical of his fellow Christians for “flitting and scurrying about, doing lots of unnecessary tasks.” Luther, Bateza said, used the ancient Greek and medieval concept *polypragomsyne* that referred to people being overly busy with needless work. He wanted people to stop trying to earn righteousness before God and instead find freedom and rest in God’s grace. Luther believed that necessary acts of service would naturally blossom from faith.

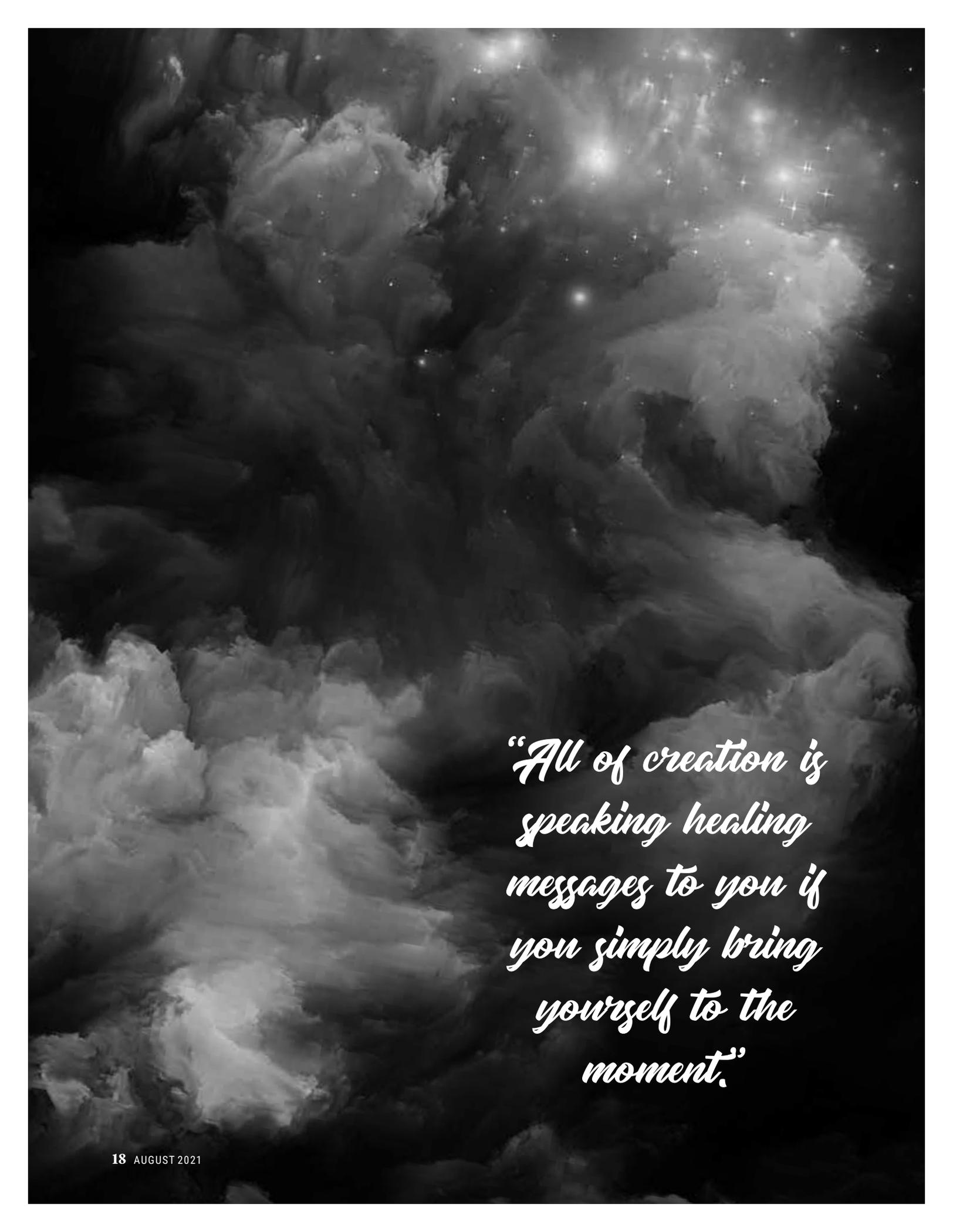
Rest and justice

Although God desires rest for all, systemic and structural challenges prevent some in society from receiving the rest they need to live balanced, healthy lives. Thus, rest is a privilege, Moe-Lobeda noted.

“If you need to work two jobs because you’re paid a minimum wage and you also need to raise your kids, there is little time for rest,” she said. “The reason people have to work two jobs is structural injustice. It’s wage structures—one of the problems of advanced global capitalism.”

Bateza is troubled by the sense “that people who are Black and Brown aren’t in need of rest. A narrative of laziness is laid upon people who aren’t working the way upper-middle-class white folks work. Black folks in particular are seen as shiftless.”

Moe-Lobeda added, “Racism leads to underpaid people of color and inadequate employment that deprives them of the capacity to nourish themselves



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with rest. It's an abomination in many ways to deprive people of the basic things that God wants for us and calls us to."

Drawing from his experience and his studies in racial justice, Bateza said, "Black folks can't rest in the ways that white people take for granted: driving, shopping or existing in all kinds of spaces."

Bateza appreciates those in the ELCA who stress slowing down and resting in God's presence. He believes the church should be fighting for everyone to have that opportunity. He called for an "end to the additional labor that people have to do because of their skin. ... I am Black and as such I tend to get picked out to a larger percentage of committees. [The church] could pay more attention to the kinds of labor that are being demanded to the Black and Brown folks around them in their community."

We should also examine rest through a gender-justice lens, he said. We often "give lip service to gender imbalances" in congregations, with more women than men taking on volunteer positions such as running committees, yet we rarely take steps to remedy the imbalance, thus creating less rest time for women. Labor imbalances due to gender exist in some households as well.

Moe-Lobeda issued a call to action for people of faith: to live in a way that challenges and dismantles the racial, gender, economic and other injustices that preclude rest for others.

Additionally, Bateza suggests that ELCA members urge one another to make space for rest. "[Could we] check up with others on how rest is going, in the same way we ask about family and jobs?" he asked.

Receiving rest

Heather Schmidt believes that one "can't do social justice work without it coming from a place of contemplative identity in who you are in God."

Schmidt, a member of Lake Park Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, wrote *This Moment of Retreat: Listening to the Birch, the Milkweed, and the Healing Song in All That Is Now* (Wipf and Stock, 2014) under the pen name Heather Lee. She first became interested in rest and retreat years ago when she felt exhausted and overwhelmed by "the volume of doing" in her life that was disconnected from her Lutheran identity.

"I don't think that the Lutheran church does a wonderful job of that more contemplative, quiet-centering-prayer, meditative piece of our faith tradition," she said. "God wanted to heal me ... [but] needed a pathway through."

Schmidt began branching out to other denominations to glean wisdom from their monastic practices. That led her to participate in the Holy Wisdom Monastery community in Middleton, Wis.,

where she learned the value of Christian meditation and centering prayer.

As time passed, Schmidt became more intentional with her rest habits, which include prayer, meditation, journaling, walking, swimming and yoga. Yet rest will look different for each person—for example, some rest by running or crafting. "Really naming these things as disciplines" enabled her to "incorporate them into a rule of life."

Now, as a retreat leader, she's noticed that some people can fear rest that has no agenda. But a big part of rest is just "showing up and seeing what comes up," she said. "All of creation is speaking healing messages to you if you simply bring yourself to the moment."

Schmidt suggested that those looking to add rest to their daily lives start small, integrating five minutes of quiet prayer and meditation, or walking in creation. As you practice intentional rest, she said, "start paying attention to what happens in that discipline in your relationship with God."

You may feel vulnerable or a bit out of control, she noted, adding, "I don't think we like to be out of control. We *are* out of control. We don't want to confront that. It's too scary to recognize that it's not up to us."

Yet part of rest, she said, is "to recognize that God is the doer of all. My work is to open my heart ... to listen to what the Spirit is calling in me right now."

Schmidt references Psalm 46:10 for comfort and contemplation: "Be still, and know that I am God!" †

To learn more

- *Reclaiming Rest: The Promise of Sabbath, Solitude, and Stillness in a Restless World* by Kate H. Rademacher (Broadleaf Books, 2021).
- *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* by Dorothy C. Bass (Jossey-Bass, 2001).
- "Stress and the Balance Within" and "How Wintering Replenishes" podcasts from *On Being with Krista Tippett* (onbeing.org).
- *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions* by Esther M. Sternberg (W.H. Freeman, 2001).
- *Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Bruggemann (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
- *Silence: A User's Guide: Vol. 1: Process* (Cascade Books, 2014) and *Silence: A User's Guide, Vol. 2: Application* (Cascade Books, 2017) by Maggie Ross.
- Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.