

The Hidden Treasure of Sabbath Keeping

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Exodus 20:8 Luke 13:10-16

“The Hidden Treasure of Sabbath-Keeping”, a good topic for Labor Day Weekend. When my parents were growing up in Southern Baptist churches there were very strict Sabbath restrictions, for example, no movies on Sunday afternoon. Sabbath and frivolous entertainment never went together.

When I was growing up the son of a Southern Baptist minister of music there was no *time* for entertainment. Sunday morning worship, afternoon youth choir, then some form of Bible instruction, then Sunday evening worship. It was a day of worship but *not* a day of rest.

I

Rest, however, was the original purpose of the commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” We’re talking here about “holy rest.”

In the Hebrew tradition there were two great events that undergirded this commandment: *Creation* and *Exodus*. The creation account in Genesis 1 says that God worked for six days creating the world and on the seventh day rested. O.T. professor Walter Brueggemann writes:

Israel rested because God rests. This God is not a workaholic...It is ordained in the very fabric of creation that the world is not a place of endless productivity, ambition or anxiety. ¹

The great rabbi, Abraham Heschel wrote:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. ²

There's an arresting phrase: embezzling one's own life! Wordsworth wrote:

The world is too much with us, late and soon
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.

And now the *Exodus*, the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. As slaves in Egypt they labored seven days a week. God had freed them from merciless slave labor. They now could rest one day a week. So the weekly Sabbath became a day of thankful remembrance, worship and rest. Again I quote Brueggemann

Sabbath, in the first instance is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawing from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption.

In other words, step out of America's consumer society. The word "Sabbath" means to *stop*.

II

So, for the Jewish people the weekly Sabbath became a time of thanksgiving, worship, rest and trust in the provision of God. This Sabbath rhythm was also built into the passage of years. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year. They let the land lie fallow so it could recover its strength. They lived in the seventh year on what they had accumulated the previous six.

Today in America if you are an Orthodox or Conservative Jew you live close enough to your synagogue so you can walk to Sabbath services. No driving on the Sabbath. I've always been stirred by the sight of Jewish families walking together on the Sabbath for services.

If you go to buy an oven, there are some ovens which can be set not to turn on on Saturday, a provision for Jewish customers. When I visited Israel I was surprised when I walked into bookstores and looked at the calendars for sale. All of them completely omitted Saturdays from the calendars. Sunday through

Friday, that was all. All of this has made me think about how I keep Sabbath, find Sabbath in my life.

III

In Jesus' day there was a thicket of laws about what was allowed and not allowed on the Sabbath. In today's gospel text Jesus healed a woman who had been severely bent over for 18 years.

The ruler of the synagogue, keeper of the rules, attacked Jesus for healing her on the Sabbath. "There are six days for that", he said. Jesus replied, You water your animals on the Sabbath. "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 years be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" His opponents, the text says, were put to shame while the rest of the people rejoiced in the miracle they had seen.

So the question comes: How can we be serious about Sabbath keeping without being legalistic about it?

I confess I never found a satisfactory way to get a full Sabbath of rest in my years of ministry. I tried to take a non-Sunday day of rest each week, but I rarely accomplished it. I loved, loved my work as a pastor, so I did it all the time. I became, as someone put it, "a victim of my own enthusiasms." In the long haul, it was not a healthy way of ministering or living.

How have you arranged your life so you have a full day of rest and worship each week? I wonder how lawyers do it given the required number of billable hours per week. I wonder how farmers do it with their work never completely done. Or mothers with children.

Wendell Berry, farmer, writer, environmentalist spends his Sunday mornings walking in the woods. From these mornings he has composed a good number of “Sabbath poems.” Here is one where he imagines that First Sabbath:

To sit and look at light-filled leaves
May let us see, or seem to see
Far backward a through clearer eyes
To what unsighted hope believes:
The blessed conviviality
That sang Creation’s seventh sunrise,
Time when the Maker’s radiant sight
Made radiant everything He saw,
And everything he saw was filled
With perfect joy and life and light.³

It is true Sabbath to sit or walk and observe the goodness of God’s creation.

He wrote another poem entitled “All We Need Is Here.” Here is the hidden treasure of Sabbath: The cease of endless striving and the trust in God that says, “All we need is here.”

IV

We need to let our lives lie fallow, just as the soil needs to in order to renew itself. We need to stop work, to be quiet, to unplug, to rest. Anne Lamott said, changing the metaphor:

Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes—including you.

Some people’s work does not allow them to take Sunday off. They need to designate another span of time as their Sabbath.

How, where do you find Sabbath? We begin with these questions: What nourishes your spirit; what refreshes your soul; what lets your body, mind, spirit rest? Follow the answers to those questions.

I believe Sunday worship is important as Sabbath. It sets your week in a spiritual frame. It frees your mind from the squirrel cage of daily life. It enlarges your mind. It connects you, with God and others. In community we pray, give

thanks, sing, make confession, and through the words of worship we learn to listen for that “still small voice” of God.

You may find that you need an occasional Sabbath weekend or a Sabbath week away. I have loved to spend a Sabbath week at a monastery, in prayer and quiet and worshipping with the monks at their services of prayer through each day. Churches can sponsor weekend retreats that offer Sabbath.

One way to ask the Sabbath question is: Where can you be still, experience stillness, or quiet. Famous mathematician and spiritual writer Pascal wrote:

All of humanity’s problems stem from its inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

In this noisy world it can get so noisy inside our own minds. An hour of Sabbath, or half a day, or day can help quiet our compulsive hearts and minds.

Years ago I went for a few days for a personal retreat at a retreat center in Texas named Laity Lodge. They had built a small house on the property called the Quiet House where one could go and be still. On one wall there was a cross stitch with these words:

Be Still and Know that I Am God

Be Still and Know that I Am

Be Still and Know

Be Still

Be.

I love the words of the new hymn we sang earlier:

Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,

Find the room for hope to enter,

Find the frame where we are freed:

Clear the chaos and the clutter

Clear our eyes that we may see

All the things that really matter

Be at peace, and simply be.

(Shirley Erena Murrey)

1. Walter Brueggemann, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1 (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 845

2. Abraham Heschel, I Asked For Wonder (N.Y.: Crossroad Books, 1983), p.

34.

3. Wendell Berry, Sabbaths (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p.9.