

## Keeping Sabbath and Giving Sabbath

Exodus 20: 8-11

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

On this Labor Day weekend, I want us not only to think about work, but also about *rest*. Work can be a form of grace, especially if it is good work, work that serves, that brings satisfaction and meaning. But rest is also a form of grace. Such is the meaning, old and new, of Sabbath. It is a grace. Today's sermon, then, is about "keeping Sabbath" and "giving Sabbath."

### I

Sabbath keeping is the spiritual practice where we honor the needs of the body, mind and spirit for rest—and where we put into practice our trust in God to provide. If this were easy, we would need no commandment! It is the fourth of the Ten Commandments:

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8).

The Sabbath was the holy gift of God, and keeping it holy first meant to rest.

There are two versions of the commandment, each giving their own meaning to the commandment. It is very interesting to me that there are many

more words explaining the meaning of this commandment than to any of the rest. I guess we need a little extra talking to about this one!

So let's take a look at both versions of the commandment. For the Hebrew people the Sabbath was founded on two great events: Creation, and Exodus.

The Fourth Commandment in the book of Exodus connects its meaning to Creation:

For six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day: therefore the Lord made the sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:11).

The Sabbath helps us enter time as "holy time", befriending it rather than making it our enemy. God rested on the Sabbath and established a holy rhythm of work and rest. Now we can too!

The rabbis through the years would ask questions about passages in scripture and give their answers. One might have said, "What did God do on his day of rest?" The creation story in Genesis hints at the answer: God took the day off and enjoyed what he had done, and took pleasure in it. (See Genesis 1: 31-2:3).

The Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says that before the Sabbath was a day of worship, it was a day of rest. That's something to ponder!

“It was” he says, “a complete and comprehensive work stoppage.”<sup>1</sup> The word “Sabbath” in the Hebrew means “Stop.”

On a trip to Israel I went into a stationary store. As I was examining their calendars I discovered none of them had Saturdays on them! What!? No appointments on Saturday? These Jewish people take this sabbath thing seriously!

Brueggemann expands on the meaning of Sabbath:

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

Too many of us Christians, including this preacher, work on Sunday afternoon or evening to get a jump on the work beginning the next day. Confession may be good for the soul, but it's murder on the reputation! Endless productivity, ambition, anxiety.

Sabbath keeping also demonstrates our trust in God to provide. Jesus spoke of such trust when he said, “Do not be anxious about your lives, what you shall eat or drink or wear.” Then he pointed us to the flowers of the field and birds of the air (See Matthew 6:25-33). We have a beautiful piece of Japanese calligraphy given me by a Japanese seminary student which hangs between our kitchen and

family room. The Japanese characters say “Lilies of the field” and “Birds of the air.” It reminds us of God’s gracious provision and helps loosen us from that daily anxiety that can grind us down.

## II

So first, Sabbath is rooted in Creation and the gracious rhythm of work and rest. The second meaning of Sabbath, and just as important, is rooted in the Exodus, God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. In Deuteronomy’s version, we are commanded not only to rest *ourselves* on the Sabbath, but everyone in the household, servants and animals are to rest as well! So it is about Sabbath-*giving* as well as Sabbath-*keeping*. Sabbath is for everyone! And why do we and our households rest? The Exodus event:

Remember you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:15).

In slavery the Hebrew people worked seven days a week in forced labor. Now they were set free. Sabbath is a mark of our freedom. Brueggemann says the Sabbath is a “withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh”, the “refusal to let

our lives be defined by production and consumption.” Moses said to Pharoah “Let my people go!” Sometimes it is hard for us to let *Pharoah* go!

My teacher and mentor, pastoral theologian Wayne Oates, coined the term “workaholic” in his book *Confessions Of A Workaholic*. Workaholism, he wrote, is an addiction, a dependency on “over-work.”<sup>2</sup> It can destroy our health, body, mind, and spirit, and do the same to our dearest relationships. Sabbath helps release us from the bondage to overwork. It reminds us that God is our provider and our deliverer.

### III

Rabbi Abraham Heschel has some of the most profound thoughts I know on Sabbath. In his book *I Asked For Wonder*, one whole section is on “Sabbath”. It begins:

He who wants to enter into 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 in embezzling one’s own life.<sup>3</sup>

Embezzling one’s life! This is what addiction to overwork and neglect of Sabbath does to us. As Wordsworth wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon  
 Getting and spending we lay waste our powers:  
 Little we can see in nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon. <sup>4</sup>

Sabbath is a way we acknowledge that we have enough. In Wendell Berry poem, “Wild Geese”, he sees the geese, living by the “ancient faith”: “All we need is here”. The poem ends:

...And we pray not  
 for new earth or heaven, but to be  
 quiet in heart and in eye  
 clear: What we need is here.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

Early in the Christian movement Sunday became our Sabbath. It was rooted in the great events of Creation and Easter. On the first day of the week God made the world, and on the first day of the week God raised Jesus from the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Our Sabbath has been called “a day of rest and gladness. We worshipped on that day, but the goal of Sabbath is not mere “church-going”, it is God.

The worship can happen anywhere, and especially in the “un-roofed church” of creation. The enjoyment of God’s world is a form of the love and praise of God. Emily Dickenson, the poet of Amherst, who found the New England worship services stultifying, wrote this, one of her most beloved poems:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—

I keep it, staying at Home—

With a Bobolink for a Chorister—

And an Orchard for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice-

I just wear my wings—

And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,

Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—

And the sermon is never long—

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—

I’m going all along.<sup>7</sup>

Sabbath keeping in our 24/7 economy is very difficult. Many have to work on Sundays, and people work all hours of the day. So perhaps we need to consider Sabbath as a “Moveable Feast”.

Some may need to designate another day of their week as their Sabbath. And we can experience Sabbath in other ways. We can establish a “Sabbath hour” every day. In a Wendell Berry story a character remembers as a boy working in the hot sun helping a farmer cutting corn. A couple of times in the day, the farmer led the boy to a creek where they both plunged in up to their eyeballs. Berry writes: “It made a hard day good.”

We could take a “sabbath weekend” every three months. *Practice idleness.* The 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and author George MacDonald wrote:

Certainly working is not always required of a man. There is such a thing as sacred idleness, the cultivation of which is now frightfully neglected!

Take a walk in the woods, take your love to the fields. Play. Enjoy the gift of solitude. Keep Sabbath!

## VI

And now the final word, not wanting to cram your Sabbath with words. *Give Sabbath too!* To your spouse, to your family, to your employees. The Sabbath you give is the Sabbath you keep.

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1. Walter Brueggeman, "The Book of Exodus", *The New Interpreter's Bible*; vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press,1994), p. 845
2. Wayne E. Oates, *Confessions Of A Workaholic* (N.Y.: World Publishing, 1971),p.4
3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked For Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1983)p.34
4. William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much With Us" *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1950* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.507
5. Wendell Berry, "The Wild Geese", *The Selected Poetry of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1998), p. 90
6. "The First Apology of Justin Martyr", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1,p106
7. Emily Dickinson, poem 324, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.,19060),p.153