

Extending the Grace Mindset
Deuteronomy 15: 1-2, 7-11; Matthew 6: 9-13
August 25, 2019

WE are in our third week of a series on Sabbath. Those who put the Narrative Lectionary together suggest that churches spend three weeks on Sabbath over the summer. Pastor Lauren and I thought that it might be helpful to be carrying some Sabbath insights with us as we transition from August to September and activities of the fall.

I'm going to spend some time talking through the sermon highlight reel of the last two weeks, (kind of like Sportscenter, think of it as Churchcenter), and then I'll reflect on our passages for today.

In week 1 of this series, Pastor Lauren preached on the "why" of sabbath. It is worth remembering that the command to practice the sabbath is #4 of the big 10, right up there with do not murder. It's a central command because stopping work for a day a week and resting is how you keep from being enslaved. The Ten Commandments is a response to the slavery of Egypt and it charts a different course for God's people, and Sabbath, a balance of work and rest is part of that.

Lauren shared that Sabbath practice is there "to make us come alive again." We may fear that Sabbath practice will cause us to miss out on life, or to fall behind, but the Bible has the opposite fear which is without Sabbath practice we will miss out on living life to the fullest. She shared Walter Bruggemann's quote that "rested people are dangerous people."

With rest and new eyes, having come back to life, rested people can see what is life-denying and then live differently.

Last week, I spoke of what I think is needed for sabbath taking, which I called a “grace mindset.” I read a book on vacation titled the *MVP Machine*. My escape books are baseball books, and this book is about how baseball teams are using data to improve player development. The catch phrase is “growth mindset.” Players need a “growth mindset,” any player can grow at any time, even the best players. This is a catch phrase in many fields right now.

I think that we, as people of faith, have a “grace mindset.” As we sink into a “grace mindset,” we begin to find true rest for our souls. In order to stop working, stop doing, when so much of the culture keeps moving, we will need to trust that we can stop, and the world will still be ok. We will need to trust that we are not God. There is more at work in the world than our actions alone. Holy Love is active too.

Wendell Berry is an author and poet who has had an influence on me. He has a practice of going on walks in the woods on his farm on the Sabbath and writing Sabbath poems. One of the collections of his Sabbath poems that is on my shelf is appropriately titled, *Given*. Grace

mindset. When we rest, we begin to see more and more all that we receive, all that is happening beyond our own effort, that we are creatures and that miraculous goodness surrounds us.

On the cover of the bulletin is a photo of one of the sunflowers in the garden at my house. Berry says, in one of his poems, “that we may reap, great work is done while we’re asleep.” In other words, it isn’t all up to us. I planted sunflowers seeds this spring, but I didn’t create the growth. I’m not responsible for the photosynthesizing. I’m not responsible for all that the sunflowers are now giving to the Goldfinches, bumblebees, and butterflies. I did one small thing, planted a seed, and now so much more has happened that I have had nothing to do with at all, even though it is the garden at my house. Now, the challenge for me is, can I trust that God is moving in other areas of my life too, not just in my garden. Maybe then, I’ll be better able to stop and take sabbath rest.

Our efforts contribute to all that is, but our efforts are not all there is.

Our passage from Deuteronomy, for today, extends this grace mindset into the world, into more of the economy, and we hear echoes of this in the prayer of Jesus. Sabbath is not

only about our individual lives and rested or unrested souls. The grace and patterns of Sabbath are intended to heal the entire community.

Pastor Kara Root of Nokomis Lake Presbyterian Church, who put this series of scriptures together writes that Sabbath helps us remember, “that we are human beings, made in God’s image for love and connection, (and not locked in a never-ending competition for worth and resources).

There’s an equalizing dimension to Sabbath practice in the same way that there is at the Communion Table. At the communion table, everyone is welcome, everyone has a place, everyone has value, and all are fed. No matter what our station in life, no matter what we have done, or what has been done to us, we are all on equal footing before God, and we are all offered grace that we need. No exceptions. Everybody needs it. Everyone receives it.

The same is true for sabbath. On the sabbath everyone stops, and the scriptures are very detailed about this. Deuteronomy 5: 14 says, “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns.”

Pastor Kara Root continues... “One day in seven everyone rests, and all distinctions that you erect to define your value and measure your worth disappear - old, young, rich, poor, slave,

free, citizen, foreigner - - you are all simply and completely human beings, alongside one another, all beloved children of God.”

By the time Deuteronomy is written, scholar Ronald Clements notes that “Israel had moved deeply into a capital-acquiring, land-owning economy in which wealth and poverty were prominent features (we may hear some similarities). It is taken for granted that debts would be incurred for the purchase of land and other property and that there would be further risk-laden business ventures. For the successful, these could lead to the amassing of considerable wealth and the acquisition of influence and power. For the less fortunate, such ventures could lead to ruin and destitution.”

You can see the logic of sabbath spinning and in tension in this situation. “If everyone stops work once a week, and everyone is reminded that they are equal in the eyes of God. And we have this practice where distinctions melt away, and we are all reminded we are creatures, then how do we change a system that is making us more and more unequal?”

The response is, “What if we extend the sabbath pattern into another part of the economy.” Sabbath practice already stops production once a week and reminds us, at least it should, that there is more to being human than production and consumption. What if we also

extend this pattern to debt forgiveness saying that every seven years there shall be a forgiveness of debts?”

In this passage of Deuteronomy, “The Lord’s remission” is proclaimed. God’s forgiveness has to do with actual debt. There’s an attempt to reset everyone’s standing within the community. We hear an echo of this vision in the Prayer of Jesus that we say every week. The Gospel of Luke’s version of the prayer of Jesus has the words “forgiveness of sin.” Matthew’s uses forgiveness of debt. The Gospel of Matthew casts Jesus as a new Moses and it seems likely to me that Matthew wants to bring this part of the law of Moses to mind and that debt means debt. The movement of Jesus, the early church, has as a concern, a resetting of everyone’s standing within the community and making sure that everyone has what they need.

Then we have some of the most powerful words urging us to care for the poor in the whole scripture, “do not be hard hearted, or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor...Open your hand to the poor and needy in the land.”

There’s an assumption here that whether you are successful or not is not about whether you are deserving or undeserving. There’s more to it than that. “There but by the grace of God go I” seems to be a part of this reasoning.

One of the tasks of the life of faith is to extend the grace mindset to others. God's grace is not just for us, but for others too.

Our Deuteronomy text has this sort of movement. You've been given what you have, be sure to give others what they need, every seven years, and every other time you see a need. The Prayer of Jesus has this movement, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Restore our standing in your eyes and in the eyes of others, O God, and we promise, and we pledge, we will restore the standing of others too. As you have given us, we will give. And Sabbath practice it seems to me, nurtures our awareness of grace.

It's hard to imagine a more transformational orientation of a community. To use Brueggemann's words, its hard to imagine anything more dangerous to how things are. Not just to the structures of power that create inequality and cement in place generational poverty, but to all that damages relationship. Here's a community that practices being restored in standing in the eyes of God, and then promises to do the same with others. To let go of debts, to let go of sin, to let go of grudges, to let go of seeing oneself as fundamentally different than, better than, more deserving than.

How do our relationships change as we practice extending the grace mindset outward? How does our world change as we extend the grace mindset outward. We see the Deuteronomists doing that. We see Jesus doing that. We are the church, the living Christ in the world, still receiving grace and sharing it too. Amen.