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Sabbath Series I

August 11, 2019

Scripture

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 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, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your 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.

Matthew 11:28-30 "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."

Sermon

As I was thinking about my sermon this morning, I remembered starting seminary 12 years ago. I was looking forward to being a hospital chaplain—it was versatile, no day was the same, you could be on your feet meeting interesting people instead of sitting at a desk, and you could be with people in some of the most holy moments of life.

A year into seminary, I did a chaplaincy internship like many seminarians do, and it was exhausting going some days from trauma to trauma. It was hard not to take the job home with me that summer, and I realized that the question I was dealing with wasn't *how* to rest and relax, it was *why*. Why come home to rest and relax when people in the hospital weren't able to walk away from their predicaments? (Now there are a lot of answers to that question and maybe someday it'll be pertinent for me to talk about that. Know that I got through it!) I wonder if many of us feel similarly in the demands of a world that calls our attention to so many issues: the liberation of the poor, racial justice, the equality of women, and LGBTQIA people, the climate, the humanity of the entire human race. These issues can be demanding and also exhausting—a feeling I personally felt as a chaplain. But as we begin a sermon series on Sabbath, I want to address that question about Sabbath—the *why* of it. Because if we don't address the *why* of it—*why* Sabbath?—we may never understand how incredibly important it is.

Our Scripture reading from Deuteronomy today is a reminder from the 10 Commandments. We first hear about the 10 Commandments in book of Exodus, but it is also in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, like Deuteronomy, which we read today. The general story is the same in all of the versions: God meets Moses on Mount Sinai and gives those 10 lines inscribed on stone tablets. Now many of us today may think that the 10 Commandments are an outdated Judeo-Christian list of some really basic rules. They are called Commandments, after all, and usually begin with the words "DO NOT."

In order to understand what they're about, though, and what this commandment, "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy" in particular is about, we must remember Moses and the Hebrew people's story. The people had been slaves in Egypt for generations. God hears the people's cries, calls Moses who asks Pharaoh to let the people go, he won't, 10 times this happens, there are 10 plagues, Pharaoh still won't let the people go, and then with a lot of help

from God, Moses parts the Red Sea and the people escape to the wilderness. Along the way, God invites Moses up Mount Sinai, a holy place, and gives Moses the 10 Commandments.

But the Commandments are far from being rules. Do they sound like rules? Yes, they most definitely do. With thousands of years between this context and our own, things get lost in translation and culture. But the 10 Commandments, the giving of the law, was about God giving ways for this new, free, people to conduct themselves. They were a new society. Each rule was designed to give life to the people. The commandments were guidelines for a healthy society. Rules for neighborliness. As one preacher says, “at the Red Sea, God took the people out of Egypt, and at [Mount] Sinai, God took Egypt [and empire] out of the people.”¹

God took the people out of Egypt, well we get that part. But God took Egypt out of the people—what does that mean, exactly? According to scholar Walter Brueggemann, in this story, ancient Egypt represents an empire in which the *only* worth ascribed to the Hebrew people was what they, as slaves could *produce*. The theme of “Pharaoh’s economy was: ‘Make bricks. Make more bricks. Make bricks without straw. Make more bricks. Do not take a break. Keep working. Keep producing. Keep making bricks.’”

Sabbath then, is a resistance to an economy of empire. Sabbath is a resistance to one’s worth being tied to one’s productivity. Sabbath, as Brueggemann likes to say, means, “do not bust your [behind] to gain approval from Pharaoh [or any empire].”² Keeping Sabbath is right up there in the commandments with “do not murder.”³ Yes, don’t kill people. But also, don’t let your work kill *you*. You are precious. If we listen to God telling Moses what’s important for a healthy society, then it seems that Sabbath is pretty important to God.

So important that Scripture tells us that after creating, *God* was tired, so God kept the Sabbath. In fact, it says God was refreshed. Given new breath, new life, reinvigorated. But the word *refreshed* in Hebrew is the word for “self,” which means that a better translation might be “God kept the Sabbath and was re-selfed.”⁴ By experiencing Sabbath, God found God’s self and was given Godself back by resting, because creating things is hard work.

Now, the way keeping the Sabbath is explained in the book of Exodus, the rationale for Sabbath is that if *God* was tired after creating everything, and rested after 6 days, we’re not God, so after 6 days, we get to rest too. Because if God gets weary and needs a recharge, we do too.

But we’re not reading Exodus today, we’re reading Deuteronomy, and that puts a different spin on it. In this version, the rationale is, you keep the Sabbath because you remember what it was to be under Pharaoh’s empire—make bricks!— so you take a break to remember that your worth is *not* tied to your productivity. In this version, you take a break because God delivered you from that, saying, “I hear your cries, and I will free you.” And you take a break—because if you remember where you came from and you remember what God did to liberate you—and you don’t want anyone else to have to make bricks either. So you give your children, your livestock, your household, the foreigner in your midst, the servants—you give everyone else a break too. Because you don’t want to forget that life is more than making bricks. And you don’t want to become pharaoh by accident, either.

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker, “I Love To Tell the Story” Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Summer 2019 Podcast, quoting Marc Olson’s sermon at Luther Seminary Chapel service, NL Podcast 368, https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1146

² Walter Brueggemann, <https://www.restorecommons.com/walter-brueggemann-pharaohs-economy-today/>

³ Kara Root, Commentary on Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Matthew 11:28-30, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4093&fbclid=IwAR3WpKgb1NsNaZORu_onUqxea8p4nqzZE7JmWiCyrvRdHXY26i9r3MLqNZc

⁴Walter Brueggemann, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rtvjmjMCC>

Now, if Pharaoh's empire said, "make more bricks", what might today's empire say? "earn more, buy more, get more, you're not enough, acquire, live bigger, achieve, achieve, achieve, be the best." We are afflicted by a consumer, material-driven mantra that instills a frantic pursuit of things and achievement in institutional success. It also provokes anxiety, loneliness, isolation and depression. This is the "make more bricks" of the 21st century.

But God says, "I made you for more than this. You're made to care for one another like God cares for you. You must stop, regularly, to remember this, or all the other commandments will become simply another way to measure, compete, and dehumanize yourselves and others. You'll forget the God who saves you and the freedom you've been saved for, and [without meaning to] you'll go back to being slaves."⁵ Or worse, pharaoh.

Pharaoh, which is a stand in character for any empire, wants us to be tired, want us to strive to keep up so we don't start thinking about what's actually wrong with the whole system. Exhausted people shop and order things from Amazon on their phones without thinking because it's easiest. Exhausted people stream TV shows instead of taking a bike ride or doing something actually refreshing, and it makes those corporations money. And along the way, we become less aware to the world around us and less generous in spirit. Less neighborly.

Again, Walter Brueggemann says that "Exhausted people do not make for transformers of a community." Or in other words, "Rested people are dangerous people." Because rested people have more energy and courage, they just might start to see what's really going on and change it for good. You see, Sabbath is about being returned to yourself, the you that's made in the image of God.

So, what gives you rest? What brings you life? Do you get Sabbath? What is it for you? Do you get to do anything that helps you get out of step with the 24/7 culture? That helps you lie dormant? God rested, God instructed the people to rest for their own good. Everything in the natural world rests at some point. Even fields need to lie fallow. Remember you are doing something important when you aren't *doing* anything.

Sabbath is the breath of fresh air, the gift of being restored to ourselves, and everyone else being restored to themselves for the sake of the community, for the sake of the world. Sabbath is a reorientation, a re-aligning. Its "not to take flight from the frantic and anxious character of our world. It is rather to acquire the perspective that will then permeate our every thought and action with the vision of God's peace and joy....Rather than being relegated to one part of our schedules, Sabbath observance becomes the prism through which all our thought and action receive their focus and direction."⁶ The secret of Sabbath isn't rest, you see, it's that it makes us come alive again. And you know you're doing it when you realize how hungry you were for it in the first place, just letting your identity rest in its made-in-the-image-of-God-ness.

Sabbath is a gift of God for the sake of life. It's meant to restore you – to help you find yourself, your life, again. So, remember the Sabbath. In other words, stop working for awhile. Find some real rest in the interest of sacred downtime. Sabbath was made for you and for your neighbor, so that we might be dangerously rested people who can care for each other. It is the way of God. Thanks be to God.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Imagine a Sabbath Economy, BY NORMAN WIRZBA, Copyright © 2002 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/SabbatharticleWirzba.pdf>