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Only So Many Bricks
Sabbath II – Exodus 5
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This is the second of four weeks of Sabbath stories. Last week we started at the beginning with God creating the world in 6 days and resting on the 7th. This story gives us a helpful model for healthy living: God works hard and then God puts a firm boundary in place that work can't get through. Then God stops completely for a day, lets the emails from Adam and Eve wait for a few hours. The question for us is are there boundaries we put in place that can help us stop for a little while on a regular basis.

This week we read the story of another beginning. Exodus 5 is the beginning of the confrontation between God and Pharaoh. I think of the book of Exodus as the foundational book of the Bible. Genesis is a big introduction, explaining how everyone ends up in Egypt, the Exodus from slavery and the 10 commandments are the big event and then most of the Bible is looking back to the Exodus and trying to live the new way of the 10 commandments. Jesus is seen as a new Moses leading a new type of Exodus.

Important for our conversation is that the Exodus happens, this central event of the Older Testament happens because God wants the people to have time off.

The people of Israel are in slavery in Egypt, and God hears their cries. God calls Moses and Aaron to help God confront Pharaoh. Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, king of Egypt and say, “God says, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” Isn’t this interesting. Not only does God want justice, but God wants the people freed so they can go to a festival? I want them to do something festive! I want them to decorate, to wear costumes, I’m thinking a carnival with rides for the children. Let my people go, so they can go to Townie night and eat doughnuts that look like little feet.” The festival is to God, but it’s supposed to be fun. Let the people go, so that they may gather and

eat and talk. Let my people go so the children may play games. Let my people go so they may remember they are human and remember that life is gift, that this is all grace. None of this has to be, this is all grace. Let my people go, and remember, and be happy.

Pharaoh thinks this is the most ridiculous nonsense he has ever heard, and thus begins the confrontation that will destroy his whole empire. Pharaoh says, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labors?” Pharaoh doesn’t care about the whole person or what people need to be human. Pharaoh cares about productivity. Here we begin to realize that this isn’t just a tired old story from the Bible. This is a story that helps us see what is happening all around us. Pharaoh continues, “The Israelites are more numerous than the people of the land, and you want them to stop working?” “Do you realize how much money would be lost,” Pharaoh is saying, “do you realize how much money I would lose, if all of these slaves stopped working?” The whole economy would collapse. This simple request is a threat to Pharaoh.

Because of this threat Pharaoh steps into the spin room. It’s time to take control of the message and discredit those who are making the request. Then Pharaoh says, “The people are lazy, that is why they want a festival.” There is something wrong with them, a flaw in their character. That’s why they want time off. Then Pharaoh seeks to crush the rebellion, Pharaoh says, “From now on you will make bricks without straw. (To make sure we’re on the same page, you can’t make bricks without straw in Ancient Egypt). You will need to scramble for straw and find it wherever you can because I’m going to require the same number of bricks. This should cure you of your laziness.”

We hear Pharaoh’s call to make bricks without straw everywhere. Whenever a company or institution expects the same amount of work to get done with fewer people, that’s a command to make bricks without straw. Downsizing is usually bricks without straw. Expecting services from the government but not funding the government is bricks without straw. Any time that we expect others or ourselves to do more in the same amount of time, that is Pharaoh’s command to make bricks without straw.

I think the story from Exodus 5 is helpful because our time is like straw. We only get so much of it. Yet we often add things or others add things to our already busy schedules. We expect ourselves to make more and more bricks, without any new straw to make those bricks. What happens then is that we scramble, just like the Israelites, looking to steal some straw from wherever we can find it. We take time from our most important relationships to make bricks. We take time from our hobbies, from our leisure, to make bricks. We take time from our sleep, from our rest, to make bricks. This has consequences for our health, our relationships, and our happiness. In our Sabbath book Wayne Muller says, “God does not want us to be exhausted, God wants us to be happy.” God wants a festival for the people.

We have a variety of taskmasters in our lives: our bosses are one, of course, our own fears of failure are another, and the expectations that we feel from the culture are a third. Pharaoh is in the midst of all of that telling us that we should be able to do it all, make an unlimited number of bricks, and if we can’t, there must be a flaw in our character – we must be lazy, committing the deadly sin of sloth.

Recognizing that we can’t do it all isn’t failure, it certainly isn’t sloth, its simply being honest. God has created us for more than labor and productivity. God has created us to be in relationship with one another, and we need time for that, some straw goes there. God has created us to enjoy creation, to rest and to play. We need time for that. Some straw goes there. We also need good work and that takes time – plenty of straw goes there, not all of it, and not an unlimited amount.

Pharaoh’s confrontation with God continues over the next few chapters and it doesn’t turn out well for Pharaoh. God sends plagues that systematically dismantle Pharaoh’s whole economy. Anything that makes money, the river, the grain fields, livestock: wiped out. An economy or an institution that only cares about productivity will not stand forever. The Israelites are delivered through the Red Sea, freed from slavery, and given a new way of life in the Ten Commandments. Remember the Sabbath is commandment number four, it comes before do not steal, and do not murder. Time for rest and play, time to remember that you are human is not a helpful lifestyle suggestion but a commandment. It’s not just a law, it’s a plea. Remember the Sabbath is the command. “Remember, please. I know it’s hard, I know it’s easy to forget, but for your sake, remember Sabbath.”

If we only have so much straw, and we're commanded to give some to Sabbath time, to rest, relationship, and remembering God's goodness; and if we can't make an unlimited number of bricks with the straw that is left over, that means we will have to say no to some things. Once again we're talking about putting some boundaries in place.

So much of the Spiritual life is about discernment. We are in a constant process of discerning what God is calling us to do, and what God is not calling us to do. The Spiritual life is about saying yes to that which leads towards wholeness for the world and wholeness for us. The Spiritual life is also about saying no to that which doesn't lead towards wholeness. Saying "no" is holy work.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that I spent a week at a community organizers training through the faith-based group Isaiah. For me, that week was a combination of a spiritual retreat and my experience of Junior High football. Isaiah uses a method called agitation in their training which reminded me most of what happened when I jumped off sides a couple of times in a game and the coach got in my facemask. The method is one thing, but what the leaders were challenging us to do was the work of discernment. What are you called to right now? Where is God leading you? (These were the questions for everyone and not just the pastors.) What's getting in the way of that? And, why haven't you said no to that yet? They were belligerent on this point. We were told repeatedly that effective leaders and effective organizations are extremely clear about how they use their time, their straw. They know the few things they say yes to and they say no to many things.

For our lives to be manageable, for us to remember Sabbath, there will have to be some times when we say, "No I can't do that, no more straw. If I did that I wouldn't have time for relationship, and rest, and remembering that life is a gift, and I won't steal from that."

Not only do adults need to get better at saying no from time to time, we have to help our youth and children say no to. It is common for youth to feel like they have to do it all and not only that, but to feel like their whole future depends on it. That's Pharaoh talking and it's not true. It's ok to take time to remember we're human. Life will still turn out ok.

Moving from a town of 4,000 to Northfield, I've been amazed at all the activity options that are available to children here. The only thing we had in Wisconsin that Northfield doesn't have is Circus Camp. Who knows how much clown potential is being left untapped in Northfield. What a gift to live where we do with so many amazing opportunities for our children. Gandhi said, "There is more to life than merely increasing its speed."

God has created us for more than labor. We are also created for relationship, and we need time to rest and time to enjoy. We need time to remember that we're human and to remember that life is a gift. And to protect that time, to remember Sabbath, we will need to say no once in a while. In doing so we will be saying "yes" to what God intends for us, no to exhaustion, yes to happiness. May it be so. Amen.