

Caring for Creation: Renewing Sabbath
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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July 28, 2019

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Leviticus 25:1-7

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

Mark 2:23-28

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Humanity is lord even of the sabbath.’

When Sam and I were in Wisconsin, we lived in an apartment building that overlooked a canal. The canal led to Lake Winnebago, a large, natural lake that’s used for sailing in summertime and ice fishing in the winter. Right below our balcony was a marina filled with sailboats, and all around were water birds. Egrets nested on a rooftop of an old warehouse across the canal, white pelicans formed a chorus line along the dam downstream, ducks bobbed in the water around the sailboats, Great Blue Herons showed up on a regular basis, and, of course, seagulls were everywhere.

It sounds peaceful, and you might think that we awoke every morning to birdsong, but you would be wrong. It was other sounds that woke us up, in the morning, and

often in the middle of the night, because the canal wouldn't have even been there if not for the needs of industry, and sure enough, kitty corner from us on the other side of the canal was a paper mill. I'm not sure exactly what form of paper it produced, but it operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, emitting a slight smell of chemical burn, a constant drone of machinery, and the crashing, squealing, beeping and banging of semis coming in and going out, unloading and loading up, at every hour of the day and night. We lived there two and a half years, and in two and a half years, I never knew the paper mill to go quiet.

Now, I know that paper mills are in constant danger of going under, and I understand the efficiencies of 24-hour production. Beyond that, I know, on a personal level, how hard it is simply to stop. On any given day, there is always more that could be done, at work or at home. My mind, too, has a hard time stopping. My thoughts are constantly rehashing the day behind, or casting forward to the days ahead—making lists, solving problems, or trying to. It's as though the key is stuck in the ignition, and the engine is always on.

I have a hunch I'm not alone. I also have a hunch that the problem didn't begin me, or with the Industrial Revolution, or even with the rise of Capitalism. I believe it is simply a human problem, with us since the dawn of our creation. The reason I believe that is that, in scripture, there is no command to work. None. That humans *will* work is simply assumed. But to get us to stop? *That's* what takes a commandment from God.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

We're not the first ones to struggle with that commandment. We see in the Gospels how the Pharisees had established themselves as the Sabbath Police—because needs kept arising, and people kept needing to fill those needs. But Jesus pushes back at the Pharisees: “Human being were not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for human beings.” He is reclaiming Sabbath as a blessing, rather than a burden. Oddly, we Christians have often taken his words as a release from observing the Sabbath, altogether. That's not what Jesus was saying, though. Yes, we still need to eat. And yes, we still need to tend to emergencies that arise. But we need the Sabbath. God gave it for our own good—and not just *our* own good. Note how holistic the commandment is:

...you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

The Book of Leviticus extends it even further, to the land, itself.

...the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

Think how hard that must have been for those who were subsistence farmers, struggling to get by even in the best of times. Not to plow, not to sow, not to reap—other than what emerged from the fields naturally. But imagine, too, what happened if they *didn't* observe that every-seventh-year Sabbath for the land: soil erosion, soil depletion, and every year, a sparser harvest than the year before. If the weekly Sabbath for humans and livestock was not observed, it was the same thing—humans and livestock getting bent and twisted and incapacitated by the mental and physical exhaustion of work, work, work, work, work with no relief.

What was true in the ancient world is just as true today. As Wayne Muller observes:

“In the trance of overwork... We consume things, people, and information. We do not have time to savor this life, nor to care deeply and gently for ourselves, our loves ones, or our world; rather, with increasingly dizzying haste, we use them all up and throw them away....

[“But,” Muller continues,] “Sabbath time can be a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork, mindless accumulation, and the endless multiplication of desires, responsibilities, and accomplishments. Sabbath is a way of being in time where we remember who we are, remember what we know, and taste the gifts of spirit and eternity.”¹

Sabbath is a way of being in time where we remember who we are, remember what we know, and taste the gifts of spirit and eternity.

Ahh.

¹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 4-5, 6.

That sounds luxurious, doesn't it? It might even feel selfish. After all, the world these days is in a perpetual state of emergency, isn't it? How can the people who are suffering under the chains of oppression, and the ecosystem that is approaching the tipping point for disaster afford for us to stop? Do we even have a right to embrace Sabbath rest when the existence of all living things is at stake?

But there is good news for those of us who think it's our job to save the world, and for whom it feels irresponsible not to constantly be taking action. That good news is that observing Sabbath *is* an action.

Sabbath is an act of renewal. We can't work well if we are running on fumes. When we observe the Sabbath, we are able to resume our work with greater wisdom and effectiveness.

Sabbath is an act of justice—because, when we observe it correctly, *everyone* gets a rest. We may not have servants or livestock—at least, I don't, but if we are constantly on the go, all of those in retail and in service industries must also be constantly on the go, ready to fulfill our every demand—just like when stores started opening on Thanksgiving, and all the employees had to cut their family time short. If we stop, they get to stop.

Sabbath is also an act of faith, because workaholism is actually a form of idolatry. It reveals our secret belief that the whole world depends upon us. But when we stop, and the world keeps turning, we bear witness that it is God, not us, who sustains creation.

Finally, Sabbath is an act of healing and delight—not just for our bodies and for the earth, but for our relationships with ourselves, with those close to us, and with God.

Those of you who have small children, or who have ever had small children, know how that works. You have one of those days when they are going full steam, running around creating constant mayhem, until you have had it up to *here*. But then, they *finally* go to bed and fall asleep, and you look in on them—on those sweet, trusting faces, relaxed and peaceful, and you remember how much you love them. You gaze on them and your delight in them is renewed.

Sabbath is time for us to renew our delight in this world and in the God who made it, but it's also a time for us, who are in constant motion, to be peaceful and still, so

that God has a chance to gaze at *us* once more, as at our creation, and have God's delight in *us* renewed.

And so, in the midst of our driven lives, of our work, of our call to justice, let's remember to embrace the rhythm of Sabbath for our sake, and for the sake of the world. Let's turn off the ignition and stop the grinding machinery of our lives long enough to breathe and look and listen, reconnecting with that first sense of delight in one another, in God, and in this wondrous world—because it is, still, a wondrous world.

As the poet Wendell Berry writes:

Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have the quiet²

² Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (