

Laws of Intended Consequences: Give It a Rest

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

June 26, 2016

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” -- Exodus 20:8a

The quote from Henry James on the front of this morning's bulletin evokes an entire world of memories for me, as, I hope, it does for you. Summer afternoons, before the era when we entombed ourselves in sealed, air-conditioned buildings, were too hot for the hardest work, so things slowed down, calmed down, relaxed, and we were able to do our work at a much more leisurely pace.

I vividly remember canning season in my grandmother's kitchen, when all hands were put to work carrying in bushels of fruits and vegetables in the morning, and the jars were put on to boil and the kitchen soon became as steamy as a Turkish bath. It's still a wonder to me how the wallpaper remained upright.

Those were the mornings, but the afternoons were different. The huge pans of boiling water were still, the doors and windows were all open, the steam had cleared, and row upon row of canned goods practically sparkled on kitchen towels on the counters.

People began to pack up and drift away to start supper at their own homes, and soon enough we kids would be told it was time to come in. The evening would have had turned to night, we would have chased the fireflies and each other, while the fans had been cooling our living rooms and bedrooms. Being called in meant that it was time to rest.

Rest was built into our lives in those days. Even a single day had its seasons and rhythms, and rest was part of that rhythm of life. We lived closer to the earth, we understood more clearly where our food came from and its true costs, and none of us expected to get rich sitting at a computer terminal on Wall Street gambling with someone else's savings.

A lot has changed since those days, but some things haven't. We all still need down time. We all still need rest, and we all still need a break, even from the things we love. One of the small groups that has, in hindsight, turned out to be vitally important for kitting and holding our congregation together was the Play Group that formed about twenty-five years ago. For the young parents at the time – the Juarezes, the Yuskos, the Lorentzes, the Dugovicsees, the Holtzes, and others who have moved away – that group provided a time not only for their children to start learning how to interact with other children, but it also gave their parents some relief from the burdens of parenting. At the end of the day, their children were still their children, but for a little while, at least, the adults enjoyed the company of other adults who knew how taxing parenting can be, and who were prepared to trust each other enough to speak candidly about their fears, frustrations, and confusions. The Play Group provided a respite from some of the duties of the most important work any of us will ever do. It was a kind of sabbath.

Sabbath is the subject of the fourth commandment and this morning's topic. "Remember the sabbath day," God told the Israelites, "and keep it holy." We preserve the holiness of the sabbath by resting, which is a very different way of working out our faith than most of us religious types are used to. We equate holiness with doing something for God and others – feeding the hungry, standing up for the oppressed, marching for justice, sharing the good news of the gospel. We don't think of resting as a holy work, but God does.

We are given six days every week to get our stuff done – to get ourselves and our loved ones fed, clothed, housed, and educated, and on the seventh day we get to practice holiness by not doing all of those things. On the seventh day, we get to rest, to be who we want to be as opposed to being all the things our various types of work ask us or tell us to be.

Above everything else, getting to rest means you get to be yourself – you get to be you. Not the you that people have made you – employee, spouse, parent, or caregiver – but the you that God made you. The essential you, the fundamental you, the you freed from the expectations and demands of others.

When we rest – and the commandment, it should be noted, speaks not of sleep, but of rest – we get to return to that primary relationship we have with God, and we get to re-discover and re-invigorate and re-appreciate who we actually are.

This is the sabbath pattern that God built into creation, and one of the amazing things about it is that it applies to God as well as to us: the sabbath allows God to be God.

If you look just a few chapters later in the book of Exodus, in Exodus 31:17, you'll find this statement from God to Moses: "It – that is, the sabbath – is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed."

Now I need to lay a little bit of Hebrew on you for you to grasp what I just read, and I'm indebted to Professor Walter Brueggemann, who will be lecturing at our Avon Lake church in October, for this insight.

The Hebrew verb translated "refreshed" in Exodus 31:17 occurs only three times in the Bible, and it comes from a noun, *nephesh*, meaning "self" or "person" or "being" or, as we sometimes translate it, "soul." Its essential meaning is self, so when you make that noun a verb, you mean that a person is "selfed" -- they receive or recover themselves.

And that's what this verse in Exodus says the sabbath allowed God to do – to recover God's own self. When the verse says that God was refreshed on the sabbath, it is telling us that it is rest that allows God to be God. After all the creating, all the smiting of the Egyptians, all the law-giving at Mt. Sinai – after all of that – God recovers a sense of God's self through rest.

Getting to rest from work, as the Bible understands it in the institution of the sabbath, is to be allowed, for one day in seven, to step away from the relentless pressure to be defined either by what we produce or by what we consume. That's what it means to rest from work. We are no longer producers and we are no longer consumers. We are free to be the people God created us to be prior to Pharaoh's demands or the demands of our own self-imposed 24/7 consumerist

economy. The fundamental characteristic of rest is freedom. That's what rest gives us. That's what sabbath means. And that's why it's important.

Sabbath gives us people back. Not workers, not consumers, but women and men who are God's children and our sisters and brothers. They're not for hire and you can't fire them. No one but God writes their job description. They don't have a boss, but they do have a Parent, who says to them and to us, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."

We know the dangers of overwork. We know what happens when you drive yourself or allow yourself to be driven too hard. We begin to fall apart. We become irritable, unfocused, ungenerous, and inhospitable. We lose those very traits that make us valuable to those who pay us for them and for those who love us for them. We lose, in short, ourselves. Sabbath gives us back ourselves. So for your self's sake, for the world's sake, and for God's sake, give it a rest.