

The Language of Lent: Withdrawal

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.” -- Exodus 20:10

As you can see from this morning's order of service, my text is the fourth commandment: “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Professor Walter Brueggemann, who will be spending a weekend with us in the Western Reserve Association in October, says that the fourth commandment is the pivotal commandment in that famous list of ten. It links the first three – how we are to relate to God – with the remaining six, how we are to relate to one another. And since that commandment is about rest, rest tells us how we are to relate to God and to one another. Rest, in our religious tradition, far from being a resented – or desperately sought-for – option we squeeze into our over-scheduled lives, is the foundation for how we are to live, both in this world and in the world to come.

Not many of us, I imagine, think of rest as holy, but scripture does. The Hebrew verb that gives us the noun sabbath means “to stop or cease or bring to an end.” Very far back in that word's history, it applied to certain days of the month when people were to refrain from certain activities because those days were regarded as inauspicious – as some people still today regard Fridays that fall on the thirteenth day of the month.

But the ancient Hebrews, our most distant religious ancestors, adapted this custom of stopping on certain days of the month and changed it in two important ways. First, they applied it to the seventh day of every week, and, second, they said that it wasn't just enough to stop; what was needed, actually, was rest – rest for everyone – laborers, managers, owners, slaves, resident aliens, women, men, children, even the animals. The only exceptions to this commanded rest were the priests, who were allowed to lead worship, as I still am today, and those whose work is necessary to sustain life in an immediate situation, such as a midwife. Otherwise, we all rest.

And the reason we rest is because God rested, which is not something that we ordinarily associate with our all-powerful, all-knowing God. God, for many of us, is like a gigantic Eveready Bunny – it goes and goes and goes and never stops. God creates and creates and creates, never sleeping, never resting, never missing a beat. That's the way many of us think about God.

But the Bible is much smarter than we are, and the Bible, in its very first chapter, says that on the seventh day God rested from the work of creation, and among our Jewish ancestors, it is the sabbath, and not the creation of human beings, that is the culmination of creation. We Christians misread this part of Genesis. Our Jewish ancestors quite sensibly, in this string of seven days that structure the story of creation, saw that the most important element comes at the end – which is resting on the sabbath. And so the sabbath was understood as the crown of creation. Rest crowned God's work, just as rest is intended to crown ours. And of those seven days of the week, in the Bible it is only the sabbath that has a name; all the other six days are known simply by their number. That's how important the day of rest is – it's not incidental; it's holy.

And why is the day of rest holy? Not because we go to church. No, that's got it backwards. We go to church because the day is holy; our going to church isn't what makes it so. We worship on our day of rest because it is a holy day, and what makes it holy is that rest allows us to be who God intended us to be – creatures created in God's image and likeness.

Our day of rest is holy because rest is what allows us to stop being all the other things that the world demands us to be – accountant, janitor, farmer, truck driver, school teacher, lawyer, active senior citizen, whatever – and our day of rest allows us to be ourselves – our true selves, the sons and daughters of God.

And that's what makes the day of rest holy. God rested from doing . . . and simply was, thereby setting the pattern for our own lives. On the sabbath we get to stop doing and simply be. We don't have to be productive. We don't have to be a cog in our unsleeping economic machine. We don't have to keep buying to keep the economy growing. We don't have to DO anything. On the sabbath, we are allowed just to be. Indeed, on the sabbath we are commanded just to be. That's what the commandment to rest is – the commandment just to be. On the sabbath, we get to withdraw from the ceaseless round of doing and rest in the eternal realm of being. On the sabbath, we get to participate in God's eternal now.

Now there are lots of ways to get this fourth commandment wrong, of course, and we've tried quite a few. Back in colonial New England, for instance, when the Puritans had more leverage over people's lives than we, their descendants, have today, the sabbath was strictly enforced and precisely defined.

In 1670, two sweethearts, John Lewis and Sarah Chapman, were convicted in court of sitting together under an apple tree in her father's orchard on the sabbath.

In Plymouth, in 1652, Elizabeth Eddy was fined ten shillings for doing her laundry on the sabbath, and in 1656, Captain Kemble of Boston returned from a voyage of three years and kissed his wife on the doorstep of their home when she opened the door to greet him; for his “lewd and unseemly behavior” on the sabbath, Captain Kemble was forced to sit for two hours in the stocks on the public square.

And even in the childhoods that many of us can remember, the sabbath was a dreary exercise in church and boredom which, for many of us, were more or less the same thing.

Sunday afternoons in my childhood seemed interminable to me and my siblings, since there were lots of things we weren't allowed to do then that we were allowed on other days. We weren't, for example, allowed to play cards on Sunday. We weren't allowed to dance. If we played out in the yard, we had to play quietly. Businesses, of course, were all closed, and I can still remember the day that our local movie house decided to start showing Sunday matinées, and the debate in our house about the appropriateness of our going to the picture show on the sabbath.

Times have changed and so have I, and Sunday afternoons now are, for me, what I believe God intended for them to be for all of us: the blessed highlight of my week.

By Sunday afternoon, the concentrated piece of my work is done and I get to go home to eat something that the slow cooker has prepared while I've been earning my bread by the sweat of my jaw. After lunch, I reheat the half-mug of coffee I started before church, command all of my dependents to get on the bed with me, and I settle in for rest with my coffee, my four-legged loved ones, and the arts section of the PD. And in that sabbath rest, I consider myself supremely happy and extravagantly blessed. My hope and my prayer for all of you is that you have something that vaguely resembles that rest in your own life.

This coming Wednesday, we'll be looking in some detail at Marjorie Thompson's

discussion of sabbath in our midweek Lenten program, along with two other practices of withdrawal from the world in the form of worship and fasting. In all three cases, withdrawal from the world isn't a pious retreat or defeat; it's a holy preparation for the sundry callings that all of us have in the world. We rest in order not only to recover our true selves as God's beloved children, but also to have the time and space to discern how best to take those true selves back into the world as those "ambassadors for Christ" that Paul told the Corinthians that we are.

Sabbath is a way of saying no to a world that claims us as its own. Sabbath says that we are not consumers, producers, or controllers. Sabbath says that we are God's. As I quoted for you last week, St. Augustine said it best when he said, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee."

Sabbath allows us – commands us, in fact – to make room in our busy lives for God, and so find rest for our world-weary souls. Sabbath is a glorious blessing and a tremendous gift. Accept it, explore it, and enjoy it and see for yourselves how different life can be.