

“Keeping Sabbath”
Exodus 16:13-30 and Matthew 11:25-30

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July 3, 2005

My name is Chris and I am a Sabbath breaker. I have been a Sabbath breaker since I was fifteen years old and worked as many hours as I could operating the scoreboard for the Pleasant Garden Youth Basketball Association at six dollars per game. The goal was to make enough money to buy my own television for my room. It has just gotten worse from there. It's not that I worked at the gym on Sunday mornings, this church league would not have scheduled games during the one “holy” hour per week. It's that I bought-at age fifteen-into the mindset that says produce more so that you can consume more. I've given in to the “I've got to have more” trap. I have been convinced that we live in a world of scarcity and shortage. And so, yes, my name is Chris and I am a Sabbath breaker.

If there were support groups for people who struggle with keeping Sabbath, I dare say we would all be there. Of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Sinai, the fourth may be the most frequently broken, because its intent extends beyond what we do or do not do on Sunday mornings. Obviously, you who are here on July 3rd don't need to hear about the importance of coming to worship weekly. But keeping Sabbath involves more. Keeping Sabbath requires us to imagine the world in an entirely different way. It's a matter of faith in the abundance of God.

Our culture urges us to operate under the assumption that we need more of just about everything. Tomorrow we will celebrate the 229th birthday of our nation, and in these centuries we have taken production and consumption to a new level. Those who founded this nation brought with them what has been called the “Protestant work ethic.” Early American ministers preached that hard work, which is commanded by the words of scripture, worked as a correction for original sin. God's response to Adam and Eve's very first sin was a lifetime of struggle and work. And these Puritan preachers were convinced that this was not only a punishment for disobedience but also as a means for correcting and benefiting humanity as a sort of medicine. To work was both divinely ordained and a necessity because of humanity's sinful nature. It was in this time that the phrase, “idle hands are the devil's workshop” was coined.

I am convinced that even our ancestors in the faith and in this nation would be shocked at how far we have taken this teaching. I am further convinced that, far from being a correction to our sinfulness, our obsession with work and productivity is *our* American idol. Finally, I believe that this idolatry is rooted in our lack of faith in the God in whom we profess belief.

Of course, as is often the case, this idol is in no way new to the people of God. Take, for example, this morning's text from Exodus. God's chosen people, the Israelites had finally been freed from bondage to their Egyptian taskmasters. These Israelites knew something about the rigor of a life centered on work without Sabbath rest. Throughout their time in Egypt, the Israelites yearned for time to worship, time to offer sacrifice, and time to rest in the presence of God. And now, in the wilderness, for the first time in their lives, they had been given the gift of Sabbath.

We pick up the story just after the people had safely crossed the Red Sea. Some of you might remember that the first thing we are told that the Israelites did once they set up camp on the other side of the river was complain. They complained of hunger and suggested that they may have been better off back in Egypt under the harsh conditions imposed by their taskmasters. In other words, they lacked faith in God's ability to provide for them, this God who had led them out of Egypt and carried them safely across the mighty sea on dry land. God hears the complaining of the Israelites and tells Moses to prepare the people to eat. God says, "at twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." God's very nature is shown by the ability to provide for God's people. And just as God has promised, the people do find meat in the evening and manna from heaven in the early morning. God remains faithful. God even gives the Israelites a Sabbath day, a day on which they are not to gather manna but rather rely on the abundance of the previous day.

You know the rest of the story. The people disobey God's commandment and go out on the Sabbath to gather more manna. I can picture them justifying their actions. "Well, you can never be too careful and there is no guarantee that the manna will continue to fall." "I'm only looking out for my family and making sure that there is enough to keep us all satisfied and comfortable." "Well, the people in that tent took more than us yesterday, so we are only keeping up." Not trusting in God's abundance, they saw only scarcity. And when all you see is scarcity, keeping Sabbath is not possible.

Before you are too hard on our ancient ancestors, I want you to consider whether or not the situation has really changed all that much. Is it not true that we continue to operate from an assumption of scarcity? There is never enough to go around and therefore we must continue to produce, continue to work harder than our competitors, so that we may continue to consume and accumulate more and more. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "most of us are so sold on speed, so invested in productivity, so convinced that multitasking is the way of life that stopping for one whole day can feel at first like a kind of death....as time billows out in front of you, you can have a little panic attack at how much of it you are wasting since time is not only money but also the clock ticking on your life."¹

This is the model of scarcity. The model of scarcity complains that there is never enough time to get all the work done, let alone rest. The model of scarcity says that there is not enough food for all in the world to be fed. The model of scarcity insists that we must fight and destroy in order to protect what is ours. The model of scarcity tells us that it is

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Sabbath Resistance" in *Christian Century*, May 31, 2005, p 35.

not our job to take care of others, because this is a dog-eat-dog society and if you do not buy in you will be left out. The model of scarcity warns us that we have to hold on tightly to our salvation and to our God because if just anyone can be saved or worship God than there won't be enough to go around. The model of scarcity has a strangle hold on our society just as it choked the life out of the Israelites wandering in the desert.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man whose land produced more than he could use by himself. So the man decided to tear down his barns and build larger barns, so that he would be comfortable and wealthy for many years to come. But you remember what happened to the man in the parable. That very night his life ended and all of his possessions no longer meant a thing. You might say that his life had been taken from him long ago, through his obsession with personal security and wealth. Jesus closes the parable with the words, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God." The model of scarcity leads only to death.

There is another way, a way that is demonstrated in the story from Exodus and that comes to us through the life of Jesus of Nazareth. This way asks us to have faith in the abundance of God. It is an entirely different way of viewing the world. God did provide enough manna for all the Israelites to be filled. Jesus said that he came that we may have life, and have it more abundantly. The welcoming and inclusive acts of Jesus showed us that God has enough love to go around, so that we may all be included, all God's children.

There is a wonderful little poem by Rumi, a 13th Century mystic and poet, that goes this way:

Out beyond ideas
of wrong-doing and right-doing,
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase
each other
doesn't make any sense.²

This is the model of abundance. The model of abundance frees us from servitude to our taskmasters of greed, wealth, and selfishness. The model of abundance calls us to serve others with our time and resources. The model of abundance encourages us to give our lives away, trusting that God's faithfulness will never run out. And the model of abundance allows us to let go, to rest in the presence of God convinced that God is in control.

² Rumi, "Out Beyond"

I have to admit that this is all very difficult for me. I am a Sabbath breaker and have really become quite eloquent in reciting the reasons why. The work that I do is important and others benefit because of my hard work. I really enjoy being busy. Idle hands are the devil's workshop. Still, despite all my elaborately constructed excuses for my utter inability to practice Sabbath, it really comes down to my desire to be in control. The Israelites wanted to be in control of their own destinies and had little use for the gift of rest that God granted them. I can identify. I believe that we all can. Sometime, somehow we in this affluent and powerful nation stopped believing that we actually need God...at least not the God that we find in the scriptures. A God that I do not recognize is being preached about all over the country this morning. It's the God who takes primary interest in our personal wealth and happiness, the God who has chosen America above all other nations, the God who authorizes humans to do what is necessary to expand power and wealth. This is not the God that we find in this morning's texts. I fear that this God is our own creation, a puppet God who is called upon to defend our efforts to acquire and control more and more.

The God that I read of in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is a God who says enough is enough and too much is a sin. Too much violence and warfare. Too much greed and wealth. Too much power. Too many possessions. Too many hours spent on productivity and consumerism. Too much.

The communities that I read about in the scriptures offer revolutionary alternatives to business as usual and uncontrolled consumerist mentality. Walter Brueggemann has argued that "Sabbath is the most radical social action a church can take."³ That's because, in its communal form, Sabbath is not only about rest but also about resistance. In practicing Sabbath, the church shows that it is distinct from the ways of the world. In keeping Sabbath, we share with others the right to do the same to do the same, we give rest to those who suffer and comfort to those who mourn. In the book of Leviticus, we read that Sabbath rest was extended to all of creation...the slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, property was restored, and land was given a break. In imagining and modeling Sabbath for the world, the church lives out its prophetic mission.

Are you feeling the weight of too much in your own life? Then hear the words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel this morning not as an invitation but as a command. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Last week, Joanna told us that this passage from Matthew is one of the most beloved among religious blog users. Why is it a favorite? Perhaps it's because these are words that we need to hear precisely because it is a command we do not follow. Come to me because you can't get by on your own. You need a Sabbath.

The Gospel offers us a total alternative to the "production and consumption" society. Such a society sees everything as a usable commodity—the Gospel sees everything as God's abundance. Perhaps keeping Sabbath is not so much about self-care but about a public declaration that our lives are not meant for production and consumption. Rather

³ Walter Brueggemann, National Pastors Retreat 2005

our lives are about resting, and allowing others to rest, in the one true God, who modeled Sabbath for us in the beginning.

It is our choice. We may think that we are forced to live like the Hebrew slaves by the taskmasters of consumption and productivity—but we are not. It is our choice. We can choose to be beaten down and stressed out by the taskmasters of this world; or we can live out the radical model of community found in scripture. It is our choice.

Joshua, who would finally lead those Hebrews into the Promised Land, stood before the people and challenged them saying, “Choose this day whom you will serve...” So, who’s it going to be on this national holiday weekend? “Choose this day whom you will serve...” Amen.