

“The Habit That Keeps Us Human”

Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 6:30-34

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He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”

Mark 6:31a

For the Hebrew people, the Ten Commandments or the “Ten words,” as they are referred to in the Jewish tradition, mapped out what it was like to live in freedom as God’s own people. The Commandments are not given by a judgmental God who wants to fence us in. The Commandments rather are intended to set the parameters within which life can be lived to its fullest as the Creator intends. They lay out the principles that are the cornerstones of human society, family life that makes for wholeness and personal character.

I am drawn to this contemporary translation of the Commandments:

Always put God first.

Never worship lesser gods.

Do not use God’s holy name for your own purposes, or for the purposes of magic.

Remember the Sabbath.

Honor your parents.

Do not kill one another.

Do not commit acts of sexual infidelity.

Do not take that which is not yours.

Do not lie.

Do not covet what your neighbor owns or has.

If we are true to these principles, our lives have a good chance of blessing us and those who know us. If our societies operate according to these principles, it is quite likely that there will not be hunger or suffering or war. A wise commentator has suggested that we ought to think of the commandments as being like buoys that tell swimmers where the deep waters are. These laws are meant not to rob us of life, but to save us from danger, to enhance life, and to make possible the well-being of the human community.

Interestingly, there is no commandment that is to my mind, more clearly directed toward the ends of a whole life that honors God and enables us to live at peace with our neighbor, than the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Actually, the fourth is a relatively long commandment. It is, in fact, the longest of all the commandments. “Six days you shall labor and do your work. The seventh is the Sabbath to your Lord. You shall not work, you, your son, your daughter, your servants. The livestock or the alien residents in your town – in six days the Lord made all that is and rested on the seventh,” and on it goes. It takes up one-third of the entire Decalogue.

“Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.” We use the word Sabbath. The Jewish community uses the word Shabbat, the Hebrew word for “pausing” or ‘ceasing.’ The Hebrew Bible issues directives that the people of faith are to cease from any commercial activity on the seventh day of the week. Every seven years, a sabbatical is declared – the land is to be given a rest. The people are to be hunters and gatherers again, rather than farmers. And every fifty years a different kind of Sabbath is to be declared, a jubilee, in which all the land is redistributed among the clans. One could say that the deepest root of social justice is the profoundly restful experience of abandoning control over other people and over the earth. (1)

The Ten Commandments were given after the Exodus, but the Hebrew people had observed Shabbat throughout their captivity in Egypt. For six days, they belonged to Pharaoh, but on the Sabbath, they were the free men and women who belonged only to God. Sabbath day was freedom time. (2)

Several years ago the *New York Times* offered a series on the Ten Commandments and what it looks like to live them out in contemporary society. The newspaper did a profile of Dr. Stephen Arpad and his wife, both of whom are pediatricians who spend their careers working with children with HIV. Dr. Arpad said, “I grew up in Detroit with an American kind of Judaism that lacked spirituality. But now as a father and a practicing physician who deals with children at risk everyday, I cannot live that way any longer. During my medical training, I began to be drawn more to organized religious life. I needed a place where I could go after I had seen what I saw at the hospital. I needed the opportunity to contemplate things beyond the material world. I needed a place to think about the human condition. You can go into therapy to deal with some of this, but therapy can only help you find out who you are. It cannot answer the question of why am I here.” (3)

Observing the Sabbath has a countercultural quality to it. It is designed to make us fight the forces of materialism, selfishness, competitiveness, self-gratification and entitlement that are always at war for our souls. The discipline of disengagement, of turning away from gathering and spending, and placing ourselves in a space in which we are not trying to accomplish anything - that is the way we remain human in this world. (4)

How can we remember to obey Commandment #1: “You shall have no other gods before me” if you are busy all the time? How can we pay attention to our neighbor if we have not paid attention to spiritual things? If we have not celebrated God’s unfailing goodness and mercy, we can convince ourselves that we actually are the center of the universe, and ours is the energy that makes the world go around.

I might have told you before about the artist from the East, who was commissioned by an American to do a painting. When it was finished, there was, in the lower left corner of the canvas, the branch of a blossoming cherry tree. A tiny bird was perched on the branch. The rest of the painting was a vast white space. The American who had commissioned the painting was unhappy. “Please, fill up this canvas; I paid you for a whole painting,” he demanded. But the artist refused.

He explained, “Sir, if I fill up all the canvas, there will be no room for the bird to fly.”

Without time set aside to remember our place, to worship God, and to give the world a rest from ourselves, what will keep us from assuming that we, the humans, should take up all the room?

The fourth commandment recalls the story of creation and how God made all the heavens and the earth, and then rested on the seventh day” (Genesis 2:1-2). Indeed, the seventh day is the true culmination of the whole project: “And on the seventh day, God finished the work that God had done.” It is not that God worked six days and then took the day off. The seventh day is the completion of the work, indispensable to the outcome and to its fulfillment.

One evening, after a long day, I stopped to pick up some take-out supper. There was a new person working at the cash register at one of my regular stopping places. A veteran employee was standing nearby to assist the new person, who did have a bit of trouble finishing my order. She finally got it straight, and as I gathered up the Brunswick stew and corn muffins, it was clear that she was tired and frustrated, and she asked her trainer, “When do we get a break?”

He answered, “We don’t take breaks here.”

How true that rings for so many people! I remember when I first started practicing ministry, a wise colleague, after seeing me in operation for about a month, said, “Remember, Joanna, even Almighty God rests sometime. Only the devil works 24-7.”

Think about that short passage from Mark this morning, describing the scene that takes place when the busy disciples, who have been about the Lord’s work, have told him about all they had seen and done and accomplished. Instead of his congratulating them for a job well-done, or giving them their next assignment, he says, “You must go away by yourselves and rest awhile.”

There were few more important teachings he had to share with them than that. Christ himself rested regularly, reconnecting with the source of his power, remembering regularly that even the kingdom of God that he had come to proclaim did not rest on his shoulders. It was in God’s hands.

I am not speaking now only about the perils of ministry. I am speaking about the perils of life, the spiritual danger that lurks always on the path of responsibility, lying in wait for every single one of us. The danger is real. Parker Palmer has called it “functional atheism,” that temptation to believe that ultimate responsibility for everything really does rest with us. We operate on the unexamined conviction that if anything good is going to happen, we are going to have to make it happen, forgetting that God’s creative, transforming power and energy haven’t gone anywhere. God did not create the world

and then take a powder. God is in charge; God's wisdom and mercy are available now, and God shares that wisdom and that mercy with other people as well as with us.

I remember something Lily Tomlin once said, "Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat."

Yesterday, a good crowd of Morningsiders went to the Food Bank to work. After we'd worked about an hour and a half, the nice person who was coordinating our activities of sorting the groceries and separating broken cans and boxes from good ones, said, "OK, it's time to take a 10-minute break." My "Type A" husband asked the guy, "Will it be all right if we Type-A-types keep on working?"

We really can rest. We really can remember the rhythm of life. Think of your own heart and how it beats, and then it rests. This is the rhythm of life; without it, there is only death.

In the early 80's I took a trip to Africa. One afternoon, I watched a man, in what was then the African country of Zaire, now the Congo, try to carry a heavy burden up a hill – a huge, huge bundle that he had on his back. He struggled, and he struggled. I thought that he would never make it to the top of the hill. I have thought of him often since, as representing not only his own burden, but the burdens of millions of people, who out of necessity, must live a life of deep struggle. But then I thought of the people I know, who seem to have everything they could ask for in life, but are never able to find an unburdened hour or moment or day. Their work, their families, the organizations they serve become a life burden instead of the life-joy they were meant to be. This is the kind of thing that can happen, even to smart, faithful people, when we feel as if we have to carry the whole load, when we have forgotten that God is God.

The discipline of discipleship is the discipline of signing off for awhile, whether to take a trip or to be still and at rest – that is as important a spiritual discipline as I know. It is the only way I know to avoid the chronic anxiety that is the by-product of functional atheism.

Last week, we spoke of how the only word in the Apostles' Creed for Jesus' earthly life was the word "suffer". "He suffered under Pontius Pilate." This morning, as we say the Apostles' Creed, think about the first line: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." It is God who created and creates still. God is not dead or ineffective or inactive.

Imagine finding time to trust that God is still God and enjoy being alive. Feel free to give everybody in your life a break from you, to even turn off the cell phone – that is unless you are a heart transplant surgeon, waiting to hear that an organ is available – you can turn off your cell phone for a half or a whole day. To a world that moves faster and faster, there is no more important word to hear from God than this: "Be still and know that God is God."

I love the old story about the man who was running down the street. Someone hollered after him, “Why are you running?” He answered, “I’m running after my good fortune.” “Silly man,” the wise teacher replied, “your good fortune has been trying to catch up to you for years. But you have been running too fast to receive it.”

To obey the Fourth Commandment is to find ourselves in the place where we remember, where we CAN remember what is important. We find time to wonder, to ruminate, to rejuvenate and to recommit. We find all kinds of questions beginning to rise in our souls.

Just last week, I went to Tennessee, to a gathering of people from all over the country, who work with children in trouble, through the auspices of the Children’s Defense Fund. We sang, and we worshipped, and we walked around in nature in a beautiful place called Haley Farm, which Alex Haley bought and which the Children’s Defense Fund now owns. It was in that time of quiet rest that I found myself asking, “Now, why ARE there still so many families in New Orleans, and on the Mississippi Gulf coast, who are living in trailers and eating micro-waved food with plastic knives and forks?” In that Sabbath space, I found myself ruminating about all the children of the world: “Why it is that over three years after the war in Iraq began, that place is full of so much death and desolation?” I found myself ruminating and recommitted all at the same time.

Jesus and his disciples would soon be needed again; in fact, the people followed them as they went out to their deserted place. The people would be hungry soon. They would soon need his teaching, but neither Jesus nor the disciples would have anything to give if they relied on themselves for their power. Engagement – disengagement. This is the rhythm of the faithful life and of the faithful church.

A few years ago, I paid a visit to the Island of Iona, where St. Columba landed in the sixth century and began the Christian movement in Scotland and in the rest of the British Isles and other places as well. It is still a place of great spiritual renewal. I had been told that eagles fly there across the Island of Iona, and I was all set to see them. I remember standing on the hillside and saying those verses from Isaiah, “They will mount up with wings as eagles...” and I was waiting to see an eagle soar through the sky. Only sparrows and blackbirds showed up, but how they flew, flapping their wings with all their might when it was needful, but then also riding the currents of the air whenever they could.

Here is what I would say to you today. God’s grace is the air that holds you. God’s strength lies deep within you. May God’s peace fill your spirit today, and in all the days ahead. This is my prayer for you, and for me, and for our troubled world. May the peace of God be with us always. Amen.

(1) *Take Back Your Time*, Rabbi Arthur Waskow.

(2) Barbara Brown Taylor

(3) *New York Times*, December, 2002.

(4) *Ibid.*