

Sunday May 7
Lesson 10: Collective Work, Collective Rest
Scripture: Exodus 20: 8-11

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “The Life of Faith.” In this first lesson of our third unit, “Sabbath,” we conclude our spring series by examining how God commands humans to follow and keep the sabbath. Today we will reflect on the communal aspect of sabbath.

Our lesson today comes from the Old Testament in the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus focuses on God delivering the Hebrew people from the land of Egypt and taking them into the Promised Land. As the Israelites travel with Moses, the leader God appoints to them, God also gives some ground rules and laws to help the people as they travel and for their own formation as God’s chosen people.

The passage today from is known as the Ten Commandments. While the Old Testament has quite a number of decalogues or decalogue-like formulations, this one stands out due to placement and attention as they were repeated throughout other Old Testament books and were reference points for the prophets like Jeremiah and Hosea.¹ It is also significant as they are placed on tablets, where they will be of importance for the communal and worship life of the Israelites.

A significant note about the Ten Commandments is their purpose. While read as an address to individual acts of obedience, the concern is not private welfare as the focus is on protecting the health of the community, to which end the individual plays such an important role.² The commandments are meant to help keep order and to prevent chaos from reigning in the community. Yet their formation also plays a spiritual role. The appeal is not to just enforce laws: these are commands of “the Lord your God,” and are meant to draw the individual closer to God and to others.³ As individuals seek these commandments, they find the ways to live more deeply and authentically with God, creation, and with others.

While often the focus of the Ten Commandments is on the relationship centered commands such as the danger of lying or killing, there is also a command on sabbath. God retains the right to determine how one day shall or shall not be used.⁴ In the Genesis narrative, God rests after creating all things and it is labeled as good. As such, God’s resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working/resting rhythm.⁵ God includes this as a command so humans may individually and corporately flourish, allowing our beings to be rejuvenated and thus all of creation benefits.

¹ Fretheim, Terence E. “Exodus.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 220-221.

² *Ibid.*, 221.

³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

Application

Of all the commandments, the keeping of sabbath is perhaps the one we hear the least about and honestly the first one we are quick to ignore. We read it and nod our heads, going onto one of the others on the list which are juicier such as lying or coveting. Those you can find examples of on television, in books, and sadly in reality every day. Yet keeping sabbath should step on our toes especially as we consider what it means individually and for the community.

I think it is very easy to skip this commandment because it flies in the faces of values, particularly those in the west and in the United States of America. From an early age, most of us can remember the talk of individuals who were “lazy” or “unproductive.” These were examples to avoid because you wanted to be seen as industrious and hardworking, contributing back to society. It is okay if you don’t rest from work because you are accomplishing things or providing for your loved ones.

Yet the more I have watched and observed both within myself and with others, the danger of not keeping sabbath doesn’t just wear us out individually; it also wears out entire communities. When God gave this commandment, God was seeking like with the other commandments to remind us of the collective good of a community. As individuals we seek those commands to grow closer to God and yet they also impact our life with those around us.

When we can rest as individuals, we are able to discover things about ourselves. Every day we wear different hats. We are someone’s boss perhaps or we are dedicated employees. Depending on our job or vocation, we may have strange hours where we work for long periods of time to get the job done. It is easy to believe we are the work titles we possess.

Yet when we rest, we are reminded of other things. We are reminded we are humans with interests and curiosities. We discover the art of slowing down so we can focus on what brings us joy and rejuvenates our souls. We find out our bodies crave it too, looking for some type of release whether it is rest or even exercise where we let out our energy. We make the time for the important relationships in our lives whether it is family or friendships.

This keeping of sabbath, while it may indeed rekindle our individual spirit, also impacts the rest of the community we live in. As we have taken a day to focus on ourselves, the rest is also meant to help us in how we interact with those around us. If we have taken our sabbath, then most likely we can be with others and be more present with them. We have cultivated time for ourselves and now we can do life with the rest of the community we live in.

I think part of the temptation we see in this world is not to keep sabbath because keeping sabbath invites us to say the word no. We want to keep moving and going because this is the way the world operates where we live. Going ninety miles an hour is celebrated and is seen as something to stay ahead.

Yet as we also have seen, there is so much anxiety and confusion in this world. People make decisions impulsively or irrationally. People do not take time to notice what is going on around them or within themselves. There is a strange push to move rapidly in this world without creating a day specifically for rest.

A day of sabbath invites us to be intentional in carving a time where we can rest and be rejuvenated. It is also a time when God can work on us individually without us being caught up in the rat race of life. For our communities, it can also be a way for us all to slow down and to see the inherent beauty we have been given by God with a rhythm. Just as God rested, we too are called to rest and to reflect on the gift of life which God has given all of us. God builds us up individually and communally so we might live at peace with God, with creation, and with one another.

What day do you keep as sabbath? How have you noticed a change in yourself when you do not have a day to just rest and relax? How have you seen keeping a sabbath help keep communities in love and support of one another? Why do you think this commandment is often the first to be dismissed? Why do you think God wants us to have a day of rest for ourselves?

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