

Remember the Sabbath God's Gift of Ten Words 2

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

February 25, 2024

Exodus 20:8-11

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Mark 2:27-3:6

²⁷Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” ³Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

When we hear this commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” one of the things that comes to mind is how America historically supported Christian observance of Sabbath by the passage of Blue Laws. Blue Laws originated in the thirteen colonies to protect Sunday worship by restricting activities that would interfere with Sabbath observance. Shortly after Pennsylvania became a state, it passed this law in 1682: “Whoever performs any worldly employment or business whatsoever on the Lord’s Day, commonly called Sunday, works of necessity and charity only exempted, or whoever uses or practices any game, hunting, shooting, sport or diversion whatsoever on the same day not authorized by law is considered to be a law breaker.” Why these were called “blue laws” is a matter of speculation. In Connecticut they were printed on blue paper. Some historians say the term is descended from the colonial description of strict Puritans nicknamed “blue-nosed” moralists. Whichever- they protected Sunday for worship.

Blue laws were largely removed from state legal codes in the late 1970’s, although there were carryovers about the sale of alcohol and cars which lasted longer. Many of us remember either the experience of boring Sundays when you could not do anything or hearing tales of a generation before us when the newspaper’s Comic Section was removed and saved for Monday, movie theaters were closed, no stores were open and playing cards was taboo. Our laws in the United States were obviously more protective of Christian Sabbath observance than for our Jewish family, friends and neighbors, and as long as the governmental regulations propped up religious observance of Sabbath, the church didn’t have to work hard to promote it, or to compete with other rivals for our time.

Keeping the Sabbath holy – for ourselves and our devotion to God, and refusing to offer a day of rest for those required to work for us – may be the commandment we most often fail to observe in our frenetic world. We have somehow come to understand this commandment as a burden

of boredom, rather than God's gift of freedom. In laying aside our work, we remind ourselves that God is in charge, and not we ourselves.

Our Sixteenth Century theological forebear, John Calvin, considered the Ten Commandments so significant, and the Sabbath such a key to Christian obedience, that the worship liturgy he devised for the Reformed church, included the reading of these commandments every week. Right after the Confession of Sin and the Declaration of Pardon, the presiding minister would read each commandment, one by one, and the people would respond after each singing, "Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law." Presbyterians in most places have removed this portion of the service; although some Protestant churches maintain this practice over these Sundays during the season of Lent.

Perhaps we found it too demanding, unrealistic to imagine that we could keep all those "shall not's." However, it's worth pointing out that through this complex history of Blue Laws propping up Christian culture in a pluralistic country, and the church once requiring the weighty repetition of the commandments in worship, that the sheer gift of Sabbath observance may have gotten lost.

Remember from last Sunday, the preamble for all of these commandments is *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....* The Sabbath was a blessing given to newly freed slaves who had been forced to work, under brutal conditions every day of the week. Slaves cannot rest. Only because God freed the people from slavery, could they keep the Sabbath. This Fourth Word also reaches back into the story of Creation, with the reminder *that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but God rested on the seventh day.* Therefore the whole of creation should have a blessed day of rest.

By this Word from on high, God reaffirms the goodness of creation and the value of time to re-create, and remember who God is – creative,

active, loving, desiring justice and peace resourceful beyond our actions and resources. Remembering Sabbath is a gift also to remember who we are; alive, sustained and blessed beyond our striving and achieving. And observing Sabbath is also for us an act of justice for others. The commandment is defined as such: *On the Sabbath day, you shall not do any work, and neither should your children, or your servants, or your livestock, or even the resident alien – the migrant workers - in your land.* To keep the Sabbath day holy is to keep it separate from the other six days as a sanctuary of time, for worship, rest and renewal – not just for ourselves but for our community. That is not something easily legislated, but a holy calling.

One of the things we know about the times in which we live, we are told by psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and others who study these things, is that we have become a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, drug dependency and trauma. Scholars observe - this is how life works in the 21st Century. Contemporary American life is not set up to promote mutuality, care, empathy or a common life. We choose to stake our claim against “The Other” who we believe is out to get us, to limit our freedom, to take away our individual rights. Our socio-economic system is designed to maximize individual accomplishment largely defined by professional and financial success. Our culture of workism tells us that one’s identity and purpose in life is measured by what one does. Every anxiety-producing stress the world over is as close as the ever-present phone in our hand. Such a way of life in this kind of social structure leaves little time or energy for community, much less honoring the God-given dignity of other human persons. We know that this way of being is eating away at life itself. That’s why this word from God is such a gift: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.*

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading theologians and scholars of the last century, made observations about Sabbath keeping we so desperately need in these fraught days. He wrote about the Sabbath in terms of “the realm of time” and “the realm of space.” Modern life, he said, is all about conquering space: winning geopolitical

territory and prospering economically. However, Sabbath reorients us to the realm of time.

You see, Heschel was from a family of Polish and Lithuanian Jews, lived through the horrors of the last century in Europe and then in the United States. He came to understand that the Sabbath is the guarantor of our “inner liberty” in time, and he warned that Sabbath-less societies can easily descend into tyranny and barbarism. “The danger begins,” Heschel wrote, “when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. In the realm of time, “the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

By keeping Sabbath, Heschel said we live with the reminder of everyone’s royalty; the abolition of the distinction of master and slave, rich and poor, failure and success. To celebrate the Sabbath is to experience one’s ultimate independence of civilization and society, of achievement and anxiety, Heschel concluded. Sabbath observance is the embodiment of the belief that all are equal and equality of humankind means the nobility of all humankind, which wears the Crown of Creation.

Jesus put it this way: *humankind was not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for humankind*. Another way to say that is we are not meant to be enslaved to a boring Sunday afternoon with nothing to do; we have been given a sacred gift of freedom – a day to be grateful to God.

I am reminded of Wendell Berry’s poem *The Peace of Wild Things* which calls to mind the kind of grateful rest we so desperately need these days:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,*

*I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

This is the gift of Remembering Sabbath. To honor God, to honor all of God's creation; to remember we are not God, but rather heirs of God's promises and beneficiaries of God's gift of freedom, and so is every other human being. The Sabbath Commandment is not about guilt for skipping church on a Sunday. It is not simply about ceasing to work. It is about a way of life that regularly ceases to do, and enters a sacred time to be, a life-giving reorientation to live in the presence of God and to share the values of God.

The rabbis called Sabbath a "palace of time," because when we keep Sabbath, we rise above the concerns of this world and enter into the vastness and wonder of eternity. What a gift! What a gift for holy keeping.

AMEN.