

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 Bill Uetricht 2 Pentecost 5.30.24

When I was a kid, our family often took a yearly vacation, always in the car. Frankly, I was a whiny kid. For years, my sisters reminded me of what I often said when the six of us were traveling in a non-airconditioned car to one of our vacation destinations: “Oh, I am so hot and sweaty; Oh, I am so hot and sweaty.” I admit it. I as a child had what the psychologists call “low frustration tolerance.” I got easily frustrated. So, what I am about to share must be understood in light of that.

On one of our vacation trips, we traveled from Ohio to the big state of Michigan, ending up, for some reason, in Grand Rapids. It was a Sunday, and Bill was “oh so hot and hungry; oh, so hot and hungry.” And you know what? We couldn’t find any restaurants open in Grand Rapids. It was a Sabbath, I was told. I didn’t care. I was hungry. And I don’t like to be hungry. I like to eat! The only memory I had of our trip to Grand Rapids was that those Grand Rapidians kept me from eating, and all because some religious people wanted to honor the Sabbath. Now, we were religious people, good conservative Lutherans, but we ate on Sundays.

Sabbath keeping has been a topic for Jews and Christians for a long time. The Bible makes that perfectly clear. In Deuteronomy today, we are given the second listing of the Ten Commandments in the Bible. And this second recitation is straight forward in its instruction: “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.” Exodus, where the first listing of the Ten Commandments can be found, says you are to *remember* the Sabbath. Deuteronomy takes the command up a notch. You are to *observe* it. You are to *practice* it, make it a regular part of your week. And this is no suggestion. It is a command. Do it every week. Set aside one day a week (for the Jews of that time, Saturday) for rest.

Yes, you should work. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” Life is not about taking it easy all the time. No! Work and work hard. But also rest! “The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord God.”

The word Sabbath comes from a word that means ceasing. You are to cease one day a week. Marva Dawn says that Sabbath keeping involves ceasing work, productivity and accomplishment, ceasing anxiety, worry, and tension, ceasing our possessiveness, ceasing our trying to be God.

Wow! I don't cease very well. I am an accomplisher. I am not very good at being unproductive. I probably can get a whole lot more done in a short period of time than most of you can! La, de, da!
Cease?

“The seventh day is a Sabbath to the *Lord your God*; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the immigrants in your towns.” Sounds like everyone gets a break. Even your cows. It's a fascinating image to me. “Listen, Elsie, you get the day off. You don't have to produce milk today!” But the point is clear. Everything and everybody deserves a break.

Why this command? Why Sabbath? Oh, I know what you are going to say. Because God made the world in six days, and on the seventh day he rested. If God needed to rest, we and everything else should rest. Rest is built into creation itself. That's right, and that is what Genesis tells us. But that is not what Deuteronomy says. According to the second giving of the law, you practice Sabbath because you “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

Sabbath is about liberation, freedom. God set you free, and you know what it's like not to be free. You know what it's like to work all

the time. You, therefore, will not work all the time. You, therefore, will not treat other people like you were treated. You are not going to make other people and even your animals work all the time. It's not just rich people who are going to get vacations. Everybody will! Sabbath is about social justice. Sabbath is about freedom from that which oppresses. Life in God is not about oppression. Life in God is about freedom, which is really what Jesus is teaching us about the Sabbath in Mark today.

Many people think that Jesus was anti-Sabbath. And I can understand that in light of the two Sabbath controversy stories that we have in Mark today. Jesus' disciples are working on the Sabbath; they are traveling and picking grain (gleaning) on the Sabbath, and the crabby people make a big fuss. His disciples aren't ceasing. They are working. Now Jesus says there is precedent in the Bible for what his disciples are up to. David, the one who became king, and his companions violated the law when they ate the bread of the presence, which only the priests were supposed to eat. They ate it because they were hungry. More important than a strict adherence to a rigidly understood rule is human need, Jesus is saying. "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."

If observing the Sabbath is about freedom, then it doesn't make a lot of sense to turn the command into a means for keeping people bound up. It doesn't make sense to take a gift and turn it into a prison. I like what Matt Skinner says: "The proper function of the Sabbath is to promote life and extol God as liberator." I don't think Jesus is against the Sabbath. I think he is opposed to squeezing the very life out of a great gift. And this is what many religious people do far too often. We take a gift and turn it into a club or a noose we hang around our necks.

But this does not negate the gift. I am going to recommend the gift to you today. I believe that our lack of Sabbath keeping is doing great harm to our land and to us. You and I live in a world in which the boundaries around work have almost disappeared. If our work is done mostly by computers, we can work 24 hours a day. Emails, texts, social media—they all mean that work can be done whenever. And I am convinced that is potentially harmful for our mental and physical health and, I think, our work. I am not persuaded, and this is just my opinion here, that being able to work all the time increases productivity. I wonder if it doesn't reduce it sometimes.

I am known for saying on occasion that many people in the modern era, especially in middle and upper-middle American, often have more money than they have time. They are bound up by time, something that the church can tell you is very true. We obsessively fill time with activity, often neglecting the things that we value greatly. How often do we say or do we hear, "I don't have time for that. I'm much too busy"? Many of our kids are scheduled to death. *Play* has to be scheduled sometimes. A wonderful young woman, when asked by me recently what she likes to do for fun, said, "I don't have time for fun." Time tyrannizes us far too often.

Twenty-four-hour work. Twenty-four-hour news. When can our brains stop the anxiety that comes from being exposed to the craziness of our times. We can worry about the world 24 hours a day now. We can also shop 24 hours a day. A click of the mouse can get us the latest consumer product even at three in the morning.

And you don't think we need Sabbath? We badly need to cease. We badly need to step away from anxiety and consumerism. We badly need to play and pray, as Eugene Peterson describes the tasks of Sabbath keeping. We badly need to remember that life doesn't depend on us. And that is the primary significance of the

Sabbath. It reminds us that life gets along very well without all our work, our anxiety, our buying, our filling every moment with unending activity. You might note that in the first creation story in Genesis the author says, after the creative activity of each day, “There was evening and there was morning, the first, second, third...day.” Ancient Jews viewed the starting of the day as beginning with evening, the time when we are starting to produce less, starting to nod off, heading toward bed, the time when we are losing control of the day. The day begins not with us, not by our grabbing it by the horns and moving forward with power and control. The day begins with God.

Here is the secret to sabbath keeping. Life begins with and is sustained by God, a gracious God, a God who desires to set us free from all the stuff that wants to oppress us, including time. Sabbath keeping is a gracious way to remember that it is not all about you. You can play. You can pray. You don’t have to do every sport. Your house doesn’t have to be perfectly clean. And maybe you don’t even have to get A’s on all of your papers. You don’t have to work so long and so hard that you become crabby with everybody else. You can set aside a day just to goof off, to hang out with friends, having absolutely no agenda, except to enjoy life.

Can Sabbath keeping become a problem? Of course. Human beings are particularly adept at turning a gift into a burden. But frankly, that is probably not your problem. And if it is, knock it off. You will be violating the very essence of the Sabbath by using it to beat yourself and others up. The Sabbath is about freedom. Let freedom ring!