

The Practice of Saying No: Sabbath
Matthew 25:18-25
Exodus 20:8-11
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Given the events rocking our nation this week, coupled with our own bittersweet news about Corey's leaving, a sermon on Sabbath-keeping may seem to be utterly pointless. That's how I felt, anyway, until I dove in to prayer and asked God for help discerning whether our series on spiritual practices should be set aside, especially today's theme of Sabbath, or whether it might be helpful to this moment. My sermon today is what came to me. I pray that it blesses you.

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy,” the Lord commands us. But what does it mean to keep Sabbath these days? Indulge me: when I say “Sabbath-keeping,” what do you think of? This is what I've heard from you: Dull. Boring. Shut inside. Church. Church. More church. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

If it's any comfort, it used to be worse. Margaret Hart tells of her childhood, and the endless Sabbath-keeping expectations of their household. Her grandfather was a renowned pastor in this very church, a fierce advocate of the temperance movement. You can imagine the laundry list of prohibitions, of thou-shalt-nots they endured. On the opposite end was Helen Dick Bronson's experience growing up. Her grandparents lived right across the street from the church, where the Bertram's live now. Her grandmother was a faithful church-goer, every Sunday without fail. Her grandfather, however, was not one to embrace the anti-alcohol temperance movement. So after church every Sunday, friends knew that they could stop by for a nip or two. He called his hospitality the “TAR Club” – TAR standing for “Thirsting *after* Righteousness.”

That's how Sunday used to be: a battle between those who towed the line of Sabbath-keeping rules and regulations, and those who enjoyed sneaking around them. Now ... now Sunday is a smorgasbord of soccer, shopping, emails, golfing, worship, gardening, the beach, and whatever else demands our time or tickles our fancy. And I don't say that to wag my finger at you. I've shared with you that my wicked idea of a Sunday morning off is a mimosa on the back patio while I meditate on Our Lady of *The New York Times*.

Which leads us to our core question: why *should* we keep Sabbath? Why bother? Is there any good reason to observe Sunday Sabbath in this day and age? Will keeping Sabbath make any difference in this crazy, broken, world of ours, in this divided, grieving country of ours?

Today I say “Yes.” Today especially, I say, unequivocally, “yes.” Today I hope we’ll all say “yes” to honor God’s plea for us to keep Sabbath as willingly, as earnestly, as we strive to honor the commandments not to steal, not to lie, not to kill. Let’s start by looking at *why* God asks – no, commands us – to keep Sabbath.

The Bible gives us not one but two versions of the Sabbath commandment – one in the book of Exodus, and one in the book of Deuteronomy. Both commandments agree on *what* we should do: Remember the Sabbath day; keep it holy; for six days you shall labor but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, you, or your children, or your servants, or the resident aliens, or even your livestock. I love that God’s command includes the rule that even cows and donkeys should rest. That’s lovely.

But here’s where the two versions differ: they give different reasons for *why* we should honor the Sabbath. The book of Exodus tells us we should keep Sabbath because “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” (Exod. 20:8-11). But the version in Deuteronomy has a different reason: we should keep Sabbath in order to “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; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:12-15).

This is no accident. There are not one but *two* reasons Scripture tells us why we need the Sabbath. First, because God knows we need rest; and second, because God knows we need to remember we were slaves, and God brought us out to freedom. To this day, the Jewish Shabbat service begins with the woman of the household lighting two candles. One candle stands for rest; one candle stands for freedom. Rest, *and* freedom. Both are needful for our lives – for our world – to be holy, to be whole.

Let’s look at each of these gifts, starting with Sabbath rest. God, who created the world in six days and then rested, gives us Sabbath as an invitation to rest too. To

say “no” to our culture’s pressure to fill our time with more: more busyness, higher productivity, greater self-sufficiency, constant entertainment. It’s not that those things are wrong! But only when we stop can we remember that we are not self-made, and God is there behind us, continuing to breathe life into us, continuing to take the dirt and mud of our lives and shape us in God’s own image. Only when we stop can we savor what we already have, instead of always wanting more: we can pause to savor this glorious creation, and linger in the memories we cherish, and feel the deeper yearning that we silence in our hearts.

What does rest look like? Writer Barbara Brown Taylor gives us these suggestions:

“At least one day in every seven ... close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than you can produce – that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight – and when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so, remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a *commandment*. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.”¹

Recently my sister Karen was “wooded” to that truth the hard way. After her battle with cancer last year – after all the surgeries and the chemo and the radiation, after all the deep exhaustion and inability to do *anything*, after all the fear that she wouldn’t live, she realized that *stopping*, resting, even for unwanted reasons, had forced her to reflect and pray and center herself in ways she hadn’t done for years. She savored a cup of coffee. She took time with the paper. She stopped to smell the roses. She explored the wonder of creation as close as her own back yard.

And she promised herself this: she would never, ever let herself get caught up in the frenetic life she’d lived before cancer. The impossible back-to-back meetings, the endless phone calls to make and notes to write, her time at home consumed by laundry and mowing and weeding and cooking, her life consumed – consumed – by the frenzy of church work and housework. She was blessed, she felt; in January she got the good news of great joy that her PET scan was clear and cancer-free.

Fast-forward five short months. A couple of weeks ago, she had back-to-back meetings starting at 7 a.m., was called on an emergency visit to a sick parishioner, had more calls to make in the car as she schlepped into the city for her doctor's appointment ... and she got to her appointment late. Too late for the doctor to see her. Her heart sank; she was angry with herself, angry with her church, angry with her doctor, angry with her life. And then she realized: she had let herself slide right back into the life she had pre-cancer. And it was just the wake-up call she needed.

Now? Now she is resting again. Now she is savoring time again. Now she is gaining perspective again, about what matters, and what does not – a perspective she lost when she had no time for Sabbath.

We need *time* to rest; we need *time* to reflect. And if that's true for our personal lives, how much more is it true for our nation. The passion of responses to the events this tragic week has been overwhelming. Everywhere, people are grieving, and raging, and seeking a way towards peace, towards justice, towards mutual respect.

But grieving, always, always takes time. If we are to honor those who have fallen –

- *Alton Sterling* in Baton Rouge ...
- *Philando Castile* near St. Paul ...
- *Brent Thompson*,
- *Lorne Ahrens*,
- *Patrick Zamarripa*,
- *Michael J. Smith*, and
- *Michael Krol* in Dallas

- if we are to genuinely honor these fallen men, it will take *time*. Time to remember how each one of them lived. Time to remember how each one of them died. Time to consider how we got to this place, that two black men would be shot at point-blank range by police, and five white officers would be systematically gunned down by a sniper who wanted to get “even.” This tragedy – it cannot be solved in a moment. Instead, it will take time for us to discern how we got to this place, how our country unraveled, how our values devolved, how our desire for unity dissolved before our very eyes.

Nearly twenty years ago, in his book called, simply, *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller presciently wrote:

“There is a grand and lively debate flourishing throughout the land, lamenting the tragic decline of our ... values. Where in our political life have our ... values of honesty, courage and integrity gone? Where in our civic life are the fundamental qualities of respect, deliberation, and wisdom? Where, in our personal lives, are the codes of individual responsibility and accountability, civility and compassion?”

This is a holy yearning. Yet, Muller warns, yearning for these values is not enough. Debating these values is not enough. Mourning for these values is not enough. Instead, he says, “All these ... values ... require time.”

“Honesty, courage, kindness, civility, wisdom, compassion – these can only be nourished in the soil of time and attention, and need experience and practice to come to harvest.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, if we want to be a different people than we are today, we cannot keep careening in the direction we are heading. We. Must. Stop. God knows, we need to take *time*. God knows, we need time to reflect on our priorities. God knows, we need time to debate respectfully. God knows, we need time to march peacefully. God knows, we need time to listen compassionately. God knows, we need time to look at ourselves honestly. God knows we need *time* ... time that is set aside. A Sabbath.

Rest – thoughtful, prayerful, discerning rest - is reason enough to keep Sabbath. But Scripture tells us there is more. Scripture tells us God gives us Sabbath for this reason too: to “remember that you were slaves in Egypt, [to remember that] God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

Why do we need to remember this, that we were slaves, and that God saved us? Not because God needs the thanks or the glory. We need to remember we were slaves, we need to remember that God rescued us from slavery, for *our sake*. God yearns for us to *savor* our freedom and not take it for granted ... God yearns for us to *have compassion* for others who are still enslaved, are still second-class citizens as we once were ... God yearns for us to *recognize* that the way the world is doesn't

have to be this way ... and above all, God yearns for us to *share God's deepest yearning* - God's deepest desire to bring all the children of the world out of danger, out of bondage, out of fear. Isn't that why God sent Jesus Christ into the world? To save *every* child, to free *every* child, to cherish *every* child, to welcome *every* child, to love *every* child. No matter what color, no matter what country, no matter what creed.

But we are not there yet. The terrifying scene that unfolded Thursday night in Dallas is embedded in our minds. A sniper deliberately, systematically picking target after target after target after target of officers in uniform, officers who were on the scene, ironically, to protect a Black Lives Matter vigil. Five innocent lives were lost because one person's anger boiled over into rage. Our hearts go out to the families of officers in Dallas, and to officers everywhere who have given their lives to serve and protect. Yes, black lives have been lost at the hands of police; yes, the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Freddie Gray and Eric Garner and now Alton Sterling and Philando Castile are unnecessary and unjust and unconscionable. But no matter how many black lives have been lost at the hands of police, these five men - Brent Thompson, Lorne Ahrens, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael J. Smith, and Michael Krol - did not deserve to die. Justice is not a *quid pro quo* of one life for another. Justice is changing the system that has created this horrific spiral.

Here's my conviction: the police are not the problem. *Our culture is the problem.* Let me say it again. The police are not the problem. Our culture is the problem. And until we face that hard reality, we will be putting our officers in danger, making them our proxies for our culture's racial fears.

Friday at a Facebook Town Hall, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich testified to this reality: "It took me a long time, and a number of people talking to me through the years to get a sense of this," he said. "If you are a normal white American, the truth is you don't understand being black in America. White Americans instinctively underestimate the level of discrimination and the level of additional risk."ⁱⁱⁱ He is absolutely right, and we are in self-righteous denial if we think otherwise. Ask Felicia Patton about her experiences sometime. Ask Dave Bianchin, whose adopted son Ben is black, how Ben was treated differently by authorities in Downers Grove. Ask any dark-skinned student on Lake Forest College campus across the street how it is to walk or drive through Lake Forest.

Please don't get me wrong. I don't think that most of us white folks are deliberately racist. We are not doing this on purpose. I think we just can't know what we don't see. And the only way we *can* see is to be in conversation, to let down our defenses, to have compassion for the anguish, to love each other as the children of God that we all are.

This is the vision that God gives us: in the kingdom of God “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female,” Paul writes (Galatians 3:16).

In God's eyes, all lives matter. Slaves and free. All lives matter.

Black and white. All lives matter.

Black and blue. All lives matter.

Rich and poor. All lives matter.

Until God's kingdom comes on earth, our job is to love each other as we love this baby we just baptized, as we love *this* child of God; to coo and rock and hold each other as long as it takes.

Until God's kingdom comes on earth, we are invited to remember every Sabbath that God will continue to hold us.

Until God's kingdom comes on earth, we are urged to trust that God will continue to reach out with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, until all of God's children can safely rest ... until all of God's children are free.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of God* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 139

ⁱⁱ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (NY: Bantam Books, 1999), pp. 97-8

ⁱⁱⁱ The Los Angeles Times, Saturday, July 9, 2016, “Newt Gingrich: ‘If you are a normal white American ... you don't understand being black in America.’”