

Remembered by the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11

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“Everyone deserves a place to be from.”¹ With that simple statement, we entered into the heart of the theology of Jubilee. In our first sermon, we saw how Jubilee acted as a grand override, an intervention that prevented any Israelite from facing the unmitigated calamity of being dispossessed of their place in the community.

In this sermon, we move from the grand override of the 50th year to the foundational building block of the Jubilee community, which is the Sabbath. The trumpet of Jubilee is sounded after seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years. The seven Sabbaths amount to 49 years, and the 50th year is the Jubilee. The 50th year does not appear as a magical date on a calendar, full of requirements of restoration, forgiveness, and return. The Sabbath, the weekly pattern of work and rest, the ongoing rhythm of remembering and observing God’s creative, redemptive, and sustaining activity, is envisioned almost as a series of building blocks, slowly and steadily forming the foundation for the great and joyful celebration of Jubilee.

Regarding Sabbath as a building block, Richard Lowery writes, “It is appropriate to think of Sabbath day as a *little jubilee*, a weekly celebration of the hoped-for world of release, where debts are forgiven, property returned, and slaves set free.”² The weekly Sabbath establishes a set of constructive practices that can draw together the shards and pieces of particular events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into large enough wholes to show how they might add up

¹ Hans Ucko, ed., “The Jubilee as a Challenge.” *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 2.

²Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 102..

to a way of life. Sabbath practices, kept as a regular part of the Christian life, are intended to add up to the Jubilee, the wonderful and welcomed year of restoration and return.

The Sabbath command is found in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. When placed side by side, we notice the dual themes of remembering and observing.

<p>Exodus 20:8-11</p> <p>“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 5:12-15</p> <p>“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”</p>
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Remember

The patterns remembering and observing found in Sabbath stand in marked contrast to the patterns of the world, patterns found in the competitive structure of society, patterns where people find their place based on their competence, what they produce, how they manipulate, and what they achieve.

Drawing on the Israelites' experience in Egypt, Walter Brueggemann uses the analogy of a brickyard. The members of the Israelite community had no intrinsic value when they were slaves. Their only value was what they could produce in terms of bricks. "Not a single one of us is far removed from that set of realities.... We are each of us in the brickyard. We all owe our souls to the company store. It does not matter if it is a fifth-grader with a demanding baseball coach or a third-grader with a teacher who shouts or a father who demands; it does not matter if it is a taxpayer who is always playing catch-up or an unappreciated mother and wife. It does not matter if it is a graduate student never satisfying his or her committee, or a junior executive under enormous pressure, or a doctor with too many patients, or a salesperson whose quota is always upped, or a social worker with a heavy load. We are all of us caught in a way of life that yields only frantic hostility and desperate effort, which cannot finally pay off."³

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*. (New York: United Church Press, 1976), 55.

In a sense, what is described is a way of living where both individuals and communities are dismembered. To dismember is to deprive of limbs; divide limb from limb. The dictionary uses dismember in a gruesome sentence. “The ogre dismembered his victims before he ate them.” Perhaps that is over the top, and perhaps we need just such an image to alert us this is no way for human beings to live.

So it is that Sabbath comes to a dismembered world and offers a great gift: To be re-membered. The practice of Sabbath re-members the community of faith by revealing God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The Sabbath command in Exodus 20 is grounded in God’s work of creation. The community of faith is re-membered as it finds itself in the creation story of Genesis 1. Here God brings order out of chaos. Here God separates light from darkness. Here God’s word brings forth heaven and earth, mountain and sea, seed and fruit, plant and animal. Here God creates men and women, male and female, in God’s own image. Here God pronounces that creation is very good. Here men and women are valued not by what they produce or quotas they meet. Here each one is a child of God, stamped with God’s very own image. That God then rests on the seventh day, blessing the seventh day and making it holy, will have great significance for a people re-membered by the God who is Creator.

Deuteronomy 5 posits the justification for the Sabbath command in God’s mighty act of redemption, when the children of God were delivered from bondage in Egypt. The ways Israel was dismembered in Egypt are legion. They were oppressed and enslaved to forced labor. Their lives were made bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar (the brickyard). Their baby boys were targeted for death, by midwives or by drowning. Mercifully,

God saw their misery, heard their cries, was concerned for their suffering, and came down to deliver them. Although the whole earth belonged to God, Israel was redeemed that they might be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6) Their redemption from slavery signified God’s great love for Israel. (Hosea 11:1) The community of faith is re-membered through the redemptive actions of God, who bought them back at a great price.

Sabbath also reveals God as the one who sustains Israel. This is demonstrated in Exodus 16, the story of manna in the wilderness. Faced with a scarcity of food, God provides bread and meat for Israel, a provision that lasts the 40 years of the wilderness journey. But the seventh day is special. God provides enough bread on the sixth day to allow the people to rest on the seventh day. Note that this is the first time the actual word Sabbath occurs in the bible. “God lavishly provides more than enough for human life to survive and thrive—even in a hostile wilderness environment.... Sabbath, as portrayed in these stories, taps into the superabundant power of life present at the creation of the natural and national world. Sabbath observance is a statement of faith in God’s reliable care.”⁴ A dismembered people whose personal existence is “driven, anxious, and self-seeking”⁵ are re-membered as a people whose God deals not in scarcity but abundance. Because God provides, Israel can trust. Because God provides, Israel can rest.

Thus, remembering the Sabbath re-members Israel as people:

1. Created in the image of the God whose goodness rings out in all creation;

⁴ Lowery, 100.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 20.

2. Redeemed from slavery, bondage, and oppression by the powerful hand of the God whose desire is to establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation; and
3. Sustained by God's gracious and abundant provision, a provision that even provides for a Sabbath day's rest from gathering food.

To develop practices that allow ourselves to be re-membered by the Sabbath, we do well to take the word Sabbath literally. *Sabbat* literally means to cease, desist, or rest. Hans Ucko writes, "The role of the Sabbath is to remind us who we are. Once a week we are to give back the keys to God, to leave behind what we do and become again who we are, not a function but a human being...In a sense the Sabbath requires the weekly sacrifice of our need to be in constant control."⁶

Being re-membered by the Sabbath involves stopping. "The question is asked, 'Who is it that can make muddy water clear? If allowed to remain still, it will gradually become clear of itself.' There comes a moment in our striving when more effort actually becomes counterproductive, when our frantic busyness only muddies the waters of our wisdom and understanding. When we become still and allow our life to rest, we feel a renewal of energy and gradual clarity of perception. The Psalmist speaks of this: He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul."⁷ The psalm gives the invitation, "Be still and know that I am God."(46:10)

⁶ Ucko, 4, 5.

⁷ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 26.

The ceasing can take many forms. I love the story where a man said, “When Sheila and I were married, her grandparents gave us a brand-new washer and dryer. It was a very generous gift, and we were very grateful to receive such a blessing for our new home. But when they presented them to us, her grandfather explained that this was a Jewish washer and dryer. ‘What makes them Jewish?’ I asked, naively. Sheila’s grandfather replied with a twinkle, ‘They won’t work on Shabbat.’”⁸

I purposely introduce humor into the theme of ceasing, for it is easy for ceasing to become a legalistic exercise instead of a life-giving experience. Dorothy Bass writes, “It is important not to turn the Sabbath into a day that reeks of condemnation rather than gift, as has sometimes occurred.” While the Sabbath invites us to cease and desist, the space created by that ceasing provides opportunities for life giving practices. Bass writes, “The holiness of the Sabbath is also made manifest in the joy people expect to experience on that day. Taking a walk, resting, talking with loved ones, reading—these are good Sabbath practices.”⁹

Wayne Muller adds, “Prepare a Sabbath meal, alone or with friends and family. Shop for the ingredients, choosing those that bring you the most pleasure. This food is not so much for survival as for sheer, savory delight. Put on some music, turn off the phone. Take as much time as you like to feel, taste, smell each ingredient, every spice, bread, and vegetable. Decorate the table with flowers, colorful placemats, and candles. Say a prayer. Give thanks, remembering all the people who grew, harvested, packed, shipped, and sold them for you. Give thanks for the bounty of the earth. Enjoy.”¹⁰

⁸ Muller, 27.

⁹ Bass, 30.

¹⁰ Muller, 33, 34.

Muller's book on Sabbath enumerates practices which remember us in terms of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, including prayer, meditation, silence, and lectio divina. Preparing ourselves to respond to the word of the Lord, hear these words from Wayne Muller.

“Let us remember the Sabbath. Let us breathe deeply in the rhythms of life, of the earth, of action and rest. Traditionally, Sabbath is honored by lighting candles, gathering worship and prayer, blessing children, singing songs, keeping silence, walking, reading scripture, making love, sharing a meal. Just as we must wait until the darkness falls before we can see the stars, so does the Sabbath quietly wait for us. As darkness falls, as the light of the world fades and disappears, we light the inner lights, the lights of home and refuge. Our steps take us home, and the light draws us in. May you find some comfort here.”¹¹

¹¹ Muller, 11.