

6/2/2024 Remember the Sabbath Deuteronomy 5:12-15 / Mark 2:23-3:6

What does it mean to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? And why was that a command and not a suggestion? What is so important about a day out of seven and what does it have to do with what is holy? In the time of Israel, that day meant no work at all. It was a day to read scripture, pray, rest, and feel the presence of the God who was revealed at Sinai.

In that day and age, the world was very different and difficult. God's people worked hard, really hard, every day just to stay alive. They lived off the land and were more affected than we are by famine and drought, by locusts and disease. Life was simpler and mostly about doing what was necessary to stay alive and feed and protect one's family. Pretty basic stuff. It was exhausting just staying alive, and they looked around for any help they could get. Sabbath literally means to rest or cease everything one is doing. It was a time to be still, cease all physical exertion, and simply be quiet.

We are not machines with endless energy. We cannot keep going on without catching one's breath and regaining the strength needed for the next week behind a plow or daily trips to the creek to haul water. The Sabbath rest certainly had the practical value of keeping stamina and strength from fading, but the biblical texts give reasons different than that. As each day of creation ended God stepped back and reflected with the words "It is good. And finally, on the seventh day, when creation was complete, He rested. He calls us to do the same!

My grandparents were farmers and certainly needed to rest, just as Israel, on their desert journey, needed to pause from time to time to rest. They worked harder than I ever have, with few of the modern helps we are so dependent on. They had more in common with ancient Israel, being more aware that God was the only strength and power in their lives, the only constant, and their faith in God was often all that kept them from one season to the next. They understood the Sabbath command better than any of us today. They rested to remember God.

Over the years we have many Sabbath adaptations, from taking the day off, to not selling certain items or engaging in certain activities on that day of rest. We have even defined remembering the Sabbath as going to church for one or two hours and treating the other hours of Sabbath like any other day. Sabbath has become a word we define and control more than a special connection with God. It is a practical as well as theological action. Just as God paused to reflect upon the plan and majesty of creation, we too are called to take time to sit back and marvel at God's gifts, giving Him alone the glory! This is not because God needs praise, but to remember we are not God. Just as our physical bodies need rest, so our spiritual life needs to catch its proper breath. It is about priorities!

The early Christians made Sunday their sabbath for that was the Creation was amended as Jesus shattered the three days of death with his explosion from the tomb. More powerful than the Red Sea crossing of ancient Israel, this exodus from death, on our behalf, began a new journey for God's faithful people. And so, we make a point to regularly cease and desist, taking a holy pause in our routines to remember we are surrounded by the God of Creation who is also the God of deliverance. In worship, Bible Study, prayer and acts of sacrificial love we gather with one Church of every time and place to remember, so that in every moment and place, we keep focused on the holy gifts of our lives.

Isn't it interesting that when we meet someone new, we are always attempted to ask, "what do you do?" The unspoken assumption is what we do defines who we are. It controls our time and our energy and makes us worthy or not in the eyes of someone else. In remembering the Sabbath, we are reminded the more important question for each of us is not what we do, but whether or not we set aside time to remember God is our Creator and Redeemer and that is what defines our relationship with the world and each other. It is not what we do but what God has done for us that is the crux of the Sabbath rest.

Is that why a weekly cycle of rest is commanded and not suggested. Eugene Peterson suggests, "Nothing less than a command has to power to intervene in the vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busy-ness, the only part of which we are conscious being our good intentions. The Sabbath is that uncluttered time and space in which we can distance ourselves from our own activities enough to see what God is doing. If we are not able to rest one day a week, we are taking ourselves far too seriously."¹

In "The Hungering Dark," Fred Buechner relates that one winter afternoon darkness came early to his classroom he noticed an incredibly beautiful sunset unfolding outside the windows of the classroom. On a whim, he put down his lecture notes, flipped off the lights, and was silent. The sunset became the focus of everyone in the room. No one said a thing. All were drawn to the glorious beauty of a fading day. They sat there in silence for 20 minutes. And with that, the class was over. It was a great class, he says, not because they did anything, but because they spent that time together, individually, and as a group, drinking in the mystery, with no agenda of that they would "do" anything with it.

What power there is in resting in the presence of the Holy One. In such sacred rest we are reminded that time is holy, work is holy, and lives are holy, It began with the touch of the Creator, the love of a Savior, and the breath of God in every moment of our lives. Take time, holy time, regular time to remember. Allow Sabbath rest to be one of the gifts that colors who you are and how you live.

TWSeeber

¹ Eugene Peterson, "The Pastor's Sabbath," Leadership Spring 1985. pp. 55-56