

Sabbath: Asking What Would God Do?

Genesis 2:1-3

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I am old enough to remember “blue laws”—those laws that were intended to preserve Sunday as a day set apart for God. We see vestiges of blue laws in the places where you still can’t buy liquor on Sunday, but when I was growing up, most stores were closed on Sunday. Sometime in the early sixties the laws began to relax all over the country. I grew up in Texas which, characteristically, put its own particular twist on the loosening of the blue laws. Retail stores were allowed to open on Sunday, but if you bought something you had to sign an affidavit that it was an “essential purchase.” As my mother acidly remarked, this just made Texans into even bigger liars than they already were.

As a pastor, there is a part of me that looks with some nostalgia on those days. Imagine, no soccer games or swim meets scheduled the same time as Sunday worship! But those days are gone and will never return. If we are to have any sense of the sacredness of the Sabbath, of Sunday as a day set apart for God, it will not be imposed on us by external laws. Rather it will come from inside of us; it will come when we discover that we were not created to be endlessly productive. It will come when we realize that Sabbath as a time of rest, of sacred contemplation, of holy renewal was woven into the very fabric of creation.

But there are few things more counter-cultural in our society than the idea of rest. We exalt hard work. We worship at the shrine of workaholism. We measure our value by our productivity. I understand this. I all too often practice it. I end each day thanking God for the blessings of the day. But I used to follow my thanksgivings by adding up the day's accomplishments. Like a mental rosary, I would finger the projects I had completed, the visits I had made, the meetings I had attended, the hours I had worked—in my head I would go over everything I had done that day. Then I would think about all that I had left undone. And every time, no matter how much I had accomplished, no matter how many hours I had worked, there was so much more than I felt I should have done. Every night I would fall asleep guilty and wake up the next day determined to do better, only to come up short yet again. I finally gave up this bed time ritual a few years ago because I realized how spiritually sick it was, but I have to confess I still do this little self-assessment at some point almost every day. And I still come up short most days. And I bet lots of you do as well.

No wonder we are exhausted mentally and physically. We learn early that if we have not worked until the breaking point, we haven't worked hard enough. We are like the little first grade girl who was getting her school picture taken. The photographer liked to make small talk to put his subjects at ease.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked the little girl.

"Tired," she replied.

Preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor, explaining why she had decided to take a year off from accepting any outside preaching engagements and to work only 40 hours

of week, wrote, *I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand.* (Christian Century 11-30-99)

But God did not work ceaselessly and did not create us work ceaselessly either. Have you ever noticed that the Genesis account of the creation of the Sabbath says, *And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done...(2:2)* Doesn't that seem a little odd to you? After all, God's work of creation seems to have been completed on the sixth day. By the end of the sixth day God had created the heavens and the earth, the trees and the flowers, animals and humans. But this little verse says that God finished the work of creation on the seventh day. So God created **something** on that final day. But what? All God seems to have done on the seventh day was rest.

Ancient Jewish rabbis concluded that what God created on the seventh day was *menucha*. *Menucha* is usually translated as "rest", but it is much more. It is tranquility, serenity, peace, repose; it is happiness and stillness, it is peace and harmony. Creation is not complete until there is *menucha*. (Heschel, *Sabbath*)

And we are not complete, we are not whole as human beings created in the image of God until we experience that divine rest, that *menucha*. *Menucha* is the gift of the Sabbath, because the Sabbath gives us permission to turn away from the endless

drive to be productive (to make more bricks, as Rick noted last week) and to simply be with God.

As Christianity split from Judaism, it lost this sense of the Sabbath, this sense of sacred time. Rick confessed last week that the commandment about the Sabbath is the commandment he is most likely to break, but I think it is the commandment we are all most likely to break.

So what does the Sabbath mean for us, and how do we begin to create sacred time in our lives? I think the place we begin is by giving ourselves permission **not** to be endlessly productive. When spring comes (it will come!), Sabbath means we can sit in our backyards and **not** think, “Instead of just sitting here, I should mow the grass or weed the flower bed or turn the compost heap.” Sabbath means we can sit and pray or sit and read or maybe just sit, even it means letting the dishes go unwashed or the floors unswept or garage uncleaned for a little while. We can take a Sabbath from worrying about our jobs—we can learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters who are forbidden to even **think** of work on the Sabbath. We can rest and enjoy and be still and NOT FEEL GUILTY ABOUT IT! As Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel notes, the Sabbath is a time to “mend our tattered lives.”

We need to find Sabbath time that works for us. It may be Sunday, or it may be some other time. I do know it won't happen by accident. Ironically, in our over-scheduled lives, we need to schedule a time not be over-scheduled. We also need to know that Sabbath time is different from a day off from our paid work. I know about those days off. They are for running errands and doing laundry and cleaning house and

a hundred other chores. Sabbath time is not about exchanging one kind of work for another. It is time that renews our souls as well as rests our bodies. Those of us who are work full-time would probably confess that work is the center of our lives, and that we orient our time and our lives around it. Sabbath teaches us to orient our lives around God.

This is what A.J. Jacobs learned. A secular Jew and self-described agnostic A.J. decided to spend a year obeying the Bible as literally as possible and recounted his experiences in his delightful book *The Year of Living Biblically*. Of course, a part of obeying the scriptures means observing the Sabbath. At first it is really difficult—after an hour the workaholic A.J. has pangs of withdrawal every time he walks past his laptop and by Saturday noon has broken down and started checking email. He continues to have trouble with the Sabbath until he is about four months into his year. A.J. lives with his wife and son in an old apartment building in New York, and one day while he is in the bathroom, the doorknob falls off, leaving him stranded inside. No one is at home to hear his cries for help. The minutes slowly pass. He counts and recounts the tiles in the bathroom floor, ponders every crack in the walls, and tidies the medicine cabinet. After two hours A.J. is reduced to just sitting on the floor. He writes, “I sit. And I sit some more...I’ve reached an unexpected level of acceptance. For once I’m savoring the present. I’m admiring what I have, even if it’s thirty-two foot square feet of marble...I start to pray. And, perhaps for the first time, I pray in true peace and silence—without glancing at the clock, without my brain hopscotching from topic to topic. This is what the Sabbath should feel like. A pause. Not just a minor pause, but a major pause. Not

just a lowering of the volume [of the world] but a muting.” (p. 124) When after four hours his wife returns and sets him free he is relieved, but also a little sad.

From dreading the Sabbath, A.J. begins to look forward to it. He writes, “Everything leads up to the Sabbath. On Friday morning I start prepping for it like I’m going on a big date...And when the sun sets, I flip off my computer and get to work not working...By the end of Saturday...I feel good, like I deserved the endorphin rush the Sabbath gave me. And then I start to look forward to next week’s Sabbath.” (p.p.250-251)

When A.J. comes to the end of his year of living biblically, he is still an agnostic, but now he says he is a reverent agnostic. He has come to appreciate deeply the sacredness of life, the sacredness of prayer, and the sacredness of the Sabbath. And the big thing he says he plans to take with him out of his year is the practice of Sabbath rest.

A.J. (an agnostic!) discovered what God wants all of us to discover—that we are not meant to work constantly and produce endlessly. That we need Sabbath rest. And that just as just a God’s *menucha* completes creation, so it also completes each of us.