

Remembering the Sabbath: Sounding the Jubilee

Leviticus 25:1-17

Rev. Robyn M. Fickes

First Christian Church

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We have spent the last two weeks praying and thinking about the idea of Sabbath, God's rest, comfort, and even joy in our lives. As our congregation is now facing some very sad and painful news we can feel the need to hit pause on the world and dwell with God in our sadness and confusion. Those feelings are more than normal and that is most certainly what Sabbath can be for us; but today's scripture reminds us that God calls us not just as individuals, but also as members of a community and the whole creation to dwell within Sabbath. God calls us to a weekly Sabbath, but our text today tells us that God also calls the whole world and all it's creatures to dwell in a Sabbath year of Jubilee, where all the brokenness and alienation we may feel are allowed to rest. The Jubilee calls the whole world back into a loving embrace, so we might all experience Sabbath, together.

The Jubilee idea is indeed radical because as Barbara Brown Taylor states "Sabbath is not only God's gift to those who have voices to say how tired they are; Sabbath is also God's gift to the tired fields, the tired vines, the tired vineyard the tired land... Sabbath is the great equalizer, the great reminder that we do not live on this earth, but in it, and that everything we do under the warming tent of this plant's atmosphere affects all who are woven into this

web with us.”¹ The idea of Sabbath Jubilee tells us two things: You, the earth, our loved ones, our lives can rest and be restored in the life of God. We can also then breath deeply, cry out the ache and sorrow that rests in the pits of our stomachs, and receive comfort for no other reason than that is the purpose of Sabbath Jubilee.

It may seem like Sabbath is an antiquated practice of the past. Today the very idea of a day of rest cannot be squeezed into our busy schedules, much less a time of rest for all creation. We are so exhausted from stretching ourselves to the breaking point, or too weary from facing the sadness in our world that when we come to our text today, a text that speaks of Sabbath justice as rest for the earth, workers, and even financial debts and business practices, we cannot begin to fathom what that might look like. It can be easy to think these are just ideas of the past to be discarded along the path of progress and success. When we look deeper, however, we realize that the scene might look different, but the feelings remain the same.

Old Testament professor Richard Lowery claims that our “modern economy puts working people in an updated version of the ancient bind: too much work and not enough money.”² Lowry explains that during the time of this Leviticus passage non-wealthy households struggled to meet their taxes and bill requirements owed to the government, as well as feed their families. In bad agricultural years, or in our modern context, bad stock and economic years, many families have and are forced to borrow money. To qualify for loans, debtors must put up their houses, land and laborer for collateral. When they cannot repay the steep loan, ancestral land is lost and laborers and

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World*, Harper One, 2009. 132

² Richard H. Lowry, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, Chalice Press, 2000. p. 5

debtors lapse into indentured service and slavery.³ Now and historically we humans create rules and laws that make our relationships with one another a struggle. We create fantasies of success, or visions of achievement that far outreach our capacity to care for so many things, or people. This idea of a Jubilee year was as much of a struggle then, as it is now.

The Sabbath year and Jubilee are written into our sacred text for two primary reasons. One reason being that the relationship to the land and right relationships and business practices were essential for the Hebrews. When you're a nomadic people you are fully dependent upon one another and the care of your resources, namely the land. Even though we have created devices and fertilizing techniques where this is not immediately the case, our natural resources and bodily fuel are slowly being depleted to the point of empty. We too depend upon our community relationships with one another and the land for our survival. The other reason for this inclusion is the reason why we have any rules – because we break the ways of being and therefore need reminders of our humanity, of our and the world's value. We need guidelines that remind us of our sacredness and value to God. In our busy days we tend to forget our own tender worth, let alone one another's and even the planets; but God's sacred text cries out to us as a reminder that Sabbath care and renewal is essential to our beings. God's Jubilee reminds us that care for one another and renewal of our relationships are essential to our lives, as well as our faith.

When we forget about God's call for Sabbath we can put ourselves through some pretty strange things in pursuit of our goals or expectations others and we put upon ourselves. My friend Selena in the first year of ministry found herself slammed against a wall of utter exhaustion. Returning

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home from the 8th funeral in 2 months, Selena was feeling exhausted and spiritually and emotionally depleted. She scooped up her 1-year-old daughter and sank to floor in a weeping heap. Clutching her little girl Selena cried out the sorrow of parishioners passing, but also the passing of a myth we all cling to – I can keep going – I can do this. As the sobs of sorrow subsided the weeping of relief followed. She finally let go of the idea that she had to do it all, be perfect, and just keep going. As she held her daughter in her arms she knew that this little life was more than enough of a reminder that God loves us just as we are, not because of what do or don't do. God doesn't love us for the titles we earn, the bank accounts we build, or the cars we drive. God loves all of us. If this message hadn't fully wrapped itself around Selena, it finished encircling her heart as her daughter pulled her little face close, kissed Selena's cheek, and in her toddler wisdom said, "love mommy." Rest, be, feel God's love; that was the soothing Selena needed, but isn't that what we all need?

I am continually amazed by the persistent stretching of ourselves in pursuit of our wishes and desires; especially in light of the ways these exhausting efforts can damage our relationships and even our planet. We push ourselves up the ladder of success until it takes the collapse into a tired heap or the shock of bad news for us to realize we're already more than enough for God. It is in this state that we come to our weekly Sabbath. The literal practice of a year of Jubilee might not be possible, but it instead offers us a spiritual way of living Jubilee in all our actions. One translation claims we are to literally leave the earth alone for an entire year; it can also be translated however, to a letting go, a release of dominance and control. Can you imagine all that pressure you carry, released? The burdens we carry and feel can be let go. The people can work with the land, but true ownership is to God. We can

continue to work our jobs, live our lives, but these do not form our identity, we are already identified, loved, and claimed by God. The weekly Sabbath is the reminder that all are the beloved of God. We can return to God and the Sabbath love no matter what we have done, or what has happened to us. God extends this Sabbath love when we're joyful, but also when we can't seem to make sense of our world. If we allow ourselves to return and find refuge together within God's weekly Sabbath, we slowly begin to be transformed, healed, and renewed by this love.

Through this weekly time in God's love we begin to see how the concept of a communal Sabbath, a shared sense of Jubilee is possible. We are capable of so much love, so much compassion and tenderness, so much beauty, but also so much pain and sorrow. When this reality is stretched at arms length, it is manageable, and we can continue on in our speedy ways; but when it comes crashing into our little piece of the world it can be devastating. We can be angry and shocked that our world is thrown off kilter; but we can also be sorrowful of the ways that we can mistreat one another in our Sabbath rejecting ways of being. We don't have to stretch and contort ourselves, our hearts, our relationships, our planet in these ways. God does enough of that stretching for us. God stretches this call of Sabbath wholeness to us, and then reaches to include the people we love, the people we struggle with, the people we don't even know until God's Sabbath is filled with everyone. God's Sabbath embraces all sense of time and place, but also the very ways we love and relate to one another. Our weekly revel within God is a brief rest stop in our journey of becoming the Jubilee Sabbath God intended. With every stop we are renewed and refreshed, again and again, until these moments of tenderness and healing, love and care begin to stretch beyond just one

Sabbath moment or day, and into our welcoming of one another and working alongside our coworkers and soil. These weekly moments of restoration lead us to a Sabbath life where “the land, like the people who occupy it, are redeemed – bought and owned by God.”⁴ The Sabbath is not something you keep, but instead, it’s something that keeps you. The Sabbath is not something you do alone, but instead, we do together. God keeps you in tender love, caring treatment, and wants us to do the same. Rest and allow God to tend to you; then, and only then, will be able to lovingly tend to those things and people who are entrusted to our care. Then, and only then, will we all be able to celebrate God’s Jubilee, together.

⁴ Lowry 62