

“Sabbath Peace”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 2

Texts: Deuteronomy 5:12–15, Mark 2:23–3:6

Preached: June 3, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Shabbat shalom! Sabbath peace to you from the Lord of Rest. AMEN

You all remember the Ten Commandments, don't you? “You shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. Honor your father and mother.” I'm really pretty good at the “You shall not murder” one, typically. I try to be very conscious of honoring my parents. And never once have I coveted my neighbor's ox or donkey—though perhaps I've coveted that nice Mercedes or that fancy kitchen...or the new laptop. All in all, I try to stay within the lane of the commandments. How about you?

But you know, there's a commandment in there that I think a lot of us have decided has been retired: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” How many of you remember the days when the Sabbath was a quiet day spent at church or at home, or visiting friends? Remember when all the shops were closed for the Christian Sabbath? I can remember as a young child racing to the grocery store at 5:45 on Saturday afternoon, a dollar bill clutched in my hand, sent by my mother to buy milk quickly before Baker's Lucky 7 Market closed, because it would not be possible to buy any on Sunday. I can also remember the time my family came in for sharp criticism at church because my dad, the pastor, had accepted an invitation from a restaurant owner in the congregation to come and have Sunday lunch at the restaurant—and by doing so, we had caused other people to work on the Sabbath. By the time I was a teen, though, things had already begun to change as people began to throw off the oppressive traces of religious strictures, and grocery stores, drug stores, and gas stations started opening their doors on Sunday. And, truth be told, the pastor's son was one of the workers laboring on Sundays. Fellow church members and I would sort of give one another shamefaced glances when they came in the door, me for working, they for making me work.

In Texas, where I grew up, they then implemented blue laws to regulate what could and could not be sold on Sundays. So, on Saturday evenings, we employees had to go through the store placing little signs on the items that couldn't be sold on Sunday: You could sell cameras, but not film, fishing poles but not fishing line; you could not sell toys or hair dye or pantyhose, ...you had to carry a list with you to be sure you marked everything. And the state sent out inspectors to catch violators. I will never forget one Christmas Eve that fell on a Sunday, a desperate man came rushing in just before closing time to buy a doll as a Christmas gift for his little girl, and my manager stepped up behind me at the register and informed me that I could not sell it to him.

But nowadays, Sabbath is pretty much like any other day. Many folks still go to worship on Sundays, but our numbers are reduced. There are still businesses that close, but most of us have developed an expectation that we should be able to go and purchase groceries and gasoline, or shop for sundries at Sam's Club and Target. We expect to be able to do all the things we want to do, when we want to do them. Work has intruded on our Sabbath, as well, and there are few who can resist checking and responding to work emails and texts on the Day of Rest. And we Americans are near the bottom in carving out leisure time for ourselves and our families. We are constantly on the go, and the lines between work and leisure have become increasingly blurred.

Now, what I'm saying is not an exercise in nostalgia, or romanticizing the past. Nor am I arguing for the return of blue laws. Yes, it was wonderful to have a quiet day where everything seemed to stop. But in many ways, the peace and quiet was enforced by oppressive regulations and laws, and among Christians by a whole lot of Sabbath shaming. Many observed Sabbath only because they were afraid of the condemning glare and wagging tongues of their fellow Christians. And all too often, the purpose of enforcing Sabbath was to ensure that there were plenty of bodies in the pews on Sunday morning—by making sure there was nothing else for people to go do. And then there is the huge problem that the Christian Sabbath is not the Jewish Sabbath, doesn't coincide with Muslim Friday prayer, and for folks who have no religion, forces them to observe something that means nothing to them. So enforced Sabbath is problematic in more ways than one.

In an increasingly secularized society, we've moved far, far away from the notion of a Sabbath day. And in the process, we've thrown out something crucial, we've lost something vital. What we have lost is a rhythm to our lives. What we have lost is a separation of days, leaving us instead to swim in a constant stream of days with no distinction one from the other. What we have lost is an understanding that not every demand placed on us must be responded to instantly. What we have lost is an understanding that work and commerce are fine and good, but that they must not rule our lives. We've decided that Sabbath doesn't really matter.

In scripture, though, Sabbath seems to be of supreme importance. The notion is built into the very order of creation itself in the first chapter of Genesis, where God expends tremendous creative energy for six days, and then stops everything and simply rests. In the two versions of the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5, the command to remember the Sabbath is given an emphasis that is not given to the other commandments. If you look at both passages, both lists of commandments, you'll see that this particular commandment is given the lengthiest explanation and defense, more even than the prohibition on worshiping other gods. That's a red flag that this one really, really matters. In Exodus, it is explained that Sabbath is an imitation of God's own pattern of creating and working, then resting. In Deuteronomy, Sabbath is commanded because the people of Israel had once been slaves in Egypt, and needed a weekly day set aside for gratefully remembering that their God had set them free.

Sabbath is not about a day, not about rules, not about shaming. Sabbath is about recognizing that God values not only our labor but also desires our freedom and rest. Sabbath is about making ourselves step out of the rushing torrent of our lives to enjoy a day of peace, and to give thanks for what has been as we look toward what will come next. Sabbath is about turning away from the daily preoccupations that risk becoming our idols or our masters, and stopping to turn toward God once again. And Sabbath is not only about ourselves. If you look at the Ten Commandments in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, there's a list of who Sabbath rest is for: you, your family, those who work for you, the alien resident living in your town, even your animals. And you are commanded to make sure that all those others, even animals, can enjoy and rest as well. And then there was a sort of "super Sabbath" called the year of Jubilee, literally the "trumpet blast of liberty," which was to occur every "Sabbath of Sabbath years," or after seven groups of seven years, so the 50th year after 49 regular years. In Leviticus, the Year of Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, is a year of freedom and celebration, in which property will be restored to its owners, exiles can return home, debts will be forgiven, and slaves will be sent home to their families. "Proclaim liberty throughout the land," it says.

We live in a culture that says that work and commerce are the highest values. Americans work longer hours than workers in any other major economy, and our hours have actually increased over the last decade. We receive less vacation than our counterparts elsewhere, and don't even take all of what we're given. And even though we're working harder, and productivity has soared, wages have remained stagnant. Work has become our god. And because of our desire for instant gratification, we've forced others to work harder and longer, as well. Now we can't even wait until Monday for a package to be delivered to us from Amazon... Technology has made us accessible 24/7 to virtually everyone, to virtually every demand that can be placed on us. Our days blend numbingly one into the other.

Yet we chafe at the idea of Sabbath. Taking a day of rest, stepping out of the current and pausing to be refreshed and renewed, is seen as a burden, somehow, and it is definitely countercultural. But Sabbath was never meant to be a burden. It was always intended as a gift, as a joy. We Christians often caricature Jewish understanding of Sabbath, in part based on the Gospels' depiction of the Pharisees' response to Jesus healing on Sabbath. I got a very different picture of things, though, when I was in Jerusalem as Shabbat began. At the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, a crowd began to gather as the sun set. Many people were praying aloud, positioned along the wall. Greetings of "Shabbat shalom!" ("Sabbath peace!") echoed through the crowd. Then the music started. Imperceptibly, this huge crowd began to sway, and then to swirl, and a chain of people began to form, and suddenly there was a line of dance that swept up everyone in its path, old and young, men and women, American pacifists and Israeli soldiers with Uzis slung off their shoulders, all dancing and singing as they welcomed the gift of Sabbath. As darkness fell, the joy and peace of Sabbath descended, if only for a day.

There's a well known Jewish midrash that explains the origin of Sabbath as gift. When God was about to give the Torah to the Jewish people, God summoned the people and said to them: "My children, I have something precious that I would like to give you for all time, if you will accept My Torah and observe my commandments." The people then asked: "Ruler of the universe, what is that precious gift You have for us?" The Holy One, blessed be God, replied: "It is the world-to-come (the Messianic Age)!" The Holy One, blessed be God, said: "The *Shabbat* is a sample of the world-to-come, for that world will be one long *Shabbat*."

Sisters and brothers, we are called to live as Sabbath people, called to live in the rhythm of Shabbat, to proclaim liberty, release, and Sabbath peace and rest to all people, and indeed all of creation. We are called to be samplers of the world to come, and to make sure that all know that sweetness, if only in part, for now. We are called to live our lives by Sabbath values of peace and freedom and rest. Can we go against our culture, and reclaim Sabbath as the crowning gift of creation, a glimpse of all that God intends? Shabbat shalom. AMEN.