

Exodus 20:8-11
“Sabbath: Not a Proper Noun”

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We are confronted this morning by a single word. As with all words that come forth from scripture, this word presents a challenge to us, while at the exact same time providing us with comfort. Few words can speak two languages, can say two things at once. This word, I believe, can.

From Exodus chapter twenty, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.”

In our Americanized culture, where a 7-day work week is not at all unusual, because work is not so much a place we go to or a thing we do anymore as it is the way we define ourselves—how many people do we meet for the first time and the first question we ask them is, “Tell me, what do you do for work?”—in a culture like that, it is hard to accept the challenge of this word. “Work six days; not 7. The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.” You can have 6 days all to yourself— to accumulate for yourself, to work for yourself, to make yourself feel good about yourself, but leave one day out of seven for someone else, for God. It’s not so much that the writer of Exodus has only work in the classic sense of the word in mind. As if to say this mandate applies only to everyone who works a job and makes a paycheck. Because why would a retiree who spends their days on the golf course need to worry about keeping the sabbath? For them, isn’t every day a sabbath? Or what about the person who lives by the mantra, “If you love what you do then it isn’t work.” If work doesn’t stress and tire you out, do you need to be worried about keeping the sabbath? But no, this word says sabbath is for everyone, because it is about giving a day to something, someone, else. “The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.” If you look at this word as written down in Exodus chapter 20, verse 8, you’ll see something interesting. You’ll see that the word sabbath is not capitalized. This seems worth mentioning, that sabbath is not a proper noun. It is not, as we have often told ourselves, a specific day of the week. It is not Sunday. For how could it be, given that our Jewish family members keep the sabbath on Saturday, and not even on Saturday, but from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Religious Jews have been keeping the sabbath this way since the beginning, because sabbath is not a proper noun. It was never meant to be something we pencil in our calendar for an hour or two on Sunday morning, if we can swing it, if work isn’t calling. As the late Jewish mystic/scholar/Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once put it, “Sabbath is not the carving out of space in time.” It is not concerned with great churches and temples, which ought to be good news for us who are keeping sabbath sitting in our living room and kitchens today. And yet, Heschel goes on to say that sabbath is about time. “Six days you shall labor, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.”

There is a demarcation of time inherent to this word. There is what we do with days 1 through 6, and then there is what we do with day 7. It is not time marked on the calendar and spent in a particular place, however. It is time spent in holiness, time spent with God. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. It is a sabbath to the Lord your God.”

Read the first creation account in Genesis chapter one and we see that with each passing day where God creates something, God calls it good. The light is good, the sky is good, the plants are good, animals in the ocean and on the ground are all good. On day six God creates human beings and goes so far as to say we are very good. But on day 7 when God creates sabbath, it is not called good, it is called holy.

What's the difference? To understand it, I think we need to acknowledge a certain order to things. We need to see that God did not make us as human beings first. We were not, it turns out, God's first bright idea. God made us on day 6, at the end of a long line of other things God had already made. And when God made us, God did not say, "Aha! Finally, something I have gotten right! My crowning achievement!" No, God looked around at everything God had made and thought, "Now who is going to enjoy it all? Who is going to care for it all? Who is going to enjoy it all by caring for it all?" And so God made you and me. The earth and all its colors and creatures were made for us and we were made for them. To say the least, our relationship to one another has been one of mixed results. We have protected and nurtured the earth at times, but mostly we have pillaged and plundered her. Still, though, she has yet to stop letting us breathe. She has yet to kick us out. It reminds me of a poem by the Persian poet Hafiz.

Even
After
All this time
The sun never says
To the Earth,
"You owe me."
Look
What happens
With a love like that.
It lights the
Whole Sky.

We were made to love and serve the earth and all creation, not the other way around. But not so with sabbath. Sabbath came after us. Sabbath, says Jesus later on, was made for us. It is God's gift to us, and nothing we ever do could keep God from wanting us to have it, or could make it less than what it is, because sabbath came after us. And because God made it holy, that's what it is.

What we do with the gift, of course, is entirely up to us. I said before that sabbath is not concerned with space in time. It is not concerned about what will happen if we don't show up to church on Sunday morning, as if it might mean sabbath isn't going to happen that week. Sabbath is, however, concerned with how we spend our time. The God we encounter in the Bible is a relational God who created sabbath, gave it to us, and then asks us to give it back. This is not God being greedy, but God being relational, God extending an invitation for us to return, every 6 days, to God. "Six days a week we wrestle with the world," says Rabbi Heschel,

“wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.”

What Heschel is pointing to is a kind of inner freedom that depends upon being exempt from the domination of things and people. On this fourth of July holiday, I think about how we have managed to achieve what we call political and social liberty, and yet very few are not enslaved to things, and too many are still enslaved to another.

There is a story that Jesus tells about a day when all the nations will be gathered to the throne of God to give an accounting of how they spent their time on earth. And God will mix everyone up and then separate them all back out, with some on the right and some on the left. To one group God will say, “Come, all that is mine is yours. For I was hungry and you fed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

“You must be mistaking us for someone else,” they will say. “For when did we see you and do any of these things?”

And God will tell them, “Whatever you did for the least of all, you did for me.”

Jesus doesn’t say this will necessarily take place on a sabbath, though I have to believe that when it does happen—when we finally begin to see the face of God in everyone, when we finally reach out to touch the hand of God on everyone, when we finally love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as our self—then it will be a sabbath. Because on that day we shall have rest. And we shall have peace. And we shall have perfected our union. And we shall be free.