

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH

The Practice of Saying No: Sabbath

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For 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—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Matthew 6:25-34

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

***"For 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."***

Deuteronomy 12:13-14a

Have you ever thought about sinking your teeth into a delicious chicken sandwich, with a side of good southern coleslaw to go with it, and then head on over to Chick-fil-a only to find that they are closed on Sunday? What kind of business does that anymore, especially a fast food restaurant? But Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-a, insists on it. He is a Southern Baptist and a sabbath keeping, Lord's Day type of Christian.

The whole idea of a business's closing on Sunday's hearkens back to day when there were laws on the books – "blue laws" they called them -- that did not permit certain types of businesses to be open on Sunday. While I may not agree with Mr. Cathy on a lot of things theologically and biblically, and it still bugs the heck out of me that our Washington Township Chick-fil-a plays Contemporary Christian music through their Muzak system so that you hear songs of praise to Jesus while you eat your chicken sandwich – in spite of all that – I have got to hand it to Mr. Cathy that he is willing to forgo work and profits for one day out of the week. And not only for himself, but for all of his employees and chickens.

Many of you may also know that for preschool and daycare Gideon attended the Jewish Community Center here in Centerville. And now Aydan, following in his big brothers footsteps, is a student there. One of the things I love about the Jewish Community Center Preschool is that

every Friday morning all the children and workers (whether Jewish or not) start the day with a Shabbat service – ushering in the Jewish Sabbath. The children light the Shabbat candles, set the table, sing Shabbat songs, and share juice and challah bread. Shabbat is so ingrained in Jewish culture that they teach this rhythm to their kids from the day they are born.

So -- whether it is driving into Chick-fil-a's parking lot on a Sunday only to discover that they are closed or watching children gather and honor Shabbat every Friday, there is within me this romanticized notion of Sabbath. Maybe it is a feeling of nostalgia. Maybe it is a distant memory that has faded. Perhaps it is this deep sense of a vision that is lost. In so many ways, Sabbath feels like a relic from the past, something outdated and out of touch with current realities, something that seems like a ditto machine in a world of computers and high speed copiers.

For sure, Sabbath is something that I am struggling to practice in my own life, and my guess is that many of you are too! And to be blunt honest, and a tad histrionic, I feel in my bones that I have got to reclaim this ancient practice, what Barbara Brown Taylor calls the practice of saying NO, or, I will die if I don't!

Taylor says

It is difficult to find many advocates for the spiritual practice of saying no. "No, I want to stay home tonight." "No, I have enough work for now." "No, I have all the possessions I can take care of."

Depending on your temperament, your cultural conditioning and your circle of friends, negations like these can sound like death wishes. If there is nothing more you want to do or have, then why go on living? If you are going to say no to perfectly good opportunities for adding to your life, then what is the point?

Maybe you have to be really, really tired before you can answer questions like those. Maybe you have to be deeply discouraged by never having time for all the things that need doing in this world – not just the important things, like spending time with the people you love, taking care of your health, and engaging in purposeful work (paid or unpaid) that give you a chance to participate in the repairing of the world, but also the minor but non-negotiable things, like keeping up with the laundry, getting your oil changed, stocking your refrigerator with something other than fat-free yogurt and frozen pizza, remembering to send in your quarterly estimated tax payments, getting your teeth cleaned, taking the cat to the vet for her annual shots, and changing the sheets on your bed before they develop brown images of your sleeping body on them like those pictures of people caught in the lava of Vesuvius.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 122-123)

Did you know that Sabbath is the first thing named "holy" in all of creation. Long, long before Moses brought down the Ten Commandments on stone tablets from Mount Sinai, the first holy thing in all creation was, as Taylor reminds us, citing the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, was not a people or a place but a day. God made everything in creation and called it good, but when God rested on the seventh day, God called it holy. That makes the seventh day a "palace in time," Heschel says, into which human beings are invited every single week of our lives."

And then Taylor asks abruptly: "Why are we so reluctant to go?"

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 126-127)

It is a good question. Why do we avoid this holy, palace of time? It is a real good question. The way I understand it, there are two candles that are lit to commence the Sabbath (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 130-131). Each candle represents the two Sabbath commandments, the two Sabbath remembrances, both of which call God's people to be more like God. The first Candle proclaims: made in God's image, *you too shall rest*.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For 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—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

(Deuteronomy 5:12-14)

The second candle proclaims: Made in God's image, *you too are free:*

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

(Deuteronomy 5:15)

And thus begins Sabbath: a day of rest and renewal...not work; a day to remember that we are free...we are not captives anymore. And it is not just for rest and freedom's sake, it is about a deeper reality. It is about a rest and freedom that is rooted and empowered by God. It is about a regular rhythm of life that seeks and experiences renewal and replenishment in the very being of God.

But I have to tell you, more often than not lately, this practice seems like a beautifully wrapped gift with my name on it, but it is a gift that remains unopened and totally rejected. Being the pastor and all, this is a great embarrassment to me. I know better! I have experienced the life and health that comes from Sabbath practice, but the honest truth is that most of the time I feel neither rested nor free.

I don't know if it is because I'm getting older or not, or if it is because we have a 6 year old and a 2 year old in our house, but I find that I just can't do as much as I used to be able to do and I'm having a harder time keeping up with things. But this sure isn't stopping me from trying! And as a result, I find myself tired most the time. And not just tired, but a deep, bone weary fatigue!

I also find myself trapped by own calendar, on a regular basis, held captive by too many things scheduled. And it is my fault. I don't blame anyone but myself. Our church council, nor even our moderator, are chasing me around saying do more, produce more, spend more time at church! I decide what goes in my calendar. I am the one who fails to set boundaries on my time. This captivity is all my doing.

And if my partner Dan were here he would tell you that I don't know how to say "No."

And I know the great theologian Karl Barth is right: "A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity."

So the truth is I find myself neither rested nor free. And my guess is, I have a lot a company.

I hear Jesus' words:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." (Matthew 6:25-26)

And all I can think in response to Jesus is: "Yea right!" All I can think about is the dead robin that Gideon found on our deck last Wednesday. And when I think like that I know I am neither rested or free. I know I am in deep need of Sabbath.

Without this ability to say "no" one day out of seven; without this willingness to stop and rest; without this willingness to renew and replenish; without this willingness to just *be* apart from doing; without this willingness to resist the drive of consumerism, materialism and hyper-business; without this practice of centering myself in the goodness and grace of God; I end up

worshipping the wrong gods, and not the One True God who is worthy of praise. I end up wallowing in too much worry and fear, and not in the presence of the One True God who feeds and sustains. I end up participating in the cycle that leads to death and not in the Way and the Rhythm that leads to Life.

So I guess what you ended with today was not really a sermon after all, but a confession.

And a request.

Help me. Help me to practice the art of saying no. Remind me of the importance of keeping Sabbath. And I'll do my best to help you too.

I like what Taylor suggests:

If a whole day of life-giving freedom is too much for you to imagine, then start however you can. Decide that you will get up an hour before everyone else in the house and dedicate that time to doing nothing but being in the divine presence. Decide that you will turn off the television an hour before you go to bed and spend that time outside looking at the sky. You could resolve not to add anything more to your calendar without subtracting something from it.

[which by the way, sounds to me like a sort of "cap and trade" policy on the pollution of overextension and hyper-business]

You could practice praising yourself for saying no as lavishly as you do when you say yes.

If you do any of these things, you will likely discover that they are very difficult to sustain all by yourself. It is hard to be a lone revolutionary, yet that is what you become when you start saying no. You rise up against your history, your ego, your culture and its ravenous economy. You may also have to rise up against your church or synagogue, if you belong to one, since such institutions can demand as much of you as any pharaoh. My advice is to find yourself a partner revolutionary. Find a whole community of revolutionaries if you can. They will help you hang on to your vision, the one that helps you remember who you were created to be. They may even supply you with some missing details, along with the support to realize them.

So, this morning I find myself looking for some revolutionaries! I find myself longing for a community of revolutionaries with which to belong, who will "throw me a line" because my old ways/habits are not working anymore! (Carrie Newcomer, from her *Geography of Light* CD); who will help me hang on to this Sabbath vision; who will help me not just to think about it, but to practice it intentionally as an empowering cycle of life; who will help me not just to do, but be (or as the Call to Worship intoned: to no longer ride unseeing through a world we do not touch and only vaguely sense – to find the heat and warmth and light deep within myself); who will help me to feel and know Papa's presence alive and well in the world and sing it with Barbara Streisand's deep pathos: "Papa how I love you, Papa how I need you, Papa how I miss you kissing me goodnight!"

And most certainly let us help each other to keep the Sabbath rhythm; "let us breath each other into life"! It is a strength and hope of a revolutionary community.

Learning to say No won't be easy. Practicing Sabbath will most certainly be a counter-cultural activity. But more than that: I am convinced that my very life ...our lives...depend on it!

Oh, and by the way, I had some time on Friday afternoon to work some more on this sermon, but I took a nap with Gideon instead. Amen.