

## **Homily – Sabbath, A Day of Rest and Freedom**

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Back in the 1960's my grandparents retired from a suburb of New York City and moved to a 160-acre farm in upstate New York. For the next forty years they were what I will call gentlemen farmers. They had large vegetable and flower gardens, but there was no commercial farming. It was hard work, but still it was a pace of life that slowed down after so many years of daily commuting into Manhattan.

Through their actions and lifestyle my grandparents taught their children and grandchildren that there is something wonderful about a slower pace of life that include the land. This was one of the reasons that Jeff and I were eager to leave Santa Cruz and Silicon Valley and come here to Arroyo Grande. I suspect that many of you join us in this desire to get away from much of the busyness of twenty-first century America. To this end, the Sabbath is a gift from God to all of us.

Now, according to the Rabbis the Sabbath begins when three stars are visible in the sky, and most of us associate the word Sabbath with rest. The actual origin of the word is not certain. It is a noun that has some relationship to the Hebrew word 'sabbat' meaning 'to cease, or to stop.' Quite possibly, therefore, the noun simply means 'the day that stops,' implying the cessation of work or regular activity." On the front cover of today's bulletin you can see some other words that are commonly associated with Sabbath.

Many of you will remember that the fourth of the Ten Commandments is about this day of rest, however, the first noted use of the term Sabbath precedes the Ten Commandments in Exodus. So, if you believe that the Book of Exodus is presented in chronological order, then the Sabbath was not new when God gave the tablets to Moses up in the mountains.

Now, one of the most insightful books about the Sabbath was written by a leading twentieth century Jewish theologian, Rabbi Abraham Heschel. In

his book Heschel points out that the first holy thing in all creation was not a people or a place, but a day. At the beginning of our Bible, 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. The Sabbath is a palace in time.

Within the Jewish tradition, this weekly Sabbath begins with the lighting of two candles when three stars can be counted in the darkening sky. And, traditionally, there is one candle for each of the Sabbath commandments. Many don't realize that the Ten Commandments are actually given twice in the Old Testament – first in the book of Exodus and then again in the Book of Deuteronomy. Curiously, the Sabbath commandment is altered or is different in its second iteration though in both versions it calls God's people to be more like God.

Now, in the Book of Exodus, the first time the Sabbath commandment is given, it is based on the creation account in Genesis. You can tell that by the way it ends: *“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—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”* That is what the first Sabbath candle announces: made in God's image, you too shall rest.

The second candle stands for the second formulation of the Sabbath commandment as it is found in Deuteronomy 5. We heard this version read to us a few minutes ago. There the basis of the command shifts from the creation of the world to the exodus from Egypt, ending this way: *“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”* God's people cried out to God and God heard them, sending Moses to free them from bondage in a land that was not home. Thus, resting every seventh

day, God's people remember their divine liberation. That is what the second Sabbath candle announces: made in God's image, you too are free.

When observant Jews light two candles at the beginning of the Sabbath, they light one for each of these reasons — a rest candle and a freedom candle—which have more to do with each other than one might first realize. For you see, by interrupting our economically sanctioned social order every week, Sabbath practice suspends our subtle and not so subtle ways of dominating one another on a regular basis. Because our work is so often how we both rank and rule over one another, resting from it gives us a rest from our own pecking orders as well. When the Wal-Mart cashier and the bank president are both lying on picnic blankets at the park, it is hard to tell them apart. When two sets of grandparents are at the lake with their grandchildren feeding ducks, it is hard to tell the rich ones from the poor ones. So, Sabbath is about both rest and freedom, two things that most of us desperately need more of in our lives. As 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Meister Eckhart once wrote, “God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by subtracting.” Sabbath is a day to subtract

And, this may be some good insight into why so many of us resist Sabbath with all of our being. I find this to be true in my own life. I join you in a morning of worship each Sunday, but for obvious reasons my day of rest and day of freedom is on Monday. However, instead of having a Sabbath on Monday, I fill my day off with many things. I vacuum the house, go to Power Yoga at the gym, cook dinner, and often have Master Chorale rehearsals in the evening. I may spend a day away from the church, but I fill my day, often to the brim, with other things. I stay busy, which is not a day of cessation of activity.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a retired Episcopal priest who has written many wonderful books including “An Altar in the World.” In this book she has a chapter on Sabbath in which she speculates on why so many of us are unable to follow the fourth commandment. Taylor writes, “Yes” is one those words capable of changing a life through the utterance of a single syllable. “Yes, I want the job.” “Yes, I will marry you.” “Yes, it is my desire to be baptized.” Saying yes is how you enter into relationship. It is how

you walk through the door of a new room. It is how you create the future. This may account for the seductiveness of the word, especially in a “can do” culture where the ability to do many things at high speed is not only an adaptive trait but also the mark of a successful human being. As much as most of us complain about having too much to do, we harbor some pride that we are in such demand. We admire people who are able to keep more balls in the air than we do.

For these reasons and more, 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.”

Barbara Brown Taylor says that in China the polite answer to “How are you?” is “I am very busy, thank you.” If you are very busy then you must be fine. If you have more to do than you can do, and the list never gets done but only longer, then you must be very fine, because not only in China but also right here in San Luis Obispo County, successful people are busy people. Religious people are busy people. For millions and billions of people, busy-ness is The Way of Life.

The great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once wrote, “A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity. However, saying “no” can be a more difficult spiritual practice than tithing, praying regularly or serving others. Limiting my activity does not help me feel holy. Doing more feels holy, which is why I stay so intrigued by the fourth commandment and my own reluctance to follow it.

Now, I think my own struggle is summarized by the phrase “Remember the Sabbath and keep it boring.” Like you I can remember a time when most stores were closed on Sunday. Today, entertainments and shops of every kind are open on Sundays. Merchants are no longer willing to stay closed to help churches stay open. People of faith are still free to keep the Sabbath if they want to but not because there is nothing else to do. We have to make our own choices from now on. We have to see the benefit in our lives in saying “no”. We must practice of the spiritual discipline of

standing still and observing the Sabbath. Even while others continue to zoom around us, we must sit down on the porch and hit the pause button.

Now, in the eyes of the world, there is no payoff for sitting on the porch, patio or deck. A field full of weeds or brush will not clear itself. If you want to succeed in this life (whatever your “field” of endeavor), you must prepare the soil, you must plant, you must fertilize, you must water, you must battle the pests. You must never turn your back. Each year’s harvest or sales numbers, or attendance must be bigger than the last. We must do more and be more and have more. This sounds very familiar but it is still counter to the life that Jesus is calling us to lead.

In the eyes of the true God, the porch, the patio, and the deck are the imperative. And, not just every now and then, but on a regular basis. Sabbath is the true gift of God to those who wish to rest and to be free – and who are willing to guard those same gifts for every living thing in their vicinity as well. Anyone who engages this practice discovers habits of work and rest that promise a better life not only for each of us as individuals but also for our families, our communities, our far-flung neighbors, and our planet.

According to the rabbis, those who observe Sabbath observe all the other commandments. Practicing it over and over again we can become accomplished at saying “no”, which is how we gradually become able to resist our culture’s relentless rhythms of excess and depletion, compulsion and collapse. Worshiping a different kind of God, we are shaped into that God’s image. You and I are all called to stop every seven days so that we might celebrate our divine creation and liberation.

I end this morning with a poem by Wendell Berry called “Sabbath.”

*The mind that comes to rest is tended  
In ways that it cannot intend:  
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended  
By what it cannot comprehend.*

*Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by  
Your will, not ours. And it is fit  
Our only choice should be to die  
Into that rest, or out of it.*

*Parts of this sermon are based on or taken from Barbara Brown Taylors book "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith."*