

“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Saying No”
Exodus 20:8-11

Two weeks ago, I thought that the world’s situation was really bad with the pandemic but then the murder of George Floyd occurred. I felt personally brutalized by the murder as I watched a man plead for his life and gasp for air with no signs of mercy from his killers. I wanted to look away, but I knew that I shouldn’t because this is not the first time this kind of violence has happened. It is part of a clear pattern of racism that has been going on for years. The question of “What Is Saving Your Life Right Now?” took on new power. I thought of the systems that really crush lives; systems that are based on fear and hate. One of the obvious remedies to such systems is working for justice through education, resistance, and challenge. That is what the prophets in biblical times did. That is also what Jesus did by going around the whole country teaching and challenging his people to practice justice and compassion. But today I want to share with you another biblical practice that is often counterintuitive in terms of seeing it as a practice for justice. The practice is Sabbath Keeping. Barbara Brown Taylor introduces it as “saying no” so that one may have the time to stop and align one’s life with God’s power and vision for the world. This practice has the potential to transform many of the systems of hate and fear in our world because it calls us back to the essence of who we are and what society is supposed to be.

The invitation to keep the Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments. The context for the giving of the Ten Commandments was the time when the people of Israel left Egypt where they were slaves and before they had entered the Land of Promise (their new home). These commandments were guidelines for the best ways to live in their new home and under the rule of God. They were to live and create a society that was not run by the values of scarcity, oppression, and exploitation. They needed these teachings so that they would not have the same mindsets that were around them with the economy and society being built on ways that disadvantaged the vulnerable and benefited only the few at the top. One of the challenges of the slavery was not being able to have a day of rest. Taking care of your personal needs and having fun would not have been allowed, as one’s sole purpose would have been to be productive. This is so relevant to our time as well because the main focus of our society is on production. People’s value is often reduced to what they can produce. We have to relearn the lessons and wisdom of this commandment.

For a people who were used to seeing themselves as commodities, as their slave owners saw them, this commandment was essential. It was not just about taking a day off from work. It was about stopping work and aligning one’s life with God’s vision. In his book, *Sabbath as Resistance*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “Thus I have come to think that the fourth commandment on sabbath is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society, because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society that specializes in control and entertainment, bread and circuses and along with anxiety and violence.” For the people of Israel Sabbath keeping was not about learning to take a day off during the week. It was about learning to live a life of trust in God, a life of

freedom and wholeness that was very different from their experience of slavery in Egypt. For their time in Egypt of over four hundred years, the ancient Israelites lived by the values of Pharaoh and their experience of being enslaved. Their days of enslavement in Egypt were days of hard labor and humiliation. The people of Israel had to work all the time with no time for rest. In his book, *Peace*, Walter Brueggemann sets up a powerful metaphor for the experience of the Israelites in Egypt: "The Brickyard." As anyone who has read Exodus 5 knows, the children of Israel were enslaved by Pharaoh. They made bricks for Egypt. "A brickyard is a place of competent production. It is where bricks are made to specification and on schedule . . . The brickyard is also a place of coercion and profit. . . the brickyard is a place of unhappiness, oppression, and, of course, enormous hostility . . . Not only must we produce for the others, but there is no prospect, not in our wildest imagination, that things are ever going to change. There will never be enough bricks to meet the quota." Walter Brueggemann states that Sabbath rest is about, "withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being." The Israelites had been schooled in the way of anxiety. The Sabbath was God's strategy to teach them a new way of life. As enslaved people, the Israelites forgot about the original goodness of creation and lived under the oppression of forced labor. They needed to reclaim the goodness of their own life. Their sense of wholeness was at stake. That is why the practice of Sabbath was essential for their health as a people. It was not just about luxury living and having time to play. It was about the essence of who they were as the people of God.

It is important that we not only cease work, but also consumption for one day. Once a week, we are invited to just be, to value life over stuff! In a strange way, this pandemic provided us with a forced Sabbath. We are not only pausing our work, but we are also not consuming as much.

It is easy for us to heed most of the Ten Commandments: Don't kill, don't steal, don't cheat, don't swear, and love God and your neighbor. But the one about keeping Sabbath is pretty tough to follow for most of us. In theory, keeping the Sabbath does not sound like a very tough challenge, but in practice, it is very tough when we are trying to fulfill the many demands that are put on our lives. With all the pressures of life, there is always a sense of restlessness about how to remedy the situation. None of the activities in which we engage are bad, but when they produce so much anxiety and dissatisfaction in us, they rob us of our sense of original goodness and our sense of being children of God.

What is interesting about the practice of Sabbath is that it is not only about stopping work and consumption once a week. It is also extended to take a sabbatical year every seven years and then a sabbatical jubilee. There is the command to take a sabbatical year. Leviticus 25:1-7 gives specific instructions for this kind of year, "For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest." And the Israelites

were supposed to eat whatever the land produced voluntarily, “Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you -for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.” Then the Sabbath practice was also to be taken to a higher level on the 50th year. So this would become a Sabbatical Jubilee where all debts would be forgiven, people freed, and the land would rest. When Jesus began his ministry, he called for a year of Jubilee.

All of this was part of God’s vision for the world of how human societies were to be organized. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “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 planet’s atmosphere affects all who are woven into this web with us... Test the premise that you are worth more than what you can produce - that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight - and when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so, remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.”

The essence of our scripture today is a call for us to march to the beat of God's drums in our lives. It is a call to stop the frantic and enslaving dance of busyness, control, consumerism, and violence. We are only on month three of a possible sabbatical year. We did not choose to go through this, but maybe there is a needed perspective in it for us. As God called the people of ancient Israel to leave the ways of slavery behind, we are called today to let go of the values that enslave us to embrace the values of the kingdom of God of loving the enemy, welcoming the stranger, taking time to pray and rest, working for justice, living simply, focusing on love, and practicing generosity. Let God's love remind you once more that to follow the way of Christ is to discover a new way of life. To take time to keep the Sabbath is to listen to the music of God's love that tells us of a different way to be in the world, the way of love and freedom from all that restricts and denies life, especially the values of anxiety that drive us to hate and to see ourselves or others as commodities. Take a moment to allow the Holy Spirit to bring to your attention the things that are dragging you down, the fears that haunt you, and the pressures that rob you of joy in life. I would like to end with these words from Barbara Brown Taylor:

“The ancient wisdom of the Sabbath commandment - and of the Christian gospel as well - is that there is no saying yes to God without saying no to God’s rivals. No, I will not earn my way today. No, I will not worry about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink, or about my body, what I will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? And there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” Amen.