

Sabbath

Text: Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 8, 2021

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” is one of the Ten Commandments. I’ll read the full commandment in a bit, but I want to start by pointing out that Christians are just plain bad at keeping Sabbath. It’s a state of affairs that I think we brought upon ourselves back in the day when my ancestors, and likely some of yours, joined church and state together—always a disastrous choice—and turned their interpretation of the Bible into law. That resulted, as it always does, in atrocities like the Salem Witch Trials. But in the case of what are now known as Blue Laws—the laws that tried to guard the Christian Sabbath—they also became, well, silly.

In addition to the laws that closed businesses and required church on Sundays, they also, in all seriousness and with harsh enforcement, put laws like the following on the books:

1. It was illegal to fish for whales on Sunday. Personally, I think it should always be illegal to fish for whales, now that we have overfished and driven them to near extinction, but guess what state put that law on its books. Ohio. Was some grifter running whale fishing tours on Lake Erie? Were they trying to stop day trips from Ohio to New Bedford?
2. In Connecticut, it was illegal for a man to kiss his wife on Sunday. In Judaism, it was an expectation that married couples would make love on the Sabbath. You’d have to check the census during the period, but there may well have been an uptick in Christians converting to Judaism in Connecticut.
3. There appeared to be special concern that Christians might try to enjoy themselves on Sundays, especially during church or close to that time. In Alabama it was illegal to wear a fake moustache that causes laughter in church. In West Virginia, it was against the law to eat candy less than an hour and a half before church services.
4. But it wasn’t just laughter and sweets. In Nebraska, if a child burped during church, the child’s parents could be arrested. How many of you would have done jail time if that were the law now?
5. My native Rhode Island outlawed the selling of toothpaste and a toothbrush to the same customer on a Sunday. I mean, what? Were they trying to punish the people eating candy before church with cavities?
6. And no fewer than six different states had laws about ice cream. In Georgia, you couldn’t carry an ice cream cone **in your back pocket** on a Sunday. In New York, it was illegal to carry your ice cream cone in **ANY** pocket on a Sunday. Clearly there’s something about the design of either pockets or ice cream cones that I’m not understanding here, because you couldn’t carry an ice cream cone in **any** pocket on **any day of the week** in Alabama. And in Oregon, Wisconsin, and Kansas you couldn’t eat ice cream on a Sunday, period—no matter where you kept it.

While Jewish Sabbath observance was focused on defining work and trying to keep people from doing certain things, Christians seemed to feel that it was important also to forbid pleasure. Having

fun on a Sunday was suspect—and still is to this day in many circles—especially here in New England.

I think at least part of the reason the pendulum has swung to a virtual elimination of Sabbath observance among Christians was because we took the day that was supposed to be the most fulfilling and refreshing of the whole week and turned it into a day of fearful duty and grim self-denial. The general effect of those laws was to pollute the common understanding of what Sabbath was about, eventually leading most Christians to scorn the gift and let it gather dust in the closet. And we are the poorer for it.

The Sabbath commandment is the longest of the ten. It appears twice—as they all do—once in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy—and there are some differences between the two listings for this commandment. I'm going to read them both. Try to spot the differences. I'm reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

First from Exodus 20:8-11

“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.”

Now let's take a look at the Deuteronomy version. From Deut. 5:12-15.

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 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.”

The most significant difference between the passages is in the reason given for Sabbath observance. In Exodus the people are told to keep the Sabbath because on the final day of Creation in Genesis, God rested. So we, likewise, should work six days and rest on the seventh.

But the Deuteronomy version references a different story. There the people are told to keep the Sabbath so that they don't enslave others as the Egyptians had enslaved them. In both versions the Sabbath is for everyone—every human, every animal, and we learn in the book of Leviticus that it even extends to the land itself, which is to lie fallow one year out of every seven.

That time off for the entirety of Creation is so important that in Exodus 31, God calls keeping Sabbath the sign of the covenant. It's the only one of the Ten Commandments that can't be found in other ancient law codes. Keeping Sabbath is how the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to distinguish themselves from others. It's the thing that identifies someone as willing to be set apart, not just as moral people but as faithful people—people in covenant with something above and beyond themselves. That's what “holy” means—to be set apart.

We think we're doing pretty well with the commandments if we haven't murdered anyone lately, but Exodus 31 begs to differ. The whole covenant is negated if we're not keeping the Sabbath. So, it's worth taking a few minutes to see what babies we might have thrown out with the Blue Laws bathwater. We took back the ice cream, which is fine as long as we aren't milking the cow on the Sabbath to get it. Cows are supposed to get a Sabbath, too. But what else might we gain if we re-entered the covenant and really took Sabbath seriously?

While we generally think of the commandment as being about a day of rest, the text is joined with a command to work for the other six days. So, we can't get very far in trying to define a day of rest until we understand what the Bible means by work. We think we know when we're working, but remember that the commandment isn't just about human labor. Whatever the verse means by "work" has to also be possible for elk and salmon, chickadees and worms, oaks and clay; because the Bible tells us that they must all be given a Sabbath when they are exempt from that labor.

The key verse for sorting this out is Exodus 20:9: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." That part of the commandment is identical in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. And the key word in that key verse is the word for labor, which is—in Hebrew—*abad*.

Abad is one of the central root words in the Hebrew Bible. The first time we encounter it, God is commanding Adam to do it in the Garden of Eden. Most translations use a farming term for the word there—Adam is to *till* the earth and keep it. When it appears in the Sabbath commandment, it gets translated as "labor." But those are not the word's typical meanings. The word *abad* appears as a verb 290 times in the Old Testament and 227 of those 290 times, the word is translated as "serve." But the root word doesn't just produce verbs. It occurs 96 times as a feminine noun, *abodah*, and in those places it's translated as "worship." And another whopping 803 times it shows up as a masculine noun, *ebed*, where it's translated as "servant" or "slave."

Putting all that together, we discover that, at its root, the commandment isn't really about any specific activity, whether it's eating ice cream, sawing logs, or selling insurance policies. It's not about **what** we've been doing for the other six days, but about **the purpose** it accomplishes. I think it's not just the "take a day off" part of this commandment that we've been getting wrong. We have also lost track of what our work on the other six days is supposed to look like. It's not about how much we sweat, what we earn, or our productivity levels. It's about whether or not the activity the occupies us for six out of every seven days—paid or unpaid—is a form of service.

Service here doesn't mean just what we would consider works of charity or whether we're paid or volunteer. It's about whether our labor contributes to the sustaining and renewal of the world. The service of maples and crickets looks different than the service of cashiers and nurses; and the service of bison and pheasants looks different than the service of oceans and mushrooms, but the commandment is clear that none of them should be enslaved—to be forced to provide their service without a time of rest.

We serve each other—humans, animals, even the land itself—six days out of every seven. It's a dance of mutual care and regard that is the root of what it means to worship the God who made it all. Then, for a full day, every living thing can rest and love ourselves, just as we have loved our neighbors—human, animal, and plant—for the previous six. All of it together is the expression of

our love for God. That means that in truly and fully keeping the Sabbath commandment, we fulfill the Great Commandment, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, every single week.

God wants stewards not slaves. Just as God took the time to create a command to forbid muzzling an ox while it treads some very tasty grain (Deuteronomy 25:4), so God wants not just the ox but all living things to be able to enjoy the fruits of their labors. It's also clear from the commandment itself that taking a break from your own service doesn't mean you can turn around and make others serve you. Not for pay, not as a volunteer, nothing. You can't even make your dog fetch your slippers. Nada. That's how the world is renewed and restored.

Sabbath is designed to be a hedge, not only against overwork, but also against the cruelty that is so often birthed by greed. It's a time given to all living things simply to be and to love themselves, remembering that when God summed up the work of Creation, God said that every bit of it was good. For a full day we neither make nor respond to demands with the sole exception of helping those in distress. Sabbath is the capstone of loving your neighbor as yourself. By not making demands on others, we love our neighbors, and by ceasing to serve others for a day we tell our minds and bodies that we matter, too. Self-esteem, awareness, and reflection begin in Sabbath.

But Sabbath isn't just a day-long nap. There are activities that are encouraged on the Sabbath. The commandment itself doesn't offer much guidance, but other parts of scripture do. In Leviticus 23 we learn that it isn't just the seventh day of each week that's identified as a Sabbath. Every Jewish festival also designates one of its days as a Sabbath. Mostly it's the first day of the festival; for Passover it's the last. And it's in those festival Sabbaths where we learn the kinds of activities that are encouraged on every Sabbath.

In short, the festival Sabbaths are times of inner reflection, repentance, healing, and renewal. They are times of celebrating the abundance given by God through the earth and giving thanks. They are times to take inventory of the state of our lives and relationships. They are times to look at all the non-Sabbath days of our lives and say, "So what am I doing, really? Is it important? Have I been serving in my work or just sweating? In making fine furniture, the Shakers gave us the concept of worshipful work. Can we say that about the way we spend six out of every seven days? Sabbath is a day to take stock and to shift priorities if necessary.

This is what makes the Sabbath a day of love for ourselves. It's not that we love ourselves just by doing something fun, sleeping in, or getting a day off from work. It's a day when we check in with our own priorities, offer up our failures, experience the grace of forgiveness and God's fundamental goodness in ourselves and in everyone and everything around us. It's a weekly reset—a break from the grind that directs us to remember our purpose and take stock of the things our labors have wrought.

Broadly speaking, the provision of the Sabbath is to allow everything to revel in simply being what it is and to recognize that freedom as our truest form of worship. Every sabbath day a cow can be just a cow and not a source of food, drink, or labor. Every horse can just be a horse and not a source of our entertainment, exercise, or—for Clydesdales—beer. Every sabbath year a tree can grow how and where it pleases and can share its fruit not just with people nearby but with the bears and the birds and the worms that turn it again into rich soil. And every sabbath day and year human beings

can remember that we are made in the image of the God whose name means, simply, “I am” and try just doing that for a day.

We are so very far from where we need to be on both the work and the rest side of this commandment. It’s the sign of the covenant and our actions on seven out of every seven days proclaim that we are really not interested in being God’s people—whether we come to church or not.

The climate crisis is a direct result of our failure to give Sabbath to the land and waters. Our food crisis is a direct result of our failure to serve the animals and plants that have given us life for millennia. The physical and moral diseases of our world are a direct result of our failure to see our interactions with others as a form of service and our unwillingness to spend a day apart from the noise and take stock of whether the way we’ve spent the past six days really reflects the priorities we profess.

I’m as guilty as anyone here; but every minute brings with it the opportunity to change course. That’s literally what repentance means in the Bible—to change direction. Even just one degree of change can, over time, bring us to a vastly different place. For the earth, for its creatures, for our neighbors, for ourselves; let’s return to God’s covenant and keep the Sabbath. Amen.