

Love God, Love Neighbor, and Rest

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Exodus 20:1-17

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I.

Hello Church in the Wild. It's time for us to talk about the covenant of The Ten Commandments! And I know what you're thinking, because part of me was thinking it too: what could be less wild than the Ten Commandments? These are simple, direct, rules to live by. Some of us learned them in Sunday School long ago, some of us learned them recently in Godly Play, some of us have seen Charlton Heston play Moses in the old *Ten Commandments* movie. No matter how we arrive here today, I bet most of us could probably still name all ten (or at least like seven). Don't worry, there will not be a test. But I'm hoping that by the end of this sermon we might understand the Ten Commandments to have some potential, possibly even a wild side that speaks to us today, especially commandment number four. And now you might be asking yourself, which one is number four again? So, say goodbye to your preconceived Charlton Heston, and get ready to Love God, Love Neighbor, and Rest.

There's no way we have time in one sermon to methodically explore each commandment one-by-one. But we are going to go directly into the very heart of the Ten Commandments and dwell together with the center of this passage, which is probably the most countercultural commandment of all, and that is to honor the sabbath day and keep it holy. What could possibly be wild about the sabbath? And what meaning could it have for us, a year into this pandemic?

II.

At first glance sabbath seems like an easy idea-- oh, rest? We can do that, yay. And, it seems like, as a culture, we would be pretty focused on the sabbath commandment. I know when I am over-spent, emotionally or otherwise, I start acting not with

thoughtfulness and strategy and kindness, but my reactive self shows up to run this show. And when we humans are depleted we are more susceptible to illness, depression, and anxiety. So you'd think we'd be excited about sabbath rest, about a day devoted to mindfulness, to being closer with God and letting go of the daily grind. But! Somehow the ethic to keep sabbath holy in American culture has been superceded by a work ethic that tells us resting is the same as being lazy. Seminary Professor Walter Brueggemann writes about this in his excellent book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. He talks about how rest is subversive in a capitalist system that demands people be productive 24/7. He writes about how he has come to believe that the sabbath commandment is both the most important and the most difficult for us to follow.

And even as awesome as the idea of sabbath being an act of resistance is, Walter Brueggemann wrote this in 2014, way before covid. Now in pandemic life, we're "always available" because everyone knows we are just at home and time is blurry, and the lines between work and home aren't as parsed as they used to be, and by the way my bedroom is now being used as a gym with a treadmill, a worship space, a laundry pile, and a place for sleeping. (Okay, technically, the laundry pile was there before covid). The writer Anne Lamott recently posted a piece on her FaceBook page, saying, "I think we are exhausted in a brand new way." And gosh that feels true to me, do you feel that way too? Just exhausted and wired at the same time-- I've heard the term "wired and tired"-- and it makes sense that our hearts, minds, and souls would have some catching up to do, we have really packed a lot into the past year. So in our current context, is sabbath possible, can true rest be resistance, and if so what would that even look like right now?

III.

To answer these questions it may help to get clear on why sabbath is important on a biblical scale, so let's focus on the center of the Ten Commandments themselves. We

can imagine two stone tablets, with the headlines: Love God, and Love Neighbor. And that's pretty much how they're organized. But how do we find the soul of these commandments? Well, there is a literary device used in the Bible to show us which words are just very important. It's kind of the ancient way of drawing an "x" to mark the phrase that deserves a lot of attention. It's called a chiasm. And it's not only found in the Bible, it's often found in speeches, or like in Martin Luther King Jr's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, where he writes, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The center of this chiasm is the word "threat." Technically, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 have an overall chiastic structure, the center of which is the commandment to keep sabbath. But there's also a little x inside the big x, because the sabbath command is itself a chiasm. At the center of the fourth commandment is the line, "But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." So here we find that the soul of the Ten Commandments is to keep the sabbath. Yes, love God. Yes, love your neighbor. And the practice to attend to most is to set aside time to dwell with God.

Not only is sabbath linguistically important, and good for human health and well-being, it also directly opposes the way of Pharaoh's economy, from which the people have just escaped. We see in the Bible how Pharaoh, who proclaimed himself a god, profits from a system that preys upon the poor, taking their wealth and their labor and their freedom. Back in Egypt, the Israelites were enslaved and forced to make bricks to build Pharaoh's giant storehouses. These storehouses were really monuments of greed, because he didn't really need them all and it's not like Pharaoh has plans to share the grain inside. And when the enslaved Israelites ask to rest, he says NO, but NOW you can keep meeting your brick-making quotas for my storehouse construction AND forage yourself for the materials to make those bricks.

And we know the story of the exodus, how God leads the people through the waters, as if on dry land, into freedom. In the scene just before our scripture reading, God promises to hold these escaped Israelites as God's treasured ones, if they will agree to

keep covenant with God. Immediately the people speak in one unanimous voice, Yes. Yes to this God who is the God of freedom from oppression. This is important to remember, because the Ten Commandments don't happen in a vacuum. They don't happen as a privileged society dreams up rules to live by. No... As the Israelites gather themselves together in the desert wilderness, wondering how to organize themselves, I think they've got to be asking-- how can we never be enslaved again, and how can we make sure not to oppress others? And into this environment God offers a new covenant. Specifically, the commandment to keep the sabbath holy is a breathtaking reversal of Pharaoh's ruthless economy. And the fact that God's very Be-ing blesses the sabbath by modeling rest on the seventh day of creation is huge. This is not a false God who only endorses rest just so that the workers can be more productive. The Bible does not say, and while resting on the seventh day, God checked emails to make sure God wasn't missing something important in the storehouses. No, God's call to rest is honest and true, it says that God rested on the seventh day, and therefore the sabbath is blessed.

But the concept of sabbath rest does not stop here. It does not apply to rest only every seven days, it's also every seven years-- a sabbatical-- when the land and the people are to rest, "so that the poor may eat" (Exodus 23:10). And every seventh cycle of seven years is a jubilee, an additional year of rest and freedom and the forgiveness of debts, when land is returned to its original family. It turns out you can't have a permanent underclass if you cancel debts and redistribute land this way. Sabbath, sabbatical, and jubilee are all rooted in the fourth commandment, to remember the sabbath and keep it holy. It's truly a radical commandment that re-orders the economy so it's not a pyramid with one elite class at the top, but rather an economy that's periodically shuffled to create more equality-- and love of neighbor, because you can love your neighbor more easily when your neighbor isn't your all-time financial competitor.

As a person who just experienced the practice of sabbatical, I highly recommend unplugging from responsibilities, even just one day a week, to really really rest. And maybe that means more sleep or a nap. But it can also mean turning your phone off and daydreaming. Or watching the birds outside your window. Or attending a zoom worship service with your church community. The point is, that God's sabbath rest does not disappear in times of crisis, whether it's a pandemic, or the struggle for racial equality, or a personal family crisis. In moments of challenge, rest may be even more important for us to have the stamina to carry on with the work of healing and justice, and loving our neighbor. Some of our neighbors are hard to love. We may need all the rest we can get.

Right now I'm in the process of reading the *March* trilogy with my second grader. It's a little intense for sure. *March* is written in comic book form, but is really an autobiography of Georgia Representative John Lewis, one of the giants of the civil rights movement who died in 2020. In Book 1, John Lewis and other demonstrators in Nashville are beginning to peacefully protest at segregated lunch counters and movie theaters. If you look carefully at the drawing, the marquis announces what movie is showing. And sure enough, above the place where Black people are attempting to purchase tickets at a white-only movie theater, are the words, "Now Showing: Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*." How ironic they were protesting unjust laws beneath the title of a movie all about following laws. And how ironic that a movie depicting the God of freedom from oppression, and commandments rooted in the justice economy of sabbath, that this particular movie would participate in the idolatry of segregation.

Today is the day in 1965 when John Lewis and 600 peaceful protesters marching for voting rights crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, only to be met with extreme violence. Acting from sabbath means staying in this long haul struggle against racist voter suppression, begun so long ago. In fact, just this week in John

Lewis' home state of Georgia, a new law was proposed to make it illegal to bring water to people waiting in line to vote. It's the same racist tactic Sheriff Jim Clark had used to intimidate Black people standing in the Alabama heat to register to vote in 1963.

Pharaoh's predatory economy is present in every age of history, and so the ten commandments call us to act from a position of sabbath, to continue resisting hatred and injustice in all its forms. It means turning away from ignorance, even our own, turning toward an economy that's life-giving for all, and turning round right alongside our most vulnerable neighbors.

IV.

So may we act from a position of sabbath-- even while sheltering at home--because once we've experienced true rest, we are ready to act, and not just for the sake of being busy, but for the sake of an economy of love and justice. Acting from a position of sabbath means making decisions about how we want to strategically spend our time and money as we emerge from the pandemic. It means dreaming of what our economy could look like if we really truly love our neighbors, in the name of the one to whom we belong, and by whom we are treasured, with steadfast love for 1000 generations.

Amen.