

Exodus 20:1–17 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Remember the Sabbath Day

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: March 8, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17

In the early afternoon on a Friday excitement and busyness fill the dense neighborhoods. A sense of purpose and anticipation is in the air. Shoppers pour into the Shuk, the open air market in Jerusalem. [Slide 1] Here on grand display are manifold varieties and endless quantities of fruits, nuts, vegetables, baked goods, fish, meat, sweets and spices. [Slide 2] It is a riot for the senses. Colors and smells and vendor's voices, the push of the shoppers all convey an unmistakable buzz. The Sabbath will begin in a few hours. The meals for the evening and the next day are being prepared. Last minute shopping is underway. But soon the scene shifts. As sunset approaches, as if by some act of wizardry, the market and the streets turn empty and silent. The Sabbath has begun. [End Slide 2]

Growing up I had a dim view of the Sabbath, or at least its Christian counterpart, Sunday. It meant another day of school, this time at the church. I used to tell my mother that I had enough school during the week. Especially in my mother's family, Sunday wasn't just another day of school; it was a day distinguished by prohibitions: no fishing, no baseball, no swimming, and no TV. It was, I was told, a day of rest. It was a foretaste of heaven, they said, which I have to tell you was a pretty bad sales pitch. The Sabbath day of rest seemed much more like enforced boredom than anything else. It conveyed that God was very suspicious of enjoyment. I didn't have to mow the lawn, but that was about the limit of Sunday's appeal as far as I could see.

When I first learned about the Jewish Sabbath, I assumed it was pretty much the same thing. I had good reason. After all, there were those 39 categories of things you couldn't do, and they seemed to cover just about everything one could imagine. Observant Jews do not drive, turn on lights, or cook on the Sabbath. I assumed that the excitement at the market as the Sabbath approached must be something like mardi gras, the last burst of fun before the enforced period of sacrificial monotony.

Boy was I wrong. As I learned more, I found out that many people actually look forward to Shabbat, as they call the Sabbath, all week long. The excitement at the market is because the final preparations are nearly complete and soon the Sabbath will start. It is often stated as, soon the queen will arrive. Sabbath is seen as a precious gift from God, a time when we can set aside weekday concerns. Sabbath is also a time of great feasting and celebration. It is a time when families spend time together reading, playing games, and playing music. You may be surprised to learn that marital relations are specifically encouraged on the Sabbath. That's right. S-E-X is especially approved on the Sabbath. Our passage says remember the Sabbath Day. We are to remember God's good creation, which means we are to enjoy God's great creation.

We are to remember that even God rested on the seventh day, after creating the universe. We are also to remember the great and mighty deliverance that God wrought for the people Israel, delivering them to freedom from the bondage in Egypt. Remembering that we were once slaves freed from Egypt, the Sabbath is meant to free us from the things to which we are still enslaved: our jobs, daily worries, even the need to make ends meet. On the Sabbath day, we are to set these things aside. The Sabbath is a time divided of from ordinary time and ordinary affairs.

Remembering the Sabbath is to remember, then, God's good creation and God's deliverance of us from enslavement. And because we were slaves in Egypt, because we are enslaved to so much in our lives even now, the Sabbath commandment calls us also to remember to grant the Sabbath to the rest to our family, our workers, and even to the stranger, the alien or the immigrant. When we remember the Sabbath, we are freed to experience the goodness of creation, and we are compelled to bestow it on others.

There is, of course, the other part of observing the Sabbath, those 39 restrictions. But even they are meant to counter or reverse our weekday living. In Genesis God told Adam that he had responsibility for creation. But on the Sabbath, as we observe the Sabbath rest, we take the focus off the things that we are to accomplish and focus on the blessings we receive.

From the beginning the Sabbath was an extraordinary commandment. The idea that one would rest on the Sabbath Day, even in the middle of the harvest, was unique in the ancient world. Even more astonishing is that the rest extended to the animals and employees who were directly involved in the same harvest. The Sabbath was to be strictly enforced because God knew that the human tendency to make exceptions would be great. God knows our capacity to argue and rationalize. I can't take the Sabbath off this week; I've got to get the crop in. I can't take the Sabbath off this week; I've got a big meeting next week. Or one I know many of you know all too well, I can't take the Sabbath off this week; they keep scheduling soccer and hockey on Sunday. God knows that whether we are talking about things we need others to do or things we need to do, the pressure to forget the Sabbath is severe. The Sabbath is meant to set aside those many things that fill the rest of our week, but those things intrude with great force and demand that instead we set the Sabbath aside. I know this firsthand as I'm sure many of you do. But, also as I'm sure many of you do, I worry about the price. What is the price of our fast-paced lives, our busy schedules, our over-commitments? What is the price of not setting aside time to be grateful for those blessings we have received? What is the price for not setting aside time with family or for relaxation and enjoyment? I think we all have a sense that the price is significant.

So, let's for a moment join those busy shoppers at the Shuk on Friday afternoon. A few more fruits and vegetables to buy. Last minute ingredients for the traditional stew. Loaves of Challah for the evening ceremony. Maybe a bottle of wine.

And then it's briskly home. The house has been cleaned. The food preparation is completed. A lovely and special meal awaits. The table is set with the best dishes and linen. It is as though a special guest is expected. Everyone is bathed and in clean clothes. At eighteen minutes before sunset, everyone gathers around the table. [Slide 3] Two candles are lit. One candle commemorates the command to remember the Sabbath, the other candle reminds us to observe it. Remember the blessings of creation; observe the freedoms from daily toil. [End slide 3] Prayers are said to sanctify the wine and bless the two loaves of challah. The bread is cut and each person shares a portion of wine and bread. Then the meal is enjoyed at a leisurely pace. After dinner, rather than before, a thanksgiving grace is said. The rest of the evening is spent talking together, taking an unhurried stroll, reading scripture or something else, and then finally to bed. It is worth noting that on the Sabbath the conversations generally avoid mention of unpleasant topics, money or business.

Some will spend Sabbath morning at services, followed by another meal at home. Either way, the day is spent eating, reading, talking, relaxing, playing games, napping, making love or taking walks. Finally, a short while after sunset, the Sabbath concludes with a ritual that marks the re-entry into secular time. [Slide 4] A part of the ritual is opening a container of fragrant

spices and blessing them. The lovely aromatic spices are said to be compensation for the ending of the Sabbath and the loss of the Sabbath spirit for another week. [End Slide 4]

A few thoughts cross my mind. First, we are just now celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the bloody events at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, which ultimately helped galvanize the movement that led to the Voting Rights Act. The events in Ferguson, MO and the only slightly veiled racist treatment of President Obama by many in the Congress, make it clear that there is much work left to do to address the moral and social ills of this country. In the face of such great need, what can be the rationale to advocate remembering the Sabbath Day, to encourage taking a day separated from daily worries, to take a day off when the need is so great? It's a good and fair question. Do you remember the story in the Gospels in which the woman pours a bottle of expensive ointment on Jesus' head? People complained and said, "Why this waste? This expensive oil could have been sold for a large sum of money and given to the poor." Jesus answered them, "You will always have the poor with you." Jesus sounds callous in this story. But I think he was being provocative to make a point. His point was that, indeed, there will always be serious problems to address, but unless we take time to be grateful and to get away from the frenzy of life's struggles and renew ourselves and reorient ourselves toward the sacred, we will burn out, and we will also lose our way. The Israelites understood that remembering and observing the Sabbath would make them more mindful of their blessings and more compassionate toward others, not less. Maybe more time spent in reflection and gratitude will help us be our better selves on a daily basis and ultimately be more effectively committed to justice and freedom for all in God's creation.

Another difficulty I see is that if we're going to advocate for the Sabbath, there aren't many Christian customs to follow. Other than going to church on Sunday, I'm not aware that most Christian denominations have many concrete ideas about how one might remember and observe the Sabbath. I think we can look to Judaism, with whom we share the Sabbath injunction in the Bible, for some ideas. I like the idea of seeing the Sabbath as something to look forward to. I like the idea of a sacrosanct family meal set aside and accompanied by prayers and blessings. I like the idea of reflecting on our blessings with gratitude. I like the idea of leisurely, enjoyable activities. And I like the idea of a break from unpleasant conversations and from talk of money or business. Also, we can reimagine some of our own practices. Right now we are in the season of Lent, a season, which I think could generally use a little reorientation. Maybe we should think of the things we give up less as sacrifices and more as reminders that some of our luxuries, habits or cravings cloud our spiritual vision. We can live without them. More to the point, we can live better without many of them.

Finally, I am aware that for most of us a sudden commitment to readjust our family schedules to take a full Sabbath day would be very difficult. All those things that impinge on our lives cannot easily be dropped all at once. We probably need to start modestly. Maybe start with one thing to begin with. Maybe declare a day when no unpleasant topics or business may be discussed. Maybe set one meal a week when the whole family is there, and all the iPhones, tablets or video games are turned off. I would love to hear your ideas of small steps to begin with. There's an old saying about the Sabbath that goes something like this: it is true that the people keep the Sabbath; it is even more true that the Sabbath has kept the people. However we begin, let us learn to remember the Sabbath day. Amen.