

Sermon

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018

St. John the Evangelist

Proper 4 (B): Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 81:1-10; 2 Cor 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

What do you think the most frequently broken commandment is? I would wager that the most consistently and flagrantly violated commandment of the 10 that we have is number 4, "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Take some time, take a day of rest each week and offer it to God. Imagine if we treated the other commandments like we treat that one. We'd have people lying and stealing and killing and coveting all over the place. Thank goodness we're pretty on solid 6, 7, 8, and 9: most of us don't murder, commit adultery, steal or bear false witness. We try hard on numbers 1 and 2: keeping faith in one God, not making idols. At least we know better when we break numbers 3 and 5: not taking the Lord's name in vain and honoring our father and mother. Number 10 can be tempting to break—coveting the things that belong to our neighbor, like their sweet house or fancy possessions, but generally I think we know being jealous of other people's stuff is not something to aspire to. But number 4...I'm not even sure we want to keep this one, and if we do, we certainly have some room for improvement.

Perhaps our lack of respect for the Sabbath comes from a misinterpretation of Gospel passages like we have this morning, from Mark which details Jesus engaging in what the Pharisees consider direct violations of the Sabbath law. His disciples are plucking heads of grain to munch on—which violates their law to not reap on the Sabbath; and he heals the withered hand of a man in the Temple which violates their Sabbath rules since healing was considered work. The Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath, Jesus says. There are more important things than rest when people are hungry or wounded. So, we say, the Sabbath must not really be that essential, right?

But Jesus was anti-Sabbath, he was anti-hard hearted legalism that did not allow for the alleviation of human suffering. Jesus does not disavow the Sabbath commandment, he properly reorients it by saying, doing good works, like feeding the hungry, healing the sick are what one's relationship with God is about, and if your understanding of the Sabbath is getting in the way of your relationship with God, then it's in the wrong position. When he says, the Sabbath was made for us not us for the Sabbath, he means that Sabbath should be an avenue to a holy life, not a roadblock to it. But nowhere does he say pay no attention to commandment #4. He says commandment #4, like all the commandments are supposed to make us better at loving God and neighbor, not worse.

So I don't think we can claim to ignore commandment number 4 because that's what Jesus did. In fact I think the truer reason that we ignore it is because we aren't really convinced of its benefit. We can see how destructive it would be to our common life if we all indulged in constant killing, stealing, lying, etc. But not taking a day off? How does that harm anyone? And we especially want to be assured that taking a Sabbath is worthwhile because time is our most precious resource and therefore to give some of it up, we have to be sure it's going to be worth it.

So why should we? Why should we pay attention to the Sabbath commandment and make the necessary compromises and sacrifices to follow it? Why should we part with such a precious, limited resource? Who's got time for that?

Well, first of all, the simple fact that time is so valuable means that it's exactly the kind of thing you should be giving to God. Doesn't God deserve the first fruits of our lives, rather than the left over rotted bits from the end of the harvest? Taking a Sabbath, taking time of rest and offering it to God, is an act of faith, an act of humility; an act of respect and gratitude that we even have time to begin with.

But for those who might be in positions or have responsibilities that make them feel unable to take a Sabbath because to do so would be to put their jobs or livelihoods in jeopardy, or call into question just how committed they are to maximizing life's offerings, I would also submit that God's commandment to obey a Sabbath is not just a worthy sacrifice of which he is eminently deserving, it also works. God's words are wise. Numerous studies have proven that taking times of rest, either during the day, or during the week have incredibly positive benefits to almost every area of our lives. Taking breaks boosts productivity, creativity, and attention. It benefits our mental and physical health and makes for happier relationships in all areas of our lives. God commands us to rest because rest is good for us. Being busy all the time is actually detrimental to our functioning and our happiness. But the great irony here is that while rest is proven to be beneficial, we fail to take it for fear of appearing lazy, or uncommitted. And sometimes we are often penalized for taking it, either professionally or personally by those who judge rest as a negative thing. Somehow, despite all the evidence, we resist rest, which is a tragedy because we need it. Our bodies need rest. Our minds need rest. Our souls need rest. I'm not talking about taking a nap, I'm talking about taking a break. I've heard too many stories of people who keep their foot on the gas ignoring their own needs and the needs of others and eventually they run out and find themselves broken down on the side of the road. And all the "success" they accrued as they charged full speed through their lives makes for cold comfort.

So if you find yourself making the argument against the Sabbath from a position of saying, "I would if I could, but I can't, so I won't," then consider that taking some Sabbath time, some time to truly rest, might actually make you better at your job and make your life better. God's trying to help you out with this commandment. Take Him up on the offer.

But if that's still not convincing enough, let me tell you some other things I see. I see a lot of very busy, very stressed people whose self-worth and identity is tied up in being busy and stressed. To a certain extent we have made an idol of busyness. We worship it, we aspire to it, we proclaim it. When someone asks us how we are, what is usually our number one response? "Busy. I'm super busy." I'm as guilty of this as anyone, which is ironic because my name, Noah, in Hebrew, means "rest," so you'd think I'd be better at it, but I'm not. It's like we're sprinting on a treadmill of busy-ness. And what's so cruel about treadmills is that they run us ragged without getting us anywhere. A Sabbath would throw a wrench into the gears and force us, but for a few moments, to step off that treadmill and allow us the time and space for consideration and self-exploration so we might actually know and do what it is we are called by God to do. And perhaps that's why we're so resistant to it. Perhaps we stuff our lives so full of activity so that we don't have to face the emptiness, or the dullness, or the dissatisfaction within them. Pausing allows us to enter the dangerous space of self-reflection where we can ask ourselves, "What am I doing? Why am I doing it?" Those can be supremely scary questions for some of us.

But Sabbath is not meant to throw us into existential despair. Remember, it's supposed to bring us closer to God. Sabbath is meant to restore life where life is being diminished in some way—whether that's our lives, or someone else's. That's why God is so insistent on it. And here we are back at Jesus. Whether it is hungry people being fed, or withered people being made well, or burnt out people being given back their flame, or busy people turning into purposeful people, the Sabbath is a time for us to reorient our life, reground it in Christ, and take back control of our most precious resource—time—and hallow it by offering it God so that our lives may in return be made full in a different, more satisfying way. Instead of full of activities it can be full of purpose. Instead of meetings it can be full of meaning. By taking a Sabbath we offer the whirlwind of our lives to God who can calm it and show us the beauty that is there. He can take all the noise that surrounds us, and spin it into a marvelous melody if we would but offer it to him. The Sabbath makes space for God to come into our lives so that our lives may be blessed, not just busy.

So together let's make a commitment to rest. Let's try taking a few minutes each day, or a full day each week, to pause, and pray and play and reflect, and offer our life to God so we can be restored to right relationship with Him. For if we can rest in God, if we can take that Sabbath, if we can take commandment #4 a little more seriously, the promise is not only that our lives can be better, but also that they can be holy.