



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“24/6”

Exodus 20:8-11, Matthew 11:28-30
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Hello. My name is Ann and I am a Sabbath breaker.

Welcome to the fourth sermon in a six-week series on the Ten Commandments. Today we focus on the fourth commandment:

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. (Exodus 20:8-10)

If there is one commandment I disregard on a consistent basis, it is this one. To state the obvious, I work on Sundays! But that's not really the issue, because I take a Sabbath day on Monday. Yet many Mondays find me putting the pieces of our lives back together again; errands to grocery, dry cleaners, vet and other appointments. I fit Sabbath in around life's necessities, instead of fitting life's necessities around Sabbath. Last Monday found me typing a first draft of this sermon!

In spite of my failures in this area, maybe precisely because of them, I stand here to make a case for the goodness of living 24/6 in our non-stop 24/7 world. Yes, that's right—I aspire to live 24/6, and to encourage our hopes and ambitions toward living more of a 24/6 life, as well.

Friends, the fourth commandment is for us. It is about work stoppage. It is not about going to church or praying. It is all about saying no to work. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh is a Sabbath, God's renewing, grace-filled gift. Observing Sabbath, any length of Sabbath, is countercultural. Which means we will face resistance, from within and without.

Saying “no” to work is not popular. We'd rather say “yes.” “Yes, I can take that on.” “Yes, I can handle that.” “Yes” is seductive, because in our culture the ability to do more and more things at high speed is a mark of a successful person. “Yes” is how we create the future.

Today I invite you to consider what it means to say “no” as a spiritual practice. “No, I have enough work for now.” “No, I want to stay home tonight.” “No, I have all the possessions I can take care of.” “No” closes off options. “No” sounds like a death wish. Unless. Unless you're really, really tired. Or deeply discouraged because you don't have time for all the things you have already said “yes” to.¹

When all three of our children lived at home there was a time when I couldn't tell the difference between relaxation and narcolepsy. I'd sit down on the couch and fall asleep. We'd go out to the symphony and I'd fall asleep. As soon as I stopped moving, my eyes would close. I was a human doing more than a human being, sleeping through my own life.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pp.121-123.

As a culture we are at risk. We teeter on the edge of losing touch with life's necessary rhythms, the balance between work and rest, doing and not doing. We constantly strive, and we end up feeling exhausted and even deprived, in the midst of great abundance.

The fourth commandment on Sabbath is the most difficult and also the most urgently needed commandment in our society. Moses led the people away from Pharaoh and slavery into freedom and new life. Sabbath offers rest from our contemporary brickmaking, the relentless production and consumption that is the very air we breathe as North Americans. Sabbath refuses to let life be defined by our endless pursuit of work.²

It has been said that the Chinese pictograph for the word "busy" is composed of two characters: heart and killing. When we refuse to stop working, our experience of being alive shrinks into feeling like an enormous obligation. Without rest we respond to life from survival mode.³

It must also be said that the problem of too much work is not faced by everyone. Many long for full-time employment, but can't find it. Others don't have enough of anything to fill their days. Whether it is too much work or too little, the absence of a right rhythm is killing us. As a society we live in a trance of overwork or underwork; our hearts slowly dying.

Remember the Sabbath, says the commandment. Remember, because we are at risk of forgetting. In fact, the assumption is that we will forget. And the truth is, we do. Remember the Sabbath is not a lifestyle suggestion. It is a command, found in many of the world's faith traditions, ranked equally with ethical direction not to kill or steal.

The commandment to stop working one day out of seven functions like a hinge. It connects the three commandments about God with the six commandments about neighbor. Sabbath is the crucial bridge, enabling us to face our other gods and to treat people in a neighborly way.⁴

Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote that the first holy thing in all creation is not a people or a place but a day. God made everything in creation and called it good, but when God rested on the seventh day, God called it holy. That makes the seventh day a "palace in time," into which human beings are invited every single week of our lives.⁵

And yet the truth is, we resist going into this palace!

Because stopping, even limiting my work, doesn't make me feel holy. Doing *more* feels holy. Sabbath resistance is real. In the eyes of the world there is no payoff for sitting on the porch.⁶

And so we chafe; we outright revolt against hearing "you shall not do any work." Why should we not be allowed to buy, or sell, clean, or cook, build, write, plow or harvest whenever we feel like it? What does the Bible think it is, telling us what we can or cannot do? And so we stay restless and unrested.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, p. 27.

³ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, p. 3

⁴ *Op cit.*, Brueggemann, p. 1

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Taylor, p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133

Many of us have witnessed the change to a 24/7 world. It happened gradually, and yet so quickly. And now our children's generation does not have a day of rest at all. ...and they may not even know what is missing. It is up to us to teach them how the spiritual practice of saying no actually gives us life, that being is as important as doing.

Living as if it is true is a challenge in my life, as I suspect in yours. The longing for Sabbath is a first step toward practicing it. So is the awareness that only we ourselves can choose not to work and not to shop. When we aspire to practice Sabbath we lean toward it. Every movement, every step in Sabbath's direction, no matter how small, is an exercise of freedom, an act of resistance against the anxiety in our culture.

Enter this palace in time! Experiment, play with Sabbath. At home, choose a heavily used appliance or device: your phone, the TV, a computer, your washer and dryer... and let it rest for a Sabbath period. That could be an hour, a morning, or an entire day. Experiment. Surrender to a quality of time when you choose not to be responsive to technology. Step into the palace in time!⁷

Sabbath rest makes us coherent, not divided. Sabbath play ignites creativity. It makes art, music, poetry and narrative possible. Sabbath acknowledges God and enables us not to be caught with other gods. It makes neighbor visible. Sabbath rest makes it possible to not covet our neighbor's spouse or our neighbor's stuff.

Speaking of coveting stuff, try a Sabbath experiment. Take an hour and visit a favorite store, one where you enjoy shopping. A store that has beautiful things or simply something you would like to have. But on this visit, resolve to spend time looking, knowing that you will not spend a single penny. As you look, let yourself feel the tug of buying. Listen to the voices that speak to you:

Buy me. You need me. Take me home with you. You would be so happy if you had me.

Be aware of any inner struggle. Also, be aware of any spaciousness that arises as you let each item go, as you walk away, free of the impulse to acquire it—at least for today. Notice your mood. Observe that happiness is the single commodity not produced by our economy.⁸

Sabbath comes to us as a gift, a palace in time, full of life and freedom. This fourth commandment isn't a punitive restriction from a grumpy God, but an alternative vision of wholeness and community.

One church member's Sabbath practice gets her up early on Saturdays for quiet time alone with God. She writes gratitude notes and places them in a Joy Jar. She reads the notes on New Year's Day.

Someone else practices Sabbath with a walk in nature. One uses Sabbath afternoons to call friends who live far away. Another reads, one bikes, someone else plays games with kids.

Sabbath is a palace and you've got the key. Actually, we've all got keys. Sabbath is meant to be a communal activity, something we do with one another. We can practice Sabbath together. We can commit ourselves to patterns of living that include rest and play. We can take a break from worrying about school or work or retirement and remember that we are more than our accomplishments and our professions. We can remember that we are loved.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, Muller, pp. 27-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

We hold the keys to 24/6. We hold the keys. So enter the palace. Offer thanks for life and for God's goodness. Remember the Sabbath. Remember.