

“WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS ... SABBATH”

Exodus 31:17; Luke 12:13-21

June 12, 2016

Rev. Jerry Duggins

We're not supposed to like this rich man. Whenever Jesus says "rich man," we expect criticism to follow. Actually, in this case, the criticism precedes the story. Guard against greed. Life is not about possessions, Jesus tells us. And then he tells this story about a rich man who builds bigger barns to hold his harvest... so that he can retire.

A little over a month ago, Janet and I went to a retirement planning seminar. We were a little surprised to discover that when I reach my social security retirement age in ten years, we should have enough income to "make merry" a little. The presenter made it very simple. He said, "When your expenses are less than your income, you can retire."

This takes some planning. The earlier you start, the easier it is to reach your "number" as one investment ad puts it. My dad managed it in his early fifties. Many, if not most of you, are already there. You got there by building a big enough barn, a big enough nest egg. It's not greed. It's sensible financial planning. The rich man has a great harvest. Why shouldn't he try to preserve it for the future... when he might not be able to work? Isn't that what we do?

Jesus is pretty good at making us nervous, making us think hard about the things we do that are just normal. We exercise caution around our enemies. Jesus tells us to love them. We remember when someone does us wrong. Jesus tells us to forgive them. We strive to be independent and self-reliant, providing for our needs even beyond our working years. Jesus tells us to guard ourselves against all kinds of greed.

Saving is a normal and sensible practice in our society today. We need things to live, but if we take Jesus seriously, we also understand that at some point need crosses the line and becomes greed. Are we to assume that the smaller barns were sufficient to the rich man's need and that he should have given the surplus away? Did his greed lie in being insensitive to the needs of others?

Maybe the problem isn't with his actions. In certain contexts, his behavior might even be laudable. So if the actions don't bring clarity about Jesus' meaning, maybe we should pay attention to the man's words: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

What do possessions have to do with the soul? Is it even possible to accumulate enough things to satisfy the soul? What's going to be in that barn that will provide rest for the soul? And when our time is up, of what use will all that money be to us? "Soul, you have ample goods."

Of course, a great many people wait for retirement to address the needs of the soul. For those who have planned well (or just been lucky) the assets provide a secure place from which to rest from one's labor. One will have filled the spaces with things that maximize the possibility for enjoying the time. The needs of the body have been addressed and so people turn to the soul. They take time to enjoy wonders of creation; take time to think about the needs of others and

volunteer more; take time to become more active at their church. They take time to “relax, eat, drink and be merry,” but they also think about the soul.

Setting aside the question of whether they have waited too long, what can we say about the pre-retirement soul? It would not be too strong to say that our working lives are driven by the need to acquire and achieve. Our attention is focused on making a place for ourselves in the world and our chief frustration is that there is not enough time. We find ourselves constantly sacrificing time for things and achievements. Abraham Heschel writes, “How proud we often are of our victories..., proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, in the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats. In spite of our triumphs, we have fallen victims to the work of our hands....” We have made the barns too big and become dependent on things we didn’t really need and we have used up all our time to get there. We have forgotten, as Heschel writes, “to have more does not mean to be more... time is the heart of existence” (p. 3). “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods....”

This is true not only of individuals but of our society as well. Again, Heschel raises the question: “Is our civilization a way to disaster, as many of us are prone to believe? Is civilization essentially evil, to be rejected and condemned?” But then he goes on to remind the Jewish community for whom he writes: “The faith of the Jew is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above this world; not to reject but to surpass civilization. The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the art of *surpassing* civilization” (p.27).

If those pre-retirement years, the working years really are all about accumulating resources so that we can enjoy leisure late in life, and we are willing to devote all our time to the effort without a thought for the soul, then we have not understood the meaning of work or the truth about what it means to be human.

The point here isn’t to harp on what’s wrong with the world. The world is beautiful and work is a good thing. A lot of technology improves our lives. But again and again, we see beauty sacrificed for utility as in the destruction of whole ecosystems in the acquisition of fossil fuels. We see businesses engage in practices that value profit over people. And all those time-saving devices only free up time so that we can work longer hours instead of becoming acquainted with our souls. The world, as God’s creation, is a marvelous place, but as manipulated and designed by people is often consumed with “storing up ample goods.” The antidote to this greed... what the world needs now... is Sabbath.

The Sabbath was and still is a practice belonging to Judaism. The early church adopted it while altering the practice as well. The Sabbath, celebrated by Jews on the seventh day, became for Christians, the Lord’s day, moving from Saturday to Sunday. Remembering the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments and you can see how important it was to the Jewish community from today’s reading in Exodus. Failure to honor the Sabbath resulted in death. Seems extreme, but sometimes physical realities reflected spiritual truths. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command, physical death was many years away, but something in their relationship with God was immediately lost. When failing to honor the Sabbath, Jews understood that their connection to God was lost. Time with God is sacrificed for time in the world.

Heschel puts it this way: “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become

attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world” (p.10).

The world needs Sabbath to remember that the earth belongs to God and cannot be manipulated just to suit our needs. We are its stewards, and as such we are given authority over it, but we are not its master. It is there not just for our use, but as a window through which we glimpse the glory of God. When we understand the earth as a manifestation of God, acknowledging its beauty and wonder, we are more inclined to respect and honor it.

The world needs Sabbath as a regular reminder that God made the earth and that we are created by God out of the earth. Sabbath reminds us that our relationship with the earth should be one of harmony rather than conquest. “The Sabbath,” Heschel reminds us, “... is more than an armistice, more than an interlude; it is a profound conscious harmony of [hu]man and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above” (pp.31-32).

The world needs Sabbath because it gets too caught up in its work, forgetting that life is not about the abundance of one’s possessions or the quality of one’s achievements. Dorothy Bass writes, “Refraining from work on a regular basis is a way of setting limits on behavior that is perilous for both human welfare and the welfare of earth itself. Overworked Americans need rest, *and* they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things” (p. 88).

The world needs Sabbath because rest is among the things that we need for healthy living. I never understand when people tell me that they like to keep busy, when they claim to be energized by the 24/7 lifestyle. I suspect that some of their “busyness” is actually renewing, restful activity: a walk, a bike ride, something that is a departure from their “work.” Sabbath isn’t necessarily “doing nothing,” but it does shift the emphasis from “doing” to “being,” from making a living to being alive, from working toward independence to understanding one’s interdependence, from the self in isolation to the self in community.

Apart from the bit about death, Exodus tells us that in sanctifying the Sabbath, marking it as holy; we remember that God sanctifies us, marks *us* as holy. The Sabbath reminds us that we have a calling that is not just about a job, not just about earning a living, that our work (those six days when we are not resting) is holy. The world needs Sabbath that it might cease the work causes harm and deals death and to pursue work that makes for peace, that restores life.

If we wait for rest until retirement, we will in all likelihood be too tired to really enjoy it. Six days God worked in creating the world, and on the seventh God rested. Several Rabbis and theologians have remarked that this rest was itself a new creation. Rest was not something that God just fell into, not a state of inactivity, but something that God did. The Hebrew word used here also means to renew and restore. It is the same word translated as “still” in Psalm 23. “Still waters are not the same as stagnant water. The water keeps moving, but it’s more peaceful. We can’t be running the rapids all the time. We need moments of refreshment. These are times when we remember that we are more than our bodies, that we are also spirit as well; when we remember that we are not just earth, but children of God as well.

“The meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space.” In our low moments, our stressed times, when health declines or tragedy strikes, we often ask, “Where is God?” The question points us to an understanding of God who occupies a particular space, to the desire that God be here to fix our space, to make the place we are in right. The practice of Sabbath can help us shift this question to: “When is God?” “Where is God?” leads us to the presumption that God is not here. “When is God?” invites us to consider that God is in all places, with us when we struggle and when we are blessed, with us in our losses as well as our gains. The practice of Sabbath reminds us that God inhabits all our spaces all the time. It’s a pattern of work and rest affirms God’s presence in the things we would do and the persons that we are. Janet told us last week that the world needs “presence.” In the practice of presence, we discover and deepen our sense of God’s presence.

Unfortunately, within the history of the church, we have frequently marked the Sabbath with a series of prohibitions; abstinence not only from work, but anything that might bring us pleasure. And yet, properly understood, it is a celebration. Certainly part of that celebration is a ceasing from work, putting aside the struggles of the job, the striving after a living. Dorothy Bass suggests that we should not engage in any of the activities that recall the chaos and struggle for life; that we not engage in commercial activities for instance, that we limit our use of fossil fuels that harm the earth. But Sabbath also calls us to renewal, the sort of rest that restores and energizes us. Prayer, worship and reflection belong to Sabbath celebrations; but so do walks in the woods, a day at the beach, dancing, and feasting.

The world needs Sabbath because even its celebrations are often without perspective. It honors winners and castigates losers. It rewards those who give themselves 100% to the job while passing over those who value their family. It worships the successful and popular while ignoring those who quietly do their work without fanfare. Too often the world uses up people, resources and time. A Sabbath rest redeems the time, puts work and achievement in perspective, resurrects the body and renews the spirit.

If the world ever comes to understand this, it will be because the people of God have reclaimed the practice, not as a series of prohibitions but as a call to thankfulness for God’s world and presence in our lives. Sabbath practice invites us into a deeper awareness and understanding of God and our partnership in the work of redeeming and renewing life.

Dorothy Bass says, “For time-starved contemporary people, the practice of Sabbath keeping may be a gift just waiting to be unwrapped, a confirmation that we are not without help in shaping the renewing ways of life for which we long” (p.76). Even, maybe especially, busy people need rest from the business of life in order to enjoy the glory of God and the goodness of creation and give perspective to the work that they do. Sabbath would help us find faithfulness more rewarding while also making the world a better place. Amen.

Resources:

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. The Sabbath. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York. 1951.

Bass, Dorothy C. “Keeping Sabbath,” in Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People. (Second Edition). John Wiley & Sons. Inc. San Francisco, CA. 2010 (pp. 75-88).

Brueggemann, Walter. Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY. 2014.