

Sabbath
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As a kid of ten or eleven years old, being raised in a religious Lutheran home, I found the Ten Commandments really quite comforting. I mean, if this was THE list of THE rules laid down by God, I figured that I was doing okay.

I had not, and had no desire to, make any graven images to worship. The God explained to me by my parents was just fine, thank you, don't need to worship any other gods before him.

While I was possibly finding some swear words rather enticing to use in particular situations by that point, I steered clear of those that would take the Lord's name in vain.

I had not murdered anyone.

Refraining from committing adultery was not much of a problem.

I did not steal.

I did not bear false witness against anyone else.

And I had a hard time figuring out what coveting *meant*, let alone doing it.

As I grew into my teen years, and as my understanding of the commandments expanded a bit, they became less comforting and more challenging.

Honor your father and mother? Well, I did a pretty good job, but if "honoring" meant *always obeying*, as in *not doing what you know they would not want you to do...*well, yeah, I had some strikes against me.

Then I read Jesus' words at the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, saying, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire'" (NRSV Matthew 5:21-22).

Wow! This hardly seemed fair. I was doing fine avoiding the actual murder of anyone, but all of a sudden Jesus changes the rules and says I can't be angry with anyone; if an insult slips out when I'm angry, I'm doomed; and if I call them names, it's a ticket to hell.

Not only that, he does the same thing with the commandment on adultery, saying it's not just about actually committing adultery but includes "everyone who looks at a woman with lust." This was dire news for a teenage boy.

Suddenly, I lost all childhood smugness about keeping *all* the commandments, and instead was grasping desperately for a few that I could still obey.

“You shall not bear false witness.” Don’t lie, in other words. I could not claim a spotless record there.

And yes, I’d taken the Lord’s name in vain a few times by then...

“You shall have no other Gods before me”? That was pretty safe...but, well, I had been reading these books that led me to question some things. If I was doubting God, could I say that I was really keeping this commandment?

And I’d learned enough about *coveting* to know that I was not immune...there was stuff that other people had that I wanted.

The pickings were getting very slim but finally I landed on good ol’ number three: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” *That* I could still do, even as a teenager...I loved to read on Sunday anyway, and that didn’t seem to interfere with keeping that day holy. There’s one in my column!

Imagine my dismay, then, when I read this story in the Gospel of Mark (NRSV 2:23-24, 27-28):

“One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are the doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’...[H]e said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’”

What!?!?!

Here is Jesus--the same Jesus who reinterpreted the other commandments so strictly that I couldn’t keep them anymore—now he’s saying that the third commandment, the only one that I seem to be able to keep with no trouble, he seems to be saying that *this* commandment...*well, you know, it doesn’t really matter that much.*

Is that what he’s saying?

There are various opinions on that. Some scholars believe that the whole Sabbath debate was a later controversy, as Christianity began to take on its own identity, and that this debate was superimposed back onto the story of Jesus. Others believe that Jesus was simply pointing out that the *meaning* of the Sabbath should not be lost in favor of hyper-sensitive adherence to the rules. It is true, generally speaking, that Christianity has carried a certain ambivalence regarding the importance of the Sabbath.

But understand, please, that my interest in the Sabbath today is not because it is one of the Ten Commandments from the Jewish tradition. I am not interested in which day is recognized as Sabbath in the various denominations and faith traditions. I am not concerned with the particular laws that detailed what could be done and what shouldn’t be done to honor the Sabbath. But I *am* interested in what “remembering the Sabbath,”—or “observing the sabbath,” as it says in the Book of Deuteronomy (NRSV Deut. 5:12)—might mean to us today. Because the truth is, I don’t do a very good job keeping this commandment either—and I think I’m missing out on something important because of that.

First of all, where does the notion of “Sabbath” come from in the Jewish tradition? It comes from the very first story in the Torah, the story of creation. God, it is said, created all that is in six days and rested on the seventh day: “therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it,” says the book of Exodus. On that day, “you shall not do any work,” says the commandment given to Moses.

You shall not do any work...now that sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Isaac Asimov wrote that “sabbath” is derived from a Hebrew word that means “to break off” or “to desist.”¹ Now you can desist, can't you? Break off (or take a break maybe) from your work. *Stop.*

But toward what end?

That's a question that arises, isn't it? “You mean do *nothing*?...I can't get *anything* done?!?! I *have to* rest?” Well, no, you don't *have to*. It's a commandment, yes, but even if you are seeking to follow the commandments, the Sabbath was made for humans, as Jesus pointed out, not humans for the Sabbath. You don't *have to* keep the Sabbath...but what might you gain if you did? What if you took the time to do nothing?

That is a distinctly counter-cultural idea. Yes, we, as Americans, can be lazy, but we are also enamored with work, with *doing things*, with avoiding the almost unimaginable tragedy of *having nothing to do*...we can barely grasp the possibility of *choosing to do nothing*.

A woman in another congregation told me a wonderful story about her and her husband and their new baby and a torrential rainstorm when they lived out East. She said that the rain started coming down in thick sheets, and the thunder and lightning began and she, intent on soothing her child, lost track of her husband. Anxious that they all be together during this storm, she began walking from room to room with her baby looking for him. She looked upstairs, main floor, basement (where the water was leaking through the windows) and could not find her husband. Finally, she poked her head outside and found her husband, with a small pot from the kitchen, squatting by one of the window wells frantically attempting to bail the water out from around the window where it was leaking into the basement. One problem: it was raining so hard that the water was pouring into the window well approximately twice as fast as he could bail it out. “I don't think that's going to work, honey,” she said as nicely as possible, hoping that he would come inside. Exasperated, he shouted over his shoulder, “At least I'm *doing something!*”

Sound familiar? That is not an uncommon stance, that somehow *doing something—anything!*—is better than *doing nothing*. Why do we take that for granted? What if we didn't? What if we took seriously the Buddhist's admonition: “Don't just do something; sit there!” See how silly that sounds? But it's not. Lord knows, we are often *just doing something*. We are not doing it for any good reason, except to be doing something—because then we can say, “At least we're doing something!” But so what? What if we didn't?

Sabbath, to me, helps to bring that wisdom of Buddhism to a Western mind. The power of quiet, of rest, of stillness is found in many religious and philosophical traditions. We ignore it to our own detriment.

One of my mother's favorite Bible verses is Psalm 46:10a: “Be still, and know that I am God.” She had been someone who always liked to keep busy, whether it was painting rooms, or cooking, or refinishing

¹ Asimov, Isaac, Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The New Testament (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1969) 184.

furniture, or visiting shut-ins, she was always, as she would put it, “on the go.” She found a great lesson in this verse that urged her to “be still, and know...” She experienced her God a different way because of it.

Be still. Don’t just do something...Break off. Desist.

If we’re always talking, we can’t expect to hear what’s going on around us; and if we’re always *doing something*, we can’t expect to be aware of what’s happening around us. What if we were to just sit there? What if we were to “break off” from our normal round of activities? What if we were to desist from work? From *doing*? What if we were to intentionally *do nothing*?

What is so scary about that?

Wendell Berry started writing what he calls his “Sabbath poems” in 1979, and they’ve come out in a couple different collections (*Sabbaths*, *The Timbered Choir*) over the succeeding decades. Poems “written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors,” he says, they are “about moments when heart and mind are open and aware.” The one that Karen read was the very first one, and I find it interesting that he mentions being afraid right away. There is something scary about silence, about resting, about doing nothing, but...

*“Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings and I hear its song.”²*

To hear, we must be *quiet*.

In a Sabbath poem written in 1997 (from *The Timbered Choir* pg. 205), he writes:

*“Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have the quiet.”³*

Finally, there is a practicality to honoring the Sabbath that I appreciate. Granted, there is a certain arbitrary nature to it. Whatever day or time you choose to honor, the question arises: what makes this day or time any more special than any other day or time? Answer: nothing. Absolutely nothing. However, by honoring in part, you acknowledge the whole. Let me say that again: by honoring in part,

² Berry, Wendell, *Sabbaths* (New York: North Point Press, 1987) 5.

³ Berry, Wendell, *The Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint, 1999) 205.

we are acknowledging the whole. Can any of us live in a perpetual state of Sabbath? Doing nothing; listening deeply? No, not for very long and still keep our lives running. But by setting aside the time to allow for a renewed awareness of the world around us, we acknowledge the wonder of that world even at those times when we cannot attain the same awareness. By setting aside the time to allow our inner lives to surface, we acknowledge that depth even when we do not have the time to explore it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his address to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School, called the Sabbath:

*the jubilee of the whole world; whose light dawns welcome alike into the closet of the philosopher, into the garret of toil, and into prison cells, and everywhere suggests, even to the vile, the dignity of spiritual being. Let it stand forevermore, a temple, which new love, new faith, new sight shall restore to more than its first splendor to mankind.*⁴

And for all that it may offer us, part of the beauty of a Sabbath to me is that it contains its purpose in its stillness. It is not meant to go anywhere else, and we are not meant to go anywhere else...only to be.

Wendell Berry says:

*“There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.”*⁵

⁴ <http://bartleby.com/5/102.html>

⁵ Berry, Wendell, The Timbered Choir (Counterpoint, 1999) 214.