

**Sabbath: Reconnecting Within Community**  
**Spirit of Peace UCC**

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Scripture – Exodus 20: 8-11

Luke 4: 14-21

Rev. Jean Morrow

There is a running gag on Comedy Central's Colbert Report called "Better Know a District" in which the ever-curious Stephen Colbert interviews members of Congress. A while ago, Colbert put a representative from Georgia on the hot seat...someone who had been very vocal in support of displaying the Ten Commandments in public buildings – courthouses and such. The Congressman felt that courthouses and public buildings are the best places for the Ten Commandments.

During the interview, Colbert tried mischievously, to press the point that there might actually be better sites...like churches...and synagogues...and he asked, "Can you think of any other places where the commandments should have prominence?" The Congressman didn't get it and continued to talk about courthouses...and so Colbert went in for the kill by asking "What are the Ten Commandments, Congressman?" And, not surprisingly, the Congressman couldn't name them. He stumbled and bumbled around, but he couldn't name them.

Though it was somewhat difficult to watch...I was embarrassed for the guy...it does provide a revealing example of the way in which the Ten Commandments are regularly regarded in public discourse: as a list of contextually disembodied rules intended to govern personal conduct...and whether we can name them or not, they are also applicable in modern American civic life. Stephen Colbert might say that regularly invoking of the Ten Commandments will please and appease God who vigilantly guards America's greatness.

If we place the Ten Commandments back in their original context, however, the commandments are nothing like the description I've just offered. They do not primarily provide a code for personal conduct.

Here's the context...the Israelites have just been led out of slavery by God's anointed one, Moses. The Exodus storyteller says that after about three months in the wilderness, God led them...this rag tag bunch of former slaves...to the foot of Mount Sinai...and it is here that God gives them the gift of the law that will help them flourish in their life together. They have been slaves for more than a

generation. They have never lived as a community...in covenant with one another...so God gives them the law as a gift associated with liberation.

We have come to think of the commandments as rules that individuals follow to earn God's favor...or to escape God's wrath...but they are rules given to the community to help them stay connected with one another as a community. One commentator said that the commandments are not weights, but wings...and were we to properly symbolize their presence in community, we would hold a dance. The good news of the God who sets people free is the music; and the commandments are the dance steps.

Within this context, let us hear the gifts of freedom and connection offered to all of us through the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment about Sabbath keeping...followed by several verses from the book of Luke in which Jesus shares the Good News of God who sets people free offered from the book of Luke.

**Exodus 20: 8-11** *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 and consecrated it.*

**Luke 4: 14-21** *Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Will you pray with me...*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable for you, O God...may we recognize your living, loving*

*presence within this gathered congregation and the greater community...may we cherish that thread of love that weaves us together and holds us accountable to and for one another. Amen.*

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote, “A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity.”

Last week we talked about the merits of Sabbath-keeping for the individual. And by Sabbath, I don’t necessarily mean a particular day...Saturday or Sunday...but the idea that resting is one of the ways we reconnect with our place in the wonderful web of creation. I suggested that if we saw ourselves as tending to all that was unfolding around us...nurturing hope, peace and joy wherever we find it...instead of operating under the misconception that control or are in control of everything, we would surely achieve a healthier balance, which is a creaturely need. And if we would rest and marvel at our place in creation, we would surely help to bring balance into the world...which the world needs, too.

Before the 60s, before the continued rise of consumerism and the striking down of the Sunday blue laws, the one thing that almost everyone had in common was a day off. As we transitioned to a 24/7 consumer culture, only high wage earners could still afford to take a day off and hit the links or the pool or a sports bar, but low wage earners had to choose between keeping the Sabbath and losing their jobs. By the 1990s, we found ourselves in a culture where both adults in a two adult household have to work...not because they want to but because they have to...and we also found that the average worker was putting in 164 extra hours of work each year – the equivalent of an extra month of work.

In his book *Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl*, cultural historian Craig Harlin puts it this way, “Sundays changed when the world changed.” And one of his book’s reviewers wrote, “Stopping farming in the Middle Ages was easy. But to close restaurants, shut up amusement parks or clear the airwaves when Americans with money are trying to spend it that day is impossible.”

There really is no talking about the Sabbath, as it affects community, without talking about consumerism and poverty. Those who have a lot, usually want more when they want it. And those who have a lot also have the ability to pay others to work for them so they can comfortably engage in leisure. A whole generation has grown up with the economic mottos “Please the customer” and “Customer

satisfaction”. A crasser way of saying these might be “Please the ones with money” and “Keep the ones with money satisfied”.

Having time for rest and relaxation or recharging or reconnecting...whatever Sabbath means to you...isn't something that is valued by American corporations. I mentioned last week catching a little bit of the CBS Sunday morning show as I was getting ready for church. John Schmitt, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, cites that one in four American workers do not have paid vacation provided by his or her employer...and there are no laws requiring an employer to give any vacation. Out of the 33 richest countries in the world, the US is the only one with no legally-required paid vacation for its workers. When looking at other economically rich countries, the standard is 20-25 days. England has 20; France has 30; Germany has 22; Italy has 22 or 23; Denmark provides for 5 weeks mandatory paid vacation to everyone from the factory worker to a high-priced executive.

The United States is the only country to have zero. The average American has just nine days of vacation a year. One survey showed that only 10% of us will take a full two weeks off. And, with these statistics, I am only talking about the fully employed. I haven't even begun to research about part-time employees...although I have quite a bit of anecdotal information that suggests there is very little, if any, paid vacation time for the part-time employee.

For a country that is the economic envy of the world, clearly we are not very honoring of one another in our need for rest and renewal. We are not very connected to one another, realizing that our consumption and round-the-clock material desires may keep others employed, but in a country that doesn't protect any sense of rest & renewal, it actually keeps others enslaved.

You know, in some Anabaptist communities...like the Amish, the Hutterites, and some of the Old Mennonites communities...they don't use electricity on the Sabbath, even if they have it. They do not want to cause someone else to work on the Sabbath in order to accommodate their, the Anabaptists' needs. They get it...that their comfort is connected to someone else's work.

This Spring, I read Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, which is about encountering God in the world. In one of her chapters, she opines about her longing to have grown up in a traditional Jewish home so that she could celebrate the traditional Jewish Sabbath. The honoring of a proper Shabbat begins with the lighting of two candles when three stars can be counted in the darkening sky. Isn't

that something? The beginning time of an important weekly ritual is determined by consulting the night sky. When three stars can be seen, two candles are lit. Each candle represents the Sabbath commandment from the Torah, calling God's people to be more like God.

Brown-Taylor says that the first candle represents a commandment that is accounted for in the creation text in Genesis: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and God rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." After working very hard for six days, God rested. This was a divine act of freedom...so wonderful and life-giving that God didn't just call it blessed. No, God called it holy, making Sabbath the first holy thing in all creation. And this is what the first Sabbath candle announces: *made in God's image, you too shall rest.*

The second candle represents freedom and the words associated with the lighting of this second candle come from Deuteronomy 5, making a shift from creation text to the story of their liberation from Egypt: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." When lit, the second Sabbath candle announces: *made in God's image, you too are free.*

On Friday night, observant Jews light two candles...one for rest...and one for freedom...both recognizing that we...everyone of us...are made in God's image.

Listen to Barbara Brown-Taylor: "By interrupting our economically sanctioned social order every week, Sabbath practice suspends our subtle and not so subtle ways of dominating one another on a regular basis. Because our work is so often how we both rank and rule over one another, resting from it gives us a rest from our own pecking orders as well. When the Wal-Mart cashier and the bank president are both lying on picnic blankets at the park, it is hard to tell them apart. When two sets of grandparents are at the lake with their grandchildren feeding ducks, it is hard to tell the rich ones from the poor ones."

For a community, "Sabbath is the great equalizer, the great reminder that we do not live on this earth but in it, and that everything we do under the warming tent of this planet's atmosphere affects all who are woven into this web with us." There are no easy answers to unraveling a complex economy that keeps us all in knots...and it isn't easy being a lone revolutionary. So, perhaps we could gather together as a community of revolutionaries to envision a community so connected that our need

for rest is beautifully woven together with our neighbor's need for rest...and, as Christians we will remember and remind each other that at the very heart of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy is God's good news about freeing the slaves and letting the oppressed go free.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.