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Genesis 1:31-2:4 and Mark 6: 31-36

“Practicing Our Faith: Observing Sabbath Time”

A colleague I met at Credo two years ago and occasionally run into at conferences wrote a book titled “Sabbath in the Suburbs”. It’s the story of her family’s experiment with observing the Sabbath one day a week for one full year. They went cold turkey, from overstuffed schedules and weekends filled to bursting to taking one full day a week to keep Sabbath – all with three young children.

Mary Ann says the tipping point for her came when her oldest daughter’s bus route was changed, delaying the kids’ arrival to their neighborhood a bit longer. Many of the parents in her community found this so unacceptable that they mounted a massive letter-writing campaign and petition.

After three weeks of organized resistance, the bus route was changed back again. As Mary Ann puts it, “Other children would stay on the bus longer so that our kids would get home four minutes sooner – four whole minutes.” She goes on to write, “I didn’t want to live the kind of life in which an extra four minutes were so crucial to my family’s schedule that I would petition the county government to get my way.”

Four minutes.

What can you do in four minutes?

I can do a decent amount of stuff in four minutes, especially if I’m multi-tasking, which I often do. I can take a phone call and check e-mail all at the same time. I can run a bath for Charlotte and snag a few minutes of TV. I can talk to Terry while making dinner. I can look at something on my phone while sitting at a stoplight. And I can mindlessly surf the internet, especially Pinterest.

Sounds pretty bad, doesn’t it?

But here’s the thing . . . I’m not alone. In fact, I’m in good company . . . if you consider being busy a good thing, which our society does. Whether knowingly or

unknowingly, we judge people's worth by how busy they are. Being busy is the mark of a successful human being; it means we're in demand. We admire people who can keep many balls in the air.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book "An Altar in the World", writes about keeping Sabbath. She writes that in China, "The polite answer to "How are you?" is "I am very busy, thank you." Because if you're very busy, then you must be fine. If you have more to do than you can do, and the list never gets done but only gets longer, then you must be very fine, because not only in China but right here at home, successful people are busy people. Effective people are busy people. Religious people are busy people. For millions and millions of people, busy-ness is The Way of Life." ("An Altar in the World", Barbara Brown Taylor)

Like it or not, being busy is how we measure someone's worth. And if you don't believe me just ask someone some time how they are, and I bet they'll say, "Busy!" Even people who you would never expect to say that because to you they have all the time in the world say, "I'm so busy!"

Even people who want to lead a more contemplative and spiritual life look at being busy as a positive thing. Mention keeping Sabbath, and someone might think you're lazy or should be about something more productive, like working at the soup kitchen.

Because observing the Sabbath means saying no to someone or something, and for many of us saying "yes" is how we enter a relationship: yes I'll take the job, yes I'll marry you; saying yes is even how we enter a relationship with God: yes I want to be baptized.

So, saying no is not in our vocabulary.

To this phenomenon, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

"I know that saying no is a more difficult spiritual practice than tithing, praying on a cold stone floor, or visiting a prisoner on death row – because while all of those worthy activities may involve saying no to something else so that I can do them instead, they still amount to doing more instead of less. Limiting my activity does not help me feel holy. Doing more feels holy, which is why I am so intrigued by the fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."

Twice in the Old Testament – once in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy – God commands the people to remember the Sabbath; to observe the Sabbath. And yet it's often the commandment we ignore the most. It's the cute, quaint commandment. No lying, no stealing, no killing: all of those make sense. But not working for an entire day? Who's got time for that?

But Jews were observing Sabbath long before Moses brought the stone tablets of God's holy law down from Mount Sinai. The first holy thing in all creation, Rabbi Abraham Heschel says, was 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. *Holy*. That makes the seventh day "a palace in time," Heschel says, into which human beings are invited every single week of our lives.

So why are we so reluctant to go?

Barbara Brown Taylor thinks it's because for some people, especially those of a certain age who were raised in the South, that the commandment was lived as if it was written, "Remember the Sabbath, and keep it boring." For some people, Sabbath was the day to put on your stuffy clothes, perhaps for the men the coat and tie you didn't want to wear and for the women the pantyhose you couldn't bear to put on, especially in the sweltering days of summer. It was the day you couldn't have any fun and had to spend time with relatives you didn't care much for and go to church -- twice! Sabbath was the day you *could not* do stuff, especially fun stuff, like go to the movies or buy booze.

But as we know, all of that changed. Blue laws went by the wayside and merchants were no longer willing to stay closed to help churches stay open. People were free to keep the Sabbath if they wanted to, but not because there were was nothing else to do. So people decided to do other things, and now stores that are closed on Sundays are a rare thing.

But our freedom to choose came at a cost. It came at an economic cost: we work longer hours to buy more stuff we don't have room in our houses to keep and sometimes can't even afford; it came at a physical cost: we sleep fewer hours than we used to because we work longer hours; it came at an emotional cost: we spend less quality time with people because we're working more, something technology has only exacerbated with the work weeks that never end; and it came at a spiritual cost: more people than ever are looking to connect with

something holy because their lives are so busy and filled to the brim with activities that don't have much meaning.

Ironically, many years ago, the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote, "A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity." Let me repeat that: A person is free only when he or she can determine and limit his or her activity.

This is why, in the Jewish Shabbat service, that service on Friday nights which welcomes the Sabbath at sundown, Jews light two candles: one is to remember that God blessed the seventh day, called it holy, and rested. Resting on the seventh day, God's people remember their divine creation when they light the first candle. And the second candle is lit to remember that God freed the Israelites from slavery. Resting on the seventh day, God's people remember their freedom when they light the second candle.

Two candles symbolizing rest and freedom.

At first they might not look like they have much in common. But after you live with them a while, you begin to realize that we are more than we can produce – we are children of God, and because of that, we can rest securely in the freedom of God's arms.

Knowing this, we can afford to take one day a week to enjoy one another and to enjoy God. We can honor the Sabbath and remember that we are more than enough; we do enough; that even God rested; that we don't need to defend our existence by how busy we are; that it is enough to be a child of God.

In this week's blog, I encouraged you to think about what you would have to say no to in order to say yes to keeping Sabbath. Is there some beginning step that lies within your reach?

If a whole day of life-giving freedom is too much for you to imagine, start where you can. Start however you can. But start. Resolve not to add anything more to your calendar without subtracting something from it.

And heed these words of advice about keeping Sabbath from Barbara Brown Taylor:

At least one day in every seven pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than what you can produce—that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God's sight—and when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so, remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working.

Because you are a child of God, worthy of resting in the freedom of God's arms.

Amen.