

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly

Summer is when a lot of people travel. School is out, the weather is fair, and so we take roadtrips, travel abroad, or just spend the day at the river or beach. When I've travelled—overseas or to major US cities—I typically spend most of my time visiting buildings: castles, cathedrals, museums, the monuments of a people. Anna's mother just got back from a trip to Spain, where she saw her fair share of churches, including one in Córdoba that was once a mosque. This mosque-turned-church serves as a reminder that Christianity is not alone in having an 'edifice complex,' constructing great buildings as signs and symbols of the faith.

That's not so much the case with Judaism, however. In contrast to Christianity and Islam, Judaism is not known for its great architecture; synagogues tend to be unsophisticated and unobtrusive and, well, forgettable. This disinterest in buildings may be due to the fact that Judaism's singular contribution to architecture, the Temple in Jerusalem, was destroyed almost 2000 years ago and remains in ruins today. But it may also have something to do with Jewish beliefs about God.

According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "Some religions build great cathedrals or temples, but Judaism constructs the Sabbath as a palace in time." Heschel is not just waxing eloquent. He points out that, in the Bible, before you have holy people (Israel) or holy places (the Temple), you have holy time. The first time the word holy (*kadosh*) is used, it is at creation in relation to time: "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." The Bible begins this way, with *holiness in time*, and thereafter continues to see the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries or things. It is more concerned with history than with geography.

This view is a departure from ancient religious thinking, which held that certain places, mountains or springs, were sacred. But it also stands in contrast to the assumptions of modern life. Our modern, technical world is defined by the *conquest of space*, of territory. Our main objective today is to enhance our power by conquering lands, filling space with buildings, bridges and roads, encircling the globe with a web of supply chains and communication networks. That conquest, Heschel argues, is achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. We expend time to gain space. Manufacturing products, fishing and farming, building houses, transporting goods—all of this goes on in our spatial surroundings. But as we conquer more space, and gain more, we are left with less: less time, less of ourselves.

I remember talking with a colleague of mine after he returned from a vacation during which he and his family had traveled far to visit relatives. Somebody made the comment that he didn't appear to be very rested, despite the fact that he'd been gone for two weeks. "You wouldn't be too rested either," he said, "if all you did was drive for two weeks. I feel like I need another vacation."

I expect you are familiar with that feeling. How many of us spend whatever precious free time we have just driving, running errands, doing laundry, catching up on the magazines that have piled up, and the lives of our children. (I know things are different for those of you who are retired...you have all the time in the world, right?)

It's not that any of these activities are bad or wrong. Filling the earth is a biblically legitimate task. The danger comes when, in gaining power in the realm of space, we lose all sense of what to do with time, other than to spend it on more space.

In the Bible, we find a different sensibility, a way of dealing with time, not by conquering it, but by inhabiting it, being present in it, attending to its goodness. The name the Bible gives to this approach is the Sabbath.

Most of us, when we hear that word, think of the Ten Commandments, which includes the command to "keep the Sabbath holy." This commandment is given twice, first in Exodus 20, and again in Deuteronomy 5, which we just read. The commands in each account are nearly identical, but the reasons given to support them differ. The reason given in Exodus is that keeping the Sabbath is what God does: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth...and rested on the seventh day." The reason given in Deuteronomy is that, when God's people were slaves in Egypt, it was work, work, work—inconstant, unrelieved work. Now that they are free, God's people are to stay free by not working seventh day so that they, their livestock and children will have a day off. It's a matter of loving your neighbor, a simple act of justice.

In our pragmatic, justice-minded world, it's easier to accept the second version to justify the keeping Sabbath today: everyone, we affirm, should have a day off. But the earlier explanation in Exodus tells us more about the Sabbath and what it's for.

You see, in harkening back to creation, the Exodus version tells us that the day of rest is not just good for people, it is something that is built into time itself. God rested on the seventh day and made it holy. When we remember the sabbath and rest on it, what we are doing is keeping time with God. We are synching up with the rhythm of creation, living in step with God in his work.

But sabbath-keeping was never a day of mere not-doing; it was a day of God-honoring. Set in the context of the other six 'working days,' God gives the seventh as a day of not working, not because work is bad but in order to set work in its proper context. You see, work doesn't take us away from God. When we work, we continue the work of God through us.

But therein lies the danger. For, when we work, we are most godlike, which means that it is in our work that it is easiest to develop God-pretensions. We become totally absorbed in what we are doing, and we lose God-consciousness, God-awareness. We lose the capacity to sing, "This is my Father's world" and end up chirping little self-centered ditties about what we are doing and feeling.

The Sabbath is then a deliberate act of interference, a weekly, compulsory interruption of our work, a decree of no-work so that we are able to attend to the comprehensive and majestic work

of God. The Sabbath reminds us that all our work is done in the context of God-work. It reminds us of our place, our dependency on God. It is a check on our ambition, a guard against hubris, assuring us that the world really won't fall apart if we take a day off.

But, as I said, the Sabbath is not simply about a negative: ceasing to work. The point of ceasing our labors and laying down our tools, Heschel says, is to create true rest, *menuha*, he calls it. *Menuha* is a rest that is also a celebration. It's a resting in God, a 'letting things be,' enjoying them without worrying about making or doing or planning or improving. *Menuha* is synonymous with peace, harmony, happiness. Which is why Jews long for the Sabbath, look forward to each Friday evening, welcoming it as a bride or queen.

Seeing the Sabbath this way, as something to delight in, as a groom delights in his bride, turns our typical approach to work and rest completely around. We usually think of the Sabbath as a means to another end: we rest on the Sabbath so that we will have energy to take up our labors again. But here we see that the Sabbath is not the means but the end itself. As Heschel says, "The sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays. The weekdays are for the sake of the sabbath. It is not an interlude but a climax of living."

It's telling that in Genesis the Sabbath is created right after humanity, which means humanity's first day of existence was the Sabbath—a day off! This only makes sense when we see that the Sabbath is not a break but rather the culmination of God's work, the "crown of creation," what God intended for his creation from the beginning.

All of this is embraced in the meaning of the Sabbath. It's what we are invited into, to experience when God commands us to keep the Sabbath holy.

You'll note that in all I've said up to this point, I haven't mentioned any rules or laws about *how* to observe the Sabbath. I haven't said anything about what activities are allowed or what are prohibited or even what day we as Christian should observe it. This is not because such questions are unimportant, but because God's intention for the Sabbath was never to impose a legalistic duty. Rather, it is given as gift, as a foretaste of paradise and a testimony of God's presence, commanded of us so that we don't neglect to make room in our busy lives for joy and peace.

To be sure, Jews and also many Christians have come up with plenty of rules and regulations for how to observe the Sabbath. All of them, we can assume, were put forward in earnest at the beginning, as a way to enable and support the people of God in keeping the Sabbath. And while we can disagree on whether Blue Laws are a good thing or whether it's better that we now have travel soccer on Sundays and can shop seven days a week, we can nevertheless recognize how the rules regarding Sabbath observance became ends to themselves, have been used to control, rather than to protect.

That was the issue with the Pharisees in today's gospel lesson. By Jesus' day, Jewish scholars had devised explicit and rigid rules for just what constituted "work," what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. Jesus ran afoul of these rules, in the eyes of the Pharisees, when he and his disciples plucked wheat kernels from a field to eat ("harvested grain") and again when he healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. When the Pharisees critiqued his behavior, Jesus

reminded these lawyers what the Jewish law is for: that we don't exist for the Sabbath; the Sabbath exists for us, for human flourishing, for our sake. The Pharisees, because they were so concerned that they were "doing it right," and that everyone else was "doing it right," ended up undermining the very reason of the Sabbath: the sharing in God's rest, blessing and delight.

We today have the opposite problem. We live in a society and culture where keeping the Sabbath is not only not compulsory but not respected or supported either. There are a multitude of distractions and temptations that draw us away from God's rhythms of rest and work. To observe the Sabbath these days is to buck the trend, to swim against the tide, to go against the grain of the culture. But for that reason, the Sabbath is even more needed. For in rejecting the rest, joy, contentment and delight of the Sabbath, we have become a chronically overworked, stressed out, anxious, busy and ultimately shallow people.

Your being here today, beginning your week with the worship of God, is a protest against that way of being. Spending your Sunday morning here with other believers, with God, sets you apart. You could be on your couch at home or on the golf course or at a café reading the paper or down at the 'riva,' like everybody else. But instead you're here, because you understand that who we are has as much to do with what we *don't* do on Sundays, as it does with what we *do* the other six days. For what we do or don't do today establishes our focus for the rest of the week. I like Garrison Keillor's comment: "Sunday feels odd without church in the morning. It's the time of the week when we take our bearings, and if we miss it, we're just following our noses."

The Sabbath is not given as a burden; it is invitation to let go of our burdens, to stop, to cease, to let go and to enjoy all that we have, all that God has provided for us. To let go of all that we *have* to do, and to enjoy all that God has *done* for us.

I encourage you as we enter the summer, this season of travel, to make time for the Sabbath, to not just have a "vacation," to vacate, leave, but to have a "holiday," as Europeans call it, a holy day. For God has given the Sabbath to us, commanded us to make time for rest and delight. And of all the commandments, I think that's one we would be happy to follow! Thanks be to God!