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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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 Texts: Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly – Origins

“There just aren’t enough hours in the day!” How many of us have thought this as we struggle to keep up the responsibilities of earning a living, carpooling kids, running errands, going to the gym, serving on boards, pruning the bushes, and doing our taxes? The list is endless! Even those who are retired tell me that they are busier than ever. We are an exhausted society that never stops.

Into our 24/7 world come these ancient words from Scripture, commanding us to stop, commanding us to live 24/6. The commandment to keep the Sabbath appears in the Top Ten, but it might as well be at the bottom of the 613 commands in the Old Testament for all the attention we give it. Yet among the Ten Commandments, it’s above the fold (it’s #4) and gets more column inches than any of the others. It feels outdated and alien, and yet it is central to the practice of faith in the Old Testament and assumed everywhere in the New. Are we so arrogant that we ignore it?

Today we begin a sermon series to look again at what it means for us 21st century persons of faith to observe the sabbath, to keep it “wholly.” That’s “wholly” with a “w”—as in “fully,” meaning how can keeping the sabbath be part of our total approach to a life of wellbeing as God intends. It’s also “holy” with an “h”—as in “sacred,” meaning how can we set aside one day in seven, 15% of our time, to be different from the rest in some hallowed way. I like the word MaryAnn McKibben Dana coined as she and her husband and young family experimented for a year with the observing the Fourth Commandment. She writes in her book *Sabbath in the Suburbs* that their goal was to live in a “sabbathly” manner—keeping the biblical command in spirit if not in letter. After all, how can a mother of a two year old cease working--changing diapers, cleaning spills, and picking up shoes--for a whole day?

In coming Sundays, Bruce will consider the many facets of Sabbath keeping and what it might look like. Today we look at origins, the Fourth Commandment itself. As you just heard, the Ten Commandments appear twice in Holy Writ, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. The only difference between the two versions occurs in the Fourth Commandment. In both Exodus and Deuteronomy the Fourth Commandment begins virtually the same: Remember (or observe) 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.

The root meaning of “sabbath” is to stop. On the seventh day all work is to cease. This is true for everyone—family members, slaves, resident aliens, even animals. Sabbath is community-wide and egalitarian. Everyone from the boardroom to the barn breathes a collective sigh of relief from labor. On the sabbath all are equal.

But here Exodus and Deuteronomy part company. In Exodus, the rationale given for keeping the Sabbath is because in six days God created the world and rested on the seventh. Into

the very fabric of creation, the need to rest is built in. There's a divine rhythm: work followed by rest.

When I was in college I learned that I could satisfy the physical education requirement by taking social dance. That was great because balls (tennis balls, volley balls, softballs) and I have never connected well. As we tangoed and foxtrotted in class, the moves we learned were not that complicated, step forward or backward, to the right or left. The trick, I quickly gleaned, was in getting the rhythm right. Dancing was mostly about rhythm.

The practice of sabbath keeping is about getting the rhythm right. Life is not good when it is harried day after harried day without a break. God knows we regularly need a break. We need down time. We need time to recharge—not just so we can work harder and more efficiently for the slave driver, Work. More about that in a minute when we get to Deuteronomy. No, we need time to rest and be renewed because we are made in God's image. God rests, and we rest. That doesn't mean engaging in frantic leisure activities, frantic consumption, or frantic exercise. It means restful, renewing activity—or inactivity, as the case may be. For one it might be gathering family or friends for a simple meal and good bottle of wine; for another, curling up with a favorite book. Even God had to hit the refresh button after making heaven and earth.ⁱ

In resting, God blessed the Sabbath. A blessing is a gift. The Sabbath is meant to be a gift, yet over time with rules and regulations it turned into a two-ton burden. An elderly man told me that he used to dread Sundays when he was growing up because he was not allowed to have any fun and had to wait until Monday to read the Sunday comics. On the seventh day God took pleasure in all that he had made. And we are to do the same.

A Buddhist monk visiting New York was told by his Western host that they could save ten minutes by making a complex transfer in the subway at Grand Central Station. When they emerged from the underground in Central Park, the monk sat down on a bench. His host wanted to know what he was doing. "I thought we should enjoy the ten minutes," the monk replied.ⁱⁱ

As we unwrap the gift of Sabbath, it reveals blessings of renewal and joy. It is a time to be shaped within. "On the Sabbath," writes Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul."ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin simply tells us, "We cease our work so God can do God's work in us."^{iv} Worship is one way that happens, but certainly not the only way.

So the practice of keeping the Sabbath is, according to Exodus, rooted in God's creation itself, the rhythm of work followed by rest. It is a gift intended to refresh and renew us, to nourish us inside and out.

If the book of Exodus rationalizes the Fourth Commandment with the first major story of the Old Testament—The Creation—the book of Deuteronomy rationalizes it with the other great story of the Old Testament—The Exodus. In the Deuteronomic version of the Ten Commandments it says that the reason for the Sabbath is because God liberated the Israelites from bondage. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

The Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt some four hundred years. They groaned under the weight of oppression, ceaselessly doing back breaking work building treasure houses for the empire. God heard their cries and sent Moses to free them. When Pharaoh refused "to let my people go," by God's power they escaped across the Red Sea. Their emancipation is *the* defining

event in the Old Testament. The Fourth Commandment calls to memory this liberation. You see, slaves never get a day off. But they are no longer slaves and are, by God's grace, free to set aside one day in seven. They are free from Pharaoh's quotas, free to refuse to give their lives to the endless demands of the empire's economy.

With the advances of technology, where we remote into work from anywhere and tote our phones, pads, and laptops everywhere, the demands of Pharaoh reach even farther into our lives. Practicing sabbath is an act of resistance against having your life defined by how much you produce and, on the flip side, by what you consume with the money you work so hard for. We are not gerbils made to run endlessly on the wheel of production and consumption. Our lives are more than the sum of our time sheets and Visa bills, our to-do lists and shiny new things.

Blu Greenberg has penned this modern version of the Fourth Commandment:^v

*Six days shall you be a workaholic;
On the seventh day, shall you join the serene company of human beings.*

*Six days shall you take orders from your boss;
On the seventh day, shall you be master/mistress of your own life.*

*Six days shall you toil in the market;
On the seventh day, shall you detach from money matters.*

*Six days shall you create, drive, create, invent, push;
On the seventh day, shall you reflect.*

*Six days shall you be the perfect success;
On the seventh day, shall you remember that not everything is in your power.*

*Six days shall you be a miserable failure;
On the seventh day, shall you be on top of the world,*

*Six days shall you enjoy the blessings of work;
On the seventh day, shall you understand that being is as important as doing.*

To set aside work on the Sabbath means that you acknowledge the universe can survive a day without your managing it. To set aside time to rest, renew, and enjoy God's creation and the relationships God has given you requires you to trust that God will provide. The world won't stop spinning if you unplug from it. Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow. But we have a hard time letting go of control, letting go of power, letting go of some sense that we are running the show. To honor the Fourth Commandment is also to honor the First and Second. It is to upend the god named Work and to turn away from the idol named Performance.

Recently one of you confessed to me that you were a "human doing" but were learning to be a "human being." All of us weaned on the Protestant Work Ethic can identify. Practicing Sabbath claims our identity not as doers and performers, only as good as our last report, project,

or sermon. Despite their insistence, we don't belong to Production and Busyness. We are free of these slave drivers. But neither are we trees that own ourselves. We belong to God. Keeping the sabbath reminds us whose we are.

There's a social justice edge to the Fourth Commandment which requires us to see to it that no one will work without respite. This command has been at the root of movements to abolish slavery and end indentured servitude. It undergirds the movement to assure that everyone has the opportunity to earn a living wage. God did not make people for exploitation, like some lemon to be used up, squeezed dry, and tossed in the trash.

Grounded in both the stories of Creation and Exodus, the command to remember the Sabbath is one we desperately need to take seriously. "How ever can we do it" we ask, "we already don't have enough time." That's the rub. It's counter-intuitive, like "less is more."

I've heard a number of commencement speeches over the years. The only one I can remember was on the subject of priorities, of doing what's important first. The speaker illustrated her point by filling a mason jar. She began by pouring in a cup of sand. Then she added small rocks, then medium sized ones, but by the time she got to the big rocks she had on the podium, there was no more room. Then she emptied the jar and started over. This time she put the big rocks in first, then medium and small and lastly poured in most of the sand which filled in the cracks. The remaining bit of sand, she brushed aside. Amazingly, it all, fit. It all worked out.

Sabbath keeping, friends, is a big rock.

ⁱ Exodus 31:17.

ⁱⁱ MaryAnn McKibbon Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1951)

^{iv} John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

^v Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983), p.26-27.