

Christopher Chatelaine-Samsen
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
February 17, 2019

Things You Can't Do
Matthew 6:25-34

It's generally poor form to begin a sermon by reminding everybody of something that habitually annoys them, but we'll see how this goes. I want you to remember your last service call. You know the kind I'm talking about, the one where you desperately need the plumber to be here 3 hours ago, with a service window of somewhere between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. next October, all the while water is leaking from the attic to the basement straight through the ceilings. Think about that, and think about what was most frustrating about that experience. I'll bet, in the middle of it all, it's the feeling of powerlessness. That, before the plumber or whoever it is shows up, you're powerless to fix the problem in front of you, and are forced to wait for the solution from somewhere else.

In the first reading from Exodus, the Israelites feel similarly powerless, but their situation is a little more dire than leaky plumbing. They're literally starving in a desert. They've been on the move for years since leaving Egypt, and if you've spent much time in the Middle East, you'll know they haven't exactly been in pastures of plenty. And so they complain to Moses about their state, and that they would frankly rather be enslaved than starve to death. They are as powerless as you can be.

Now, God is no 24/7 plumber agency, but it certainly seems like God made them wait for longer than they really needed to. It's a famous story, where food literally appears out of nowhere every single day. But why couldn't have God gotten to it sooner? Why not on day one or two? Why not right when their provisions ran out?

And you would think that with all this food the Israelites would rejoice. And they do, but remember that the food comes with a condition. Take what you need for the day, and no more, and tomorrow more will be provided. But don't take too much, because any extra will go bad.

An extra level of frustration. They've had to wait longer than they wanted to for an unknown time to receive food, and now they're not even allowed to plan for the next day. They can't handle it. They take extra, and it goes bad - exactly as they were told. For them, God's gift feels too perilous - God provided today, but can we trust God for tomorrow?

This story is generally told as a beautiful story of God's provision, but it's something else as well. It's as deeply challenging for us as it was for the Israelites. Because it forces us to reckon with what we can and can't do, what we can control, and what we can't. More

than anything else, the Israelites have to cede control in their time in the desert, and what could be more anxiety-provoking than ceding control over food, the very thing that sustains your life.

Although it will sound surprising, this story and those like it form part of the bedrock of what we call Sabbath. Now, for many, we usually think of Sabbath as the refuel portion of the depletion and renewal cycle that we experience in life. We pause on Sunday, or on vacations, or perhaps we put away our email for a weekend if we're really brave, in order to refuel or recharge for the week. And then over the course of the week, we get drained from endless meetings and worry and work, and next Sunday again, we fuel back up again, and so it continues week after week. And while we all need something like this, because the weeks are hard and tiring, I don't think that is primarily what the Israelites were meant to understand.

We find the exact command to keep the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments. These famous instructions are divided into two halves. We all know the second half - don't murder, bear false witness, etc. It deals with how to live well with others. The first half is different - it deals with how to live well with God, and it begins with a statement of who God is: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt." This is meant to frame this set of instructions as a relationship. "I am God, and have brought you this far as I promised. You can trust me. Therefore", God says, "have no other gods, don't profane my name, and keep the Sabbath."

That third one can seem like it comes out of nowhere, but it is connected to the first two, and to God's character. Apart from any work of their own, the Israelites were delivered from captivity, across the desert with manna, and into a new land. By their own admission, the Israelites were barely willing partners in this effort, and it is only by miracle after miracle that they make it.

And so Sabbath, the time to refrain from work, is a reminder of that fact. A reminder of the parting of the seas, a reminder of the pillar of cloud and fire that led the way, a reminder of the bread from heaven. Time after time, God removed the Israelites' ability to provide for themselves on purpose, and forced them to rely on God's own work. Sabbath is a reminder that ultimately we must rely on God's work and provision, not our own.

Sabbath isn't just a useful recharge station. The freedom of a time of Sabbath is a challenge to us. It is not simply a rest from our labors, but a reminder that our labors are insufficient, partial, and when they are disconnected from God's work, they tend to go awry, or tend to labor after the wrong things.

In case manna from heaven seems too far removed, too otherworldly, Jesus has another way of getting at this point, which he articulates in perhaps his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. You've likely heard parts of it many times - "Do not worry, look at the birds of the air, consider the lilies of the field." On the surface it seems trite, like Jesus as some sort of displaced 60's flower-power child getting his followers to "Be cool, man - Relax!"

But in case it seems easy to confuse the Sermon on the Mount and the sermon at Woodstock, remember that Jesus is deeply rooted in an understanding of Sabbath that is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. All he's doing here is relating the scriptures to something a little more present, so if it's been too long since Israel was in Egypt; it is not too long since his followers have looked at nature.

Seriously, consider for a moment what he's doing by looking at nature. As obvious as it sounds, there is not one single thing in nature that you or any other human can create on your own. You haven't made plant life, organized the ecosystem, or created the tides and the waves. The best humans have been able to do thus far is cultivate, modify, and occasionally and at great expense, clone. We are at most slight modifiers of nature, not controllers of it.

Nature is a vast, vast reminder that there are some things that we simply cannot do. Though we on occasion harness a fraction of the power of nature, we can't create any of it, and our meddling, when done poorly, often does more harm than good. Jesus couldn't have known in his time, but since the industrial revolution we've done plenty to prove his point. We have learned and are continuing to learn that when we've tried to conquer nature rather than work with it, we've created some fairly dire results, and some of our best scientists are now spending their time trying to undo and mitigate the effects of our folly.

And what has our folly really been? I would argue it has been a failure to bring a Sabbath attitude to our lives and our world. In the example of nature, we have been so reluctant to accept the gifts of nature that we have tried to bend it to our wills. How true it is in the rest of our lives as well. How many relationships have we attempted to manipulate, rather than simply receive? How many times have we tried to fit too many things into a day, rather than spend better time where we are right now?

Sabbath isn't a one day per week thing. It's an every time thing. It is ultimately an acknowledgement that, even in all our good work, God's work comes first, and our work flows out of that.

Let's go back to nature for a moment, and examine what the Hebrew Scriptures about Sabbath say about work and agriculture, which would have been the primary way of life back then. The Hebrew Scripture dictates that the people are to cultivate their land for six years, and on the seventh, they are to let it lie fallow. Now, as city folk, a lot of us probably don't know much about farming, but I do know from other people that rotating crops and letting land lie fallow periodically is essential for maintaining soil health. In other words, that Sabbath year of rest for the land is part of what makes the work time so productive. By letting the soil rest, the people found that they could work with the land to provide its bounty, rather than bend the land to accomplish something it couldn't quite do.

A holistic view of Sabbath doesn't mean a complete refrain from work. Sabbath isn't an on-off switch that's pressed once a week. When done rightly, like a field well-tended, it permeates through everything, both our work and our rest. Sabbath is more than a thing we do, but a way of being. It is recognition that all good things come from God, and that our best work is done when it is aligned with God's work.

There's an image that the Lutheran Church often uses to describe this, and yes, you're about to experience one of the hazards of having one of your pastors married to a Lutheran pastor. They use phrase, "God's Work, Our Hands." One Sunday, every year, almost every Lutheran congregation sets aside their time for a day of service, a reminder of God's calling to serve. But, to me, even more important than that single day, is the image that at our best, we are always doing God's work with our own hands. The work of education, government, medicine, industry, and more, these done prayerfully and directed towards the common good are God's work just as much as the winter shelter is. "God's Work, Our Hands" reminds us that we are working with God when we do it for God's glory and the benefit of one another.

When I began, I talked about the Israelites feeling powerless in the desert, and that being reminded of the things we can't do can feel like being cut off at the knees. But that's not the end. Because after the things that are properly God's that we can't do, comes the many, many things that we can do. Sabbath doesn't cause us to be powerless, but is instead deeply empowering, because our Sabbath work is magnified by God and in the company of the saints who we work alongside. And it is a cycle of rest and work that is mutually life-giving.

I get that this can feel pie-in-the-sky, and many days, it will be. By the way, your pastors can fully sympathize with the ups and downs of work. Of course, it's aspirational, but it is an end we can faithfully work towards, a merging of our work and rest that enlivens our lives and enlivens the world. But in the meantime, even moments of Sabbath, the

complimentary inhale and exhale of rest and work, can be enough for our daily bread,
the gift of God. Amen.