

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 25, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Hear the commandments of God to [God's] people:
I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage.
You shall have no other gods but me.

You shall not make for yourself any idol.

You shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Book of Common Prayer, p. 350

Those are the first four of the Ten Commandments. There are six others, of course, but I stop at Number Four because this is the one that lies at the heart of our gospel this morning.

In the Bible, there are at least two different accounts of the giving of the 10 Commandments. In Exodus, we get an eye-witness account of God speaking directly to Moses. Later, in Deuteronomy, Moses calls the people together to tell them once more the story of that day.ⁱ

Now, I should be careful to say that for all intents and purposes, the Fourth Commandment is precisely the same in both Exodus and Deuteronomy:

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.

Exodus 20:8-10

But here's the thing. The commandment itself is the same in both accounts, but two tellings offer different reasons for keeping the sabbath holy. Two different reasons ...and I think both of them are good. I think we need to know that. Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries knew it.

The first of the two reasons – and I remind you, they're both good reasons – the first of the reasons for keeping the sabbath day holy goes back to creation. In Exodus, God says:

... 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 day and consecrated it.

Exodus 20:11

When Moses retells this story, he doesn't tie it in with the seven days of creation; he says it goes back to the liberation of God's people:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Deuteronomy 5:15

Barbara Brown Taylor, in one of her books, says that even today observant Jews light two candles on Shabbat – one for each of the two reasons to keep the day holy. She says this about the first candle:

God worked hard for six days and then God rested, performing the consummate act of divine freedom by doing nothing at all. Furthermore, the rest was so delicious that God did not call it good, or even very good. Instead, God blessed the seventh day and called it holy, making Sabbath the first sacred thing in all creation. Resting every seventh day, God's people remember their divine creation. That is what the first Sabbath candle announces: *made in God's image you too shall rest*.

And she goes on to reflect on the significance of the second candle, saying this:

God's people cried out to God and God heard them, sending Moses to free them from bondage in a land that was not home. Resting every seventh day, God's people remember their divine liberation. That is what the second Sabbath candle announces: *made in God's image you too are free*.ⁱⁱ

Made in God's image you too shall rest. Made in God's image you too are free. Those are two reasons given for the commandment to keep the sabbath holy. They are not the same, but they are, I say once more, both good reasons.

I emphasize the point this morning because I think it relates to the conflict we hear about in this morning's gospel between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. And I am inclined actually to have some sympathy for the synagogue leader.

I think the leader in the synagogue has a point. And I think we should be careful not to dismiss it – or him – as nothing more than a rejection of Jewish legalism. And, as I say, I'm kind of on his side – at least a little – this morning.

We have, in our day, likely forgotten the point of sabbath rest. We would do well to find our value and our worth less in what we do – or fail to do – the other six days of the week. Our value is more intrinsic, hidden in the mystery of who God tells us we were created to be.

And we would do very well to notice that sabbath rest is not merely a gift for you and me. It's intended for everyone. Another person's value is greater than what they do for you or me.

In Leviticus, even the fields are supposed to enjoy a year off every seventh year. A sabbath of complete rest reminds us that everyone and everything in all creation is more than a thing for us to exploit.

Jesus is not in any way anti-sabbath. Jesus remained a Jew and, so far as we can tell, he was certainly faithful about keeping the sabbath. His first sermon, as Luke tells it, was given in his hometown synagogue on the sabbath. And Luke tells of other sabbath days when Jesus went to the local synagogue: usually to teach; and, on occasions such as this, to heal.

There were always some who took Jesus to task for healing on the sabbath. But Jesus generally held that the sabbath was made for our sake, not us for its sake.

Jesus deeply knew there were two reasons for keeping sabbath. If the synagogue leader fixes onto the words from Exodus, Jesus reminds him of how Moses said this was to be a day to remember our past oppression and God's holy desire to set us – and all God's people – free.

Two reasons for observing the sabbath: made in God's image you too shall rest; and made in God's image you too are free. So far as I can tell, they're both good reasons.

But what if rest and freedom cannot both abide on a given sabbath day?

If all creation is very good – if all is right with the world around us – then rest seems a virtue.

But if even one of God's children remains bent over, and if we have the power to do something about it, then “doing nothing” seems a far cry from anything holy; a day of rest becomes merely an excuse for turning a blind eye.

In this morning's gospel, of course, Jesus will not turn a blind eye. He sees a woman bent over and unable to stand up straight, a woman everyone else had likely literally overlooked.

It may have begun as a physical ailment, but it has taken on a spiritual component. For 18 years, people had been speaking over her, no one ever looking her in the eye. After 18 years, she will have faded into the background and become invisible. Perhaps on that day Jesus came, everyone pushed her aside, as they jockeyed for a better view of the rabbi. Perhaps she was content to be pushed back against the wall, knowing she would not be able to see anyhow.

But even if she could not see Jesus, Jesus sees her and she becomes visible again. And breaking with the conventions of the day, Jesus speaks to her: “Woman, you are set free!” ... free from her “ailment,” yes; even more, liberated from the margins where she never did belong. And he touches her, taking her by the shoulders to lift her up so that she is able to look Jesus in the eye. His is the first face she's seen clearly in 18 years.

The leader of the synagogue said the healing could have waited for another, more appropriate day. Jesus disagrees. It's not that he thinks the sabbath is unimportant or merely optional. Jesus is not ignoring tradition and custom when he calls out to the woman, when he speaks to her, when he touches her, when he lifts her up and looks her in the eye.

The healing could have waited a day if the rest were the only virtue of sabbath. But Jesus heals on this day, and he does so not in spite of the commandment to keep the sabbath holy, but in observance of the commandment to make it holy too.

In all that Jesus does, he is doing what God has done from the beginning – freeing people from what oppresses them. For Jesus shows us that what God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, God says throughout history – “Let my people go!” (Exod 7:16).ⁱⁱⁱ There is no more appropriate day than the sabbath, the day God set aside to set us free, for us to do the same.

So far as I know, there's no symbolic significance to our having two candles on our altar here. We could have one. We could have a dozen. But we have two. And so we light two candles here every Sunday. Perhaps it would be appropriate for us to light our two candles and reflect on the Jewish Shabbat. Yes, may the first remind you and me: “made in God's image, you too shall rest” – and our rest is a holy thing. And may the second candle remind us of something more: “made in God's image, you too are free” – and our freedom is given to us that we might love others as God loves us.

For in the end, I don't think the 4th Commandment is given to us merely as a day to take our ease. Our calling is to keep the sabbath as a holy day, yes, and even more to make this day holy.

ⁱ The two accounts of the giving of the 10 Commandments are actually much more alike than they are different. But the final verse of each differs, seeming to provide at least a different point of emphasis if not an entirely different motivation:

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 day and consecrated it.** (Exodus 20:8-11)

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 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, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. **Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.** (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2009), pp. 130-131. (some emphasis added)

ⁱⁱⁱ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2006), pp. 240-241.