

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
October 5, 2014
©2014

Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments IV. What's Your Sabbatical?

Exodus 20:8-11 The Message Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to God, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days God made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them; [and] rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day; [and] set it apart as a holy day.

Ephesians 5:15-20 New Revised Standard Version Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the classic theological books of the early 20th century, a book that all seminary students study at one time or another, a book that even now remains in print ninety-seven years after its publication and having been translated into twenty languages, is entitled The Idea of the Holy by a German theology professor named Rudolf Otto. In this book, Professor Otto seeks to describe what he believes to be at the root of almost all religions, which is an experience of what he calls, in Latin, the *mysterium tremendum* – the tremendous mystery. Part of that experience, Otto says, is to be suddenly taken out of one's everyday experiences and perspectives, and the chief mark of this sort of experience, he says, is the feeling of absolute **awe** in the face of something where language fails us. It is the experience of utter amazement, something outside of our everyday experiences, and overwhelmingly fascinating.¹

Of course, it may seem both ironic and futile to try to describe *in* language an experience that is said to be utterly *outside of* language! A seminary professor once

¹Cf. <http://www.bytrentsacred.co.uk/index.php/rudolf-otto/the-idea-of-the-holy-1-summary> for a good and fuller description.

decided that rather than lecturing on what Otto was trying to describe – which of course would be words about words about something that it is said couldn't be described in words! – he would **show** his students such an experience and evoke that sense of mysterium tremendum in them. So instead of beginning the class with a lecture, he stepped to the podium, pulled a \$20 bill out of one pocket and a lighter out of the other. He then proceeded to set that bill on fire, dropped it on the table in front of him, where it burned up completely. The wide-eyed gasps in the room were loud and universal! He then looked at them and said, "That, ladies and gentlemen, is the experience of the holy." And he had a point – in our culture, where we sometimes reverence money, his act of currency arson did indeed evoke feelings of fascination and awe – and certainly it was an experience that was utterly outside of all of the students' normal experiences and perspectives.

Where in your life do **you** experience that sense of the holy, a sense of awe, and wonder, and fascination? Has it been too long? Do find it hard to remember those moments? Do you miss the way they allowed you to see things in a whole new way, the way they gave you energy, the way they excited you for that moment of your life? If so, then the fourth commandment, our scripture for today, may be especially apt for you. Because there is real wisdom in it. And this teaching from God about "sabbath," this expectation from God is not because God is a killjoy and wants us to not have any fun on Sundays, as the cartoon on our bulletin cover today comically if un-grammatically depicts it. No, God's provision for a "sabbath," for a "sabbatical," if you will, from the demands and drudgery of the everyday, is precisely so that we won't ever lose touch with just **what a holy thing life itself is!** And in this, the commandment is telling us, we are to model ourselves after God – for even God stopped work, stopped the busyness, stopped the frantic pace of creation itself on that seventh day. The word "sabbath" can

also be translated in modern-day parlance as “intermission,”² and that is exactly what God is calling you to have – a regular time of “intermission” from the demands and duties and drama of your weekday, workaday lives in order find renewal through realizing and re-claiming just how fraught with meaning and holiness your life is. As one preacher puts it the fourth commandment is a “Reminder... that [we] are to cease from [our] own works, and allow God to work in [us].”³

But I know what you’re thinking. It’s probably the same thing that is captured by the story of the first grader on school picture day. As the photographer snapped her pictures of each child, she made small talk with them to help put them at ease. “What are you going to be when you grow up?” she asked one little boy. And the boy responded, “Tired!”⁴ And indeed, life can be tiring and even exhausting too much of the time – the demands of parenting, of working, of dealing with family drama or workplace demands and prima donnas can sap you. Americans lack of sleep that is so well-documented in so many studies makes it hard to find the energy to set aside a space for something other than the routine and the necessities. And the commandment’s expectation that on one day of the week you will do no “work” just seems both unrealistic and un-obtainable. And yet all of that is nonetheless all the more reason to find a disciplined way to regularly carve out some “sabbatical” time, an “intermission,” for yourself! But how? How? Well, our scripture this morning from the Apostle Paul has some good ideas about how. First, let’s hear his words again:

“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for

²www.calvaryroadbaptist.org/sermons/00-05/sermon__the_fourth_commandment.htm

³<http://www.scribners.info/content/TenCom4Sermon.pdf>

⁴<http://www.preachinghelps.com/exodus/thefourthcommandment.html>

everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now Paul’s words here aren’t simply just about the dangers of drunkenness – although even as such, they are good reminders and they are indeed true. But he has a larger point in mind in the midst of that, and if we read him simply as wanting to be the Hall Monitor of the Church who lays down rules for us about how many beers we can have, we will miss what he is trying most of all to tell us, and that is this: ***Pay attention to what fills you with true joy – and then cultivate, follow, revel, and magnify that in your lives.*** *Pay attention.* That in fact is an alternative way of translating his opening lines that the NRSV translates as “be careful.”⁵ *Pay attention. Pay attention to what fills you, and seek to be filled with God’s spirit and seek to be wise about what will truly make you fulfilled and what will truly give you joy.*

Because you see, sometimes you and I come to let the *wrong* things fill us. We all know folks who are so filled with fascination with money and stuff that they never truly experience the holy. We all know people who are filled with cynicism and jadedness so that nothing breaks through to them. We all know people who are so scared of those who are “different” that they can longer see other people as occasions to encounter holiness. But even as those things may fill those folks, they also suck the spirit right out of them. Just as a nitrogen fire extinguisher works by forcing all the oxygen out of a space, paying attention to the wrong things can also do that; forcing out the things that truly give joy, truly give life, truly give hope – and that truly make it more likely that we will indeed encounter the holiness of our lives and the purpose God has for us.

So how do Paul’s words help us find our “intermissions,” our “sabbaths,” our “sabbaticals,” that the wondrous sense of holiness that God wants for us? Well, first, as I said, Paul is counseling that we need to pay attention to what is filling us, what is inhabiting us, what is driving us. But to do that we need to go back even one step

⁵I’m indebted to Rev. Rick Dietrich for this point. http://day1.org/502-hey_pay_attention

further and start with this: **simply pay attention.** *Just pay attention.* When Barbara and I served churches in Hawaii, we lived about thirteen miles from the big city of Hilo. The drive from where we lived to Hilo hugged the coastline and each curve in the road brought breathtaking beauty. When we first moved there, I would drive that highway just lost in wonder at the amazing vistas of ocean and mountain, of beautiful and bounteous fields, of towering Mauna Kea volcano, that lay around every curve. A few months later, though, I realized one day that I had driven that entire thirteen miles and didn't remember one single thing about it, so caught up in whatever it was that I was thinking about or daydreaming about or distracted by. I didn't notice the glory that was before my eyes; I didn't notice the holiness, the sacred, beckoning to me! And so the first thing I would say that we need to do, you and I, is simply to cultivate the habit, the spiritual discipline, if you will, **of paying attention** - for it will make it so much more possible for those holy moments to find you. How do you do that? Well, try this simple idea: commit yourself to seeing at least one new thing every day; notice something as you go about your life that you hadn't noticed before. As much as you and I crave routine, sometimes, too much of it can keep you or me from seeing what God is trying to do, how God may be trying to fill us with new things, new possibilities, new perspectives. Too *much* routine may *seem* to adequately fill us in the short run, but in the long run it can suck the **possibility** out of life. So, step one, **just pay attention.** Pay attention.

Step Two: **Sing.** As Paul says, sing to the Lord. It's really very simple. **Sing to the Lord.** Paul devotes a big chunk of his words today to that admonition; did you hear it: "*as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.*" In other words, whether you're together or you're alone, sing. *Sing.* It really can open you to the Holy, it really can be a moment of sabbath and sabbatical. There is simply something life-giving, hope-giving about singing with gusto and with volume! It's harder for fear and worry and anxiety to sneak

in and fill you when you are singing. One of my friends is always singing. When we were roommates sharing a house in college, he would take a hymnal in the car and he would sing at traffic lights. I would hear him singing hymns in the shower. He would even, if this isn't too TMI, take a hymnal into the bathroom with him! And he is full of joy, and he would say that the holiness that God is commending to us in the fourth commandment far more easily finds him when it slips in between the notes of his songs. So, second way to find sabbath and sabbatical, even in circumstances that are scary or sad, hurtful or hateful, worrisome or wearying, is to follow Paul's simple admonition to sing. **Just sing. Sing to the Lord!**

The third step is also simple, but can be oh-so-hard sometimes: **Give thanks.** The way that the NRSV translates Paul's words is "*[give] thanks to God... at all times and for everything.*" But this is where translations can read us astray. I'm reminded of an old cartoon with a little boy eating his dinner, parent nearby with head bowed saying grace, and the little boy saying "**But I'm NOT thankful for broccoli!**" Well, neither am I. Nor am I thankful **for** hailstorms or ice storms or devastating floods and fires. I am **not** thankful **for** sickness, and accidents, and calamities that too often greet us in each day's Gazette. I am not thankful **for** folks who do evil to other folks, or for folks who do cowardly acts to terrorize others, or for wars that cause children to die and be maimed and be orphaned or to be forced into being soldiers at the age of nine. I am not thankful **for** any of these things. But I believe in my heart of hearts that neither was Paul. And that's why Eugene Petersen's translation of this crucial little verse makes so much more theological sense, it seems to me. Petersen says that it is better to translate this line not as "give thanks **for** everything"; no, he says that we are called to "give thanks **over** everything." **Over** everything. That's a huge difference from a tiny word!

For you see, to give thanks **for** those calamities and evils implies that God is responsible for them, that God has specifically chosen to send evil, hurt, pain, and

suffering to some of God's children. But I just don't believe that's true. And thanking God **for** such things runs the risk of implying that God is a bully to be placated, rather than a parent to be loved. And yet I do think that it is right and fitting and true to give thanks **over** everything. Why? Because even in the worst of circumstances, we need to be reminded by the careful words that we use to talk about God that we can indeed praise God for always being **present** in every circumstance to bring about the good that is possible, the new life that is possible, the transformation that is possible, the hope that is possible. That's what God does, that's what God has promised us – to be present with us no matter what, guiding us, loving us, leading us through the best and the worst and everything in between that life can offer. So giving thanks **over** all things is precisely to be giving thanks not for those things themselves, but for the God who indeed is **over** all things in hope and in power. Do you hear the difference? It's crucial. It's crucial.

So, as the title of this sermon says, let me ask you: "What's your sabbatical?" Where do **you** find "sabbath," "intermission," from the things that wear you down so that you can indeed be open to the way that the God of holiness, of promise, of purpose is seeking to find you? Well, I would commend to you that you try those three things: Pay attention; pay attention to what is filling you; pay attention to how routine and rote would keep you from seeing God at work. And sing – it's just harder to be shallow or scared or stuck when you're singing to the Lord! And finally, give thanks **over** all things because no matter what, you know that God is with you, in love and power and hope. For this very, very good news: Thanks be to God! Amen.