

Oppression Interrupted
Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Matthew 11:28-30
Sunday, August 18, 2019
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

I love a thousand things about some good vacation time. If we're fortunate enough to travel, I love the illusion of minimalism—we are fully capable of living with only what we can pack in the back of a Subaru and do not need closets and boxes and a garage full of stored things! I love the freedom to explore or not explore, to sleep in or get up to see the sunrise. Mostly, I love living in other time—what day is it? what time is it? do we live here now?

I'm in the sweet spot after some really great time away. Even with school beginning last week and returning to all of the work awaiting me at my building manager gig and my nonprofit incubator and my pastoring, there was a bubble around me reminding me what matters most and what does not, what is mine to carry and what is not, what is important enough to take home with me and what is not.

I was describing this lovely spaciousness to our friend William Thiele over coffee this past week, and mentioned how much I want to guard this awareness. He, of course, is one of the great teachers of contemplative practices, and I knew an answer to holding onto awareness and spaciousness rests somewhere in the world of silence, stillness, and solitude. William noted that I had been at rest long enough to reconnect with the vastness—the vastness of the universe, the soul, God, Love, creation, all of it. And this is indeed the aim of practices of silence, stillness, and solitude.

It is quite embarrassing at almost 42-years-old to admit: I am not very good at this. I am a product of a doing-doing-doing culture even though everything in me wants to lean into being-being-being. Even though I preach a message of absolute love and worthiness and goodness inherent in every single one of us made in the image of God, the lessons of the culture around me have ingrained in me that worthiness and goodness are produced by really hard work. And only at the point of utter exhaustion do we sit and rest, and even then...it can't be for too long.

Nothing in me is shaped for this unhealthy work rhythm, and I am so deeply aware right now of how I make myself sick when I buy into the cultural message of working/doing/working/doing instead of a better, right-sized, truer practice of calling/being/calling/being. So in this sweet spot of spaciousness and vastness, I am confessing my

shortcomings before you because I suspect in doing so, you might hear some of your own. Or in doing so, perhaps you'll know you can do the same with me. And maybe if we tell the truth about our lives, then we can create a different way together.

In this sweet spot of spaciousness and vastness, I am also re-ordering some things around here and in my own life to enable myself and all of us to hold empty space together. That mostly likely means empty in calendar time but also in physical space. In the empty space, we remember who we are, we find that good, deep soul rest, and we are better equipped to know what work is ours to do and what is not when we aren't cluttered all the way from waking to bedtime and all the way around the paths we walk.

To that end, I am reorienting myself as a pastor first with all other tasks understood through that lens. I've spent some time considering ways we function on auto-pilot when we should be guarded and mindful of the opportunity to connect with the vastness, to create some delicious spaciousness. I hope you've noticed that the order of service is different today. Of all the places we plug in details and fill in a box, let's not do that with this remarkable hour we have together. Let's elevate this time and allow it to draw us into other time, to shape us for our days, to make a people out of us. I also hope that our worship enables us to collectively call one another to what matters most and challenge one another to release some of those non-essentials that weigh us down and make us sick.

And the "us" here is not limited to St. Charles. This is "us" 21st century American people formed by a doing/doing/doing culture that ultimately values people by what they produce. And in this malformed culture, if you aren't producing, then you aren't as valuable. If you aren't producing the right things, then you aren't as valuable. It's a culture of oppression. Now we know there are some in our culture who are oppressed at every turn by the malformed standards of our culture. We are a pretty privileged bunch in here, and I want to acknowledge that. If we don't acknowledge the advantages we have, then we can't be honest in our study, understanding, and practice of Sabbath. And we need this. We need this Sabbath practice. We need this sacred time together to invite us into Sabbath; to remember who we are. It is too important to automate, and I apologize for getting stuck on repeat for a little while. If we have any hope at all of undoing the broken systems and structures of this world, then we must have a right practice of Sabbath. We'll explore these concepts together for the next three weeks.

We start today in Deuteronomy 5, where the call is to remember. "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”

And why must God’s people Sabbath? Sabbath to “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.” Now we need to be careful here in reading ourselves too intimately into the remembering of being enslaved people. Because few of us in this room have direct ties to the Jewish story of Egyptian slavery, and most of us in this room need only spend an afternoon on any genealogy website before we find the branch on our family trees where ancestors were the ones doing the enslaving. So. How do we read this command and understand it properly for who we are and how we listen today?

This invitation to remember is why Luther Seminary’s Rolf Jacobson calls Sabbath, “Oppression interrupted.”¹ Deuteronomy 5 acknowledges the broken systems and structures of this world—we aren’t the first ones to mess this up and get this wrong; only the latest ones to do so. If Israel is being commanded to remember their own past oppression, it is because they are at risk of forgetting. And even the oppressors are damaged in the system of oppression. If we aren’t mindful of brokenness, how can we ever hope to be repairers?

In Genesis 3 we find a story of long days of hard work linked to humanity’s separation from God. This is etiology—a story written to explain why things are they way they are. Why must we work so hard all the time every day? An ancient story explained that God must somehow allow it but ultimately not want it. God ultimately wants something better for us. Jacobsen notes, “God ordained that the oppressive reality of having to work ‘all the days of your life’ would be graciously interrupted, one day in every seven.”

Sabbath as oppression interrupted is about the restoration of the one who is resting but also about shocking the system of oppression. The interruption of oppression is where real life happens. Best life, truest life, God imagined life is the interruption and ultimate ending of oppression. And Sabbath is a glimpse of that vision.

¹ http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=faculty_articles

When the world is overrun with need and challenge, to rest can feel utterly selfish. We sense it is selfish to stop working, stop advocating, stop connecting. But this command isn't a biblical mandate for a great night's sleep. Sabbath isn't just about physical rest; we are talking about a soul rest with some eternal depth, cosmic height, and transformational capacity. Sabbath rightly practiced is about a deep, soul-centering on a regular basis that draws you back into truest self for the good of a people and the good of the world.

Sabbath is an essential rhythm to the life of faith for it calls us to remember, shakes us out of the patterns and habits of our culture and our world, and Sabbath calls us to live in radical, particular ways because it is rooted in remembering oppression and interrupting those broken ways forever. We can not work for a world as it should be if we are always and only locked into the world as it is. Sabbath expands our imaginations and fosters a radical creativity for the good of all.

In *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes²:

"The first time I really tried [practicing Sabbath] was the Sunday after my last Sunday as a parish minister. After more than twenty years of being in church most Sunday mornings, I found myself suddenly faced with a whole day at home alone. I could not go to the church I had just resigned from. I did not want to go to church anywhere else. I thought about going to the grocery store, but I live in such a small town where someone was bound to report that I had been seen buying cold cuts on my first Sunday morning away from church. So I stayed home instead, where I confronted grave questions about my professional identity, my human worth, and my status before God.

But that only lasted about an hour. After that, I went out on the front porch and said morning prayer with the birds. Then I read until lunchtime. Then I made an egg sandwich. Then I took a nap. By the time the sun went down, I realized that I had just observed my first true Sabbath in more than twenty years. In the years since then, I have made a practice of saying no for one whole day a week: to work, to commerce, to the Internet, to the car, to the voice in my head that is

² Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 126

forever whispering, 'More.' One day each week, more God is the only thing on my list."

Friends, I don't want to have to leave the church to practice Sabbath. And yet, I sometimes feel like that's my only choice. I don't want you to have to leave church to practice Sabbath, but a whole lotta people figured out they can get a soul-rest without the church better than they can with it. That's a real problem. We have shaped the church to be just like every other institution and organization out there because it's what we know to do. Our work is too important to exhaust one another for the doing-ness of the thing. Do you hear what I'm saying there? We know we have good work to do. We know we have tremendous injustices to fight. We know we have a great big, old building to repair and maintain as our headquarters for good being and good doing. But we are also called to do that good work from a different starting point. We are called to do that good work as people who understand being and vastness and awareness and when to say yes and when to say no.

Sabbath enables us to interrupt very real oppression in this world, but it also gives us permission to acknowledge our own. We need this holy time. We need to be still. We need to be silent. We need to pray with the birds and watch the sunset turn the whole sky pink. And not just to do it because it's lovely and feels nice, though it is lovely and sure does feel nice, but taking on a true sabbath practice then reorients us for the calling of our work in the days ahead.

I want for us to reorient ourselves to this practice here. I want for us to bring peace and justice and revolutionary love and all of that good, important change to our world. But we have to be changed people if we're going to bring about change. The work is too important to not get the holy rest right. I am recommitting myself to this practice today. I am recommitting myself to holding that lovely spaciousness for you, and I am asking you to hold it for me, too.

Jesus the Christ calls to us through the sacred stories we hold, saying, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."³

Listen with me for this invitation. Embrace his teaching with me. Release what is heavy and embrace the rest of Christ. Amen.

³ Matthew 11.28-30 NRSV