

Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now
Resistance to Coercion
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Our Lenten sermon series, based on Walter Brueggemann's book *Sabbath as Resistance*, continues today. We have been comparing the journey of the Israelites in the time period following their liberation from Pharaoh in Egypt with our own 2017 journey right here in Bartlesville, OK. We have noticed, and maybe been surprised by, some similarities between our stories and the stories of our Jewish brothers and sisters from a very long time ago.

Imagine how it must have felt to the Israelites to finally be on the cusp of entering the promised land. It had not been an easy journey to get to that point, you know. They made promises to God and broke them. At one point, they were so filled with anxiety while Moses was at the top of Mt. Sinai, they gathered all of their gold and Aaron made a golden calf which they worshipped...so much for "...you shall not make for yourself an idol.

After that stunt, Moses had to do some fast talking on their behalf to make things right with God. Here's a little factoid you may not know...a new covenant was made and new commandments were issued. We don't talk much about these commandments just fourteen chapters after the Exodus 20 commandments, do we? They were almost completely different from THE ten commandments. The Sabbath commandment, though, slightly revised, was still part of the covenant. "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest." The people lived for a long time under this new covenant and for the most part, it went pretty well.

So, they were on the verge of entering the promised land, Moses stopped them at the Jordan River and talked to them for a very long time.

I liken this talk to the kind of talk I would have had with my kids when I wanted to be very sure they remembered the rules that governed a specific place, especially if it had been a while since we had been there, and especially if it was the kind of place I wanted us all to enjoy. For example, each year, the first time we went to the swimming pool, I would go over the rules again.

No diving in the shallow end.

No running, pushing, or shoving.

No peeing in the pool.

You know...the basics.

I went over these rules for three reasons. First, I didn't want them to get hurt, second, I didn't want them to be gross, and third, I didn't want them to get in trouble from the lifeguards. Especially for Andrew, the worst thing that could happen was to get whistled at by the lifeguard. Getting whistled at had the potential to ruin his whole day. For Andrew, lifeguards were a scary bunch. My job as a parent, was to protect him...to keep him out of trouble.

So, Moses, like a good parent, not wanting the Israelites to do anything that would hurt them or get them into trouble, stopped them before entering the promised land and gave them a good talking to. Walter Brueggeman describes moving into this new land as a "high-risk venture," probably even riskier than going to the pool with 2 young boys and their friends, I would think. This new land, unlike the desert they were accustomed to, would promote prosperity. Moses knew that sometimes when things are going well, people tend to forget all of the things they learned before, when things weren't going so well.

I think of lottery winners whose “big win” doesn’t give them the perfect lives they had hoped for. I read this week that nearly a third of big lottery winners declare bankruptcy—meaning they ended up worse off, financially, than before they became rich. Beyond finances, studies have shown that lottery winners frequently become estranged from family and friends, and incur a greater incidence of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, and suicide than the average American. Apparently, there is a joke amongst financial planners that says, “If you have enemies, give them a lottery ticket.” (Ric Edelman, Fortune)

I can imagine a big lottery winner thinking, “Wow, I can do whatever I want to do because, well...look, things are great! And I can imagine the Israelites thinking that too. “Look, here’s the promised land, flowing with milk and honey. It’s great! But, Brueggemann makes the point that “prosperity breeds amnesia.” Moses wanted the people to guard against this forgetfulness, “Take care you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” he said. The Israelites had come from a system of unbearable coercion under Pharaoh. Moses was afraid they would end up in the midst of another coercive system, with a different kind of Pharaoh, perhaps even a Pharaoh that they would create themselves.

Think about it...the fertile land would be so good for producing that they would produce more and more. And they would want to acquire more and more land...after all, that’s how they observed Hittites, the Amorites, and the Canaanites functioning. Plus, they remembered what scarcity was like in Egypt. In this push to grab more, the land would become mine and yours, not ours. All of a sudden, the land is not an inheritance, from God to this *community* of people, the land is owned, possessed by individuals. And instead of seeing the land as enhancing the community so that everyone could enjoy what it yields, it becomes something to acquire more and more of. This is the difference between the rat race and goals of the coercive culture of those other nations

(and Pharaoh) and the covenantal culture that God desires which benefits the whole community.

And now, before entering the promised land, Moses reminds the people of the Sabbath commandment. And here in Deuteronomy, it sounds a lot like the Exodus 20 Sabbath commandment, with one little difference. There is still the command for everyone to rest, you, me, our sons and daughters, the people who work for us, our animals, and even the strangers among us. But, at the very end of this command in Deuteronomy Moses adds, "...so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." A better translation would be, "that they may rest like you."

And here is Brueggemann's point, Sabbath is the great equalizer. On the Sabbath, everyone is equally at rest. On the days other than Sabbath, people produce and consume more or less than their neighbors. But on the Sabbath, everyone rests equally. In a coercive social system where we are defined by how much we make, how much we do, how much we use, there are huge differences in performance, and therefore, of worth and significance. Brueggemann says that such valuing (or devaluing), "creates *haves* and *have nots*, significant and insignificant, rich and poor, people with access and people denied access." Sabbath shatters those divisions in favor of equality.

On the Sabbath:

You do not have to do more.

You do not have to sell more.

You do not have to control more.

You do not have to know more.

You do not have to have your kids in ballet or soccer.

You do not have to be more beautiful.

Everyone is equal...equal worth, equal value, equal access, equal rest.

Sabbath is an opportunity to remember that the coercive system of Pharaoh was disrupted and all other systems of coercion have the potential for disruption as well...even the ones we have created ourselves. There is freedom for everyone on the other side of coercion. Brueggemann writes, "Sabbath is the day to dance and sing, Free at last, free at last..."

Today's scripture passage invites us to consider Sabbath as a social reality that extends beyond one day.

15 Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. ² And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. ³ Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. ⁴ There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, ⁵ if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. ⁶ When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸ You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹ Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰ Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all

your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

In this passage, the sacred observance of the order of time, Sabbath time and ordinary time, has been transferred to the larger realm of laws regarding the way we conduct business and how that affects life in community. By the time this legislation was formulated, Israel had moved deeply into a capital-acquiring, land owning economy in which wealth and poverty were prominent features. In other words, Moses' words of warning were in one ear and out the other, long forgotten.

This law takes for granted that debts would be incurred and there would be some risky business ventures that may or may not work out well. For the successful, these deals lead to the amassing of significant wealth and the acquisition of influence and power. For the less fortunate, such ventures would lead to ruin and destitution. Does this broad disparity of wealth sound familiar at all? The words of the teacher who wrote Ecclesiastes come to mind, "...there is nothing new under the sun..."

The way of life that had operated reasonably well in the social structure of extended families and clans, where property was largely held in trust throughout the whole group, was eroding and being replaced by more individualistic patterns of economic life. Some people were doing really well and others were desperately poor. This legislation was designed to alleviate the social consequences of disparity and to make possible a pattern of renewals and restarts...which makes sense since we serve a God of second chances. God has never intended for some people to have everything and other, nothing.

So, this law says that every seven years, the people of Israel are commanded to cancel the debts of their neighbors. This practice is intended to be sure poverty does not become a way of life. Imagine this, a family hits a rough spot...maybe their crop gets eaten by locusts

or it's really dry and their animals and their crops die. In order to make ends meet, the father is forced to borrow money with the understanding that it be paid back. For six years, he works on paying it back, little by little, or maybe for six years he feels guilty he borrowed the money and has been unable to pay it back, even though he had no choice. Either way, for six years this debt looms over his head.

Can you imagine what that father felt like when the seventh year came around? Free at last, free at last!! How do you think the forgiver of the debt felt? I think there is the real chance the forgiver felt the same way. "Free at last, free at last!!" Now there is no more awkwardness between them, one is not over the other, more valuable. The past is the past. There is hope for the future. There is, indeed, rest. And equity is restored. One is not the benefactor of the another. And once again, there is the potential for true neighborliness.

As I studied this passage this week, I was struck by the difference between forgiving debt so that poverty doesn't become a trap or a way to keep people enslaved, and the way our society typically deals with poverty. My observation is that we want to blame the person who is experiencing poverty, rather than blaming the coercive systems that cause poverty, the systems that sadly, we take part in.

I met a woman whose name is Beth. Beth had three children. She was single and her ex-husband, the father of the children, had been ordered to pay child support. Beth worked full time at a grocery store, but she didn't make anywhere near enough money to support her children and herself without the child support income. She was barely making ends meet. Her ex-husband got hurt at work and was off for 6 weeks. He had no income, so therefore he didn't pay child support during that time period.

By the time Beth paid for groceries and the utilities, she didn't have enough money for rent. She knew her ex-husband would be getting a check from workman's comp and so she went to a place a friend told

her about that loaned money to people in her situation. The interest was really high, but she had no choice and her ex-husband said he would help with the interest because he had moved back in with his parents, so when he went back to work, he wouldn't have his own living expenses.

Unfortunately, things didn't get better from there. Workman's comp didn't pay because it turns out the ex-husband was on pain killers while he was at work and the insurance company refused his claim. Beth had no way to pay off the high interest loan. She was getting her tax refund soon though. She could use that. The loan company allowed her to extend the terms of the loan, but it would continue to accrue interest. When Beth got her tax return, the loan was 2 and half times its original amount. She didn't have enough to pay it all. That's the day she walked in the door of the church I was serving...distraught, tired of phone calls from the loan company, sad that she wasn't going to get to use her tax return money to sign the kids up for summer sports, exhausted because she had been working 7 days a week to make more money, mad at herself, her ex-husband, and feeling very ashamed.

Beth used her entire tax return, plus money from our church's angel fund to pay off that loan. Angels from our congregation paid to register her children for baseball and softball that summer. Beth ended up having to move into a smaller place because her ex-husband didn't ever go back to work. She still lives on the very edge, but she has learned that payday loans lead to a downhill slide and she has learned that new starts are possible. Through the actions of the people involved in helping Beth, the coercive system at play, through the payday lender, was disrupted.

We allow payday loan businesses to charge interest that for you and me would be unthinkable. We would never pay a triple digit interest rate. Yet, the people who are most vulnerable in our communities are offered the highest interest rates and they get buried deeper and deeper in debt. And we allow it. That, friends, is a coercive system...a

system that takes advantage of people who are already way down at the bottom of the pyramid. There is no freedom. There is no hope in that system.

Instead of making laws to protect the people who are most vulnerable, like Beth, we make laws to protect the people who don't need our help. This is not about Democrats and Republicans, this is about being on the side of people who are vulnerable. The law in our passage today was formulated to ensure that poverty did not become a way of life, yet in this nation, full of Christians who say they believe this stuff, many people experience poverty as generational. Once families fall into poverty, it is very hard to climb back out. That, friends, is a coercive system. And it is way past time for our neighbors to be liberated. We cannot continue to allow our response to poverty to be blaming the people who are poor.

You see, part of engaging in Sabbath, is having the opportunity to remember God's work as liberator, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." Through Sabbath, we have time to dream about a different world in which we participate, with God, in the liberation of our neighbors who are vulnerable, who are enslaved to the coercive systems which perpetuate poverty. Hopefully, this vision we dream of is of a just community that puts forth a positive ethic of compassion and solidarity with our neighbors. Hopefully we envision a community where justice and decency are the norm and people share joyfully out of their abundance, because this is what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. And hopefully, the idea of true equality appeals to us. We have to search our hearts...Do we really want to be equal to Beth? Or even Beth's ex-husband? Do we want to be equal to the heroin addict who called our church this week, begging for help? Or the person who has a mental illness and is unable to hold a job? I hope we do. I hope so because that's what it means to live in covenant with our God.

We cannot claim to live in covenant with God *and* continue to take part in the coercive practices that keep our neighbors in poverty, that perpetuate division based on the *haves* and *have nots*, and allow our economic system to turn our neighbors into threats to our own security. Equality requires us to disrupt coercion. And that will cause us to be very different.

People who faithfully practice Sabbath live all seven days differently. They do so because their Sabbath experiences affect their ordinary time. The pause that is Sabbath not only refreshes us, but it transforms us. It reminds us that the God who liberated the Hebrew slaves, liberates us and invites us into the work of liberation. Through Sabbath keeping, it is easy to see our vulnerable neighbors as “like us”, at rest, free at last.

How many of you rested for four or more hours this week?

Are you ready to graduate to a whole day? Let me entice you with this from one of my favorite theologians, Barbara Brown Taylor:

“At least one day in every seven, pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home, not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than you can produce – that even if you spent one whole day of being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight. And when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so – remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.”

I invite you to discover this truth for yourself this week. Amen.