The poet Wendell Berry, on one of the Sabbath walks he has been taking every Sunday on his Kentucky farm for over fifty years now, wrote this poem:

What I fear most is despair
for the world and us: forever less
of beauty, silence, open air,
gratitude, unbidden happiness,
affection, unegotistical desire.

It is a fear I share at times – that there will be forever less of all those things: beauty, silence, open air, gratitude…

And I don’t know about Wendell Berry, but I know myself that when I get into those fearful spaces in my mind, my inclination is to grasp even tighter to what I do have, and to look with covetous eyes at what my neighbor has…down this road lies despair.

A few years ago, I was walking through the hallway outside my office and caught the last bit of a conversation between a father and young child. The child was sniffling the last vestiges of his tears running down his face. The father said, “If you wanted to play with so-and-so’s car, what should you have done?” The child looked up and said, “But I didn’t want to play with the car, I wanted the car.” What made me remember the exchange, though, is what the child said next. The father said, “Well, it is not your car. What should you do if you want a car like that?” The child, without missing a beat, said, “I should have hit him harder.” I had to walk away to hide my laughter.

I guess that’s what happens when you try and reason with a four-year-old. They are not old enough to understand. So, pray tell, what’s our excuse, those of us who are not four, and yet still covet?

Walter Brueggemann says that the fourth commandment concerning sabbath-keeping looks forward to the last six commandments, which concern neighborly
relations. The Sabbath commandment creates space for a peaceable household and peaceable neighborhood. The final six commandments, concerning honor of father and mother, murder, stealing, adultery, lying, and coveting of your neighbor’s property, are all to establish a discipline and a limit that will serve a peaceable neighborhood.

The command against coveting serves as the climax of these last six commandments, and within the commandment, the word “neighbor” is used three times. Brueggemann asserts that biblically, coveting is not just about an attitude, but also action on that attitude. It is, he writes, “an attitude of craving and forceful action to secure what is craved.” The danger comes to the neighborhood when the craving is acted upon. He describes it again as a “posture and practice of acquisitiveness.”

We say it every Sunday, but it is worth remembering that the covetousness the commandment prohibits is far-reaching. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, your neighbor’s wife, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor. In ancient times, this covered the gamut of all that belonged to another. The neighbor’s household, in other words, the neighbor’s economic viability, is essential to a good neighborhood. When you stop to think that the setting for this commandment originally was most likely an agrarian village of vulnerable peasants, you can see why such a commandment would be vital. There is no margin for loss in such vulnerability. If there’s a disturbance in the property arrangements of the village, life there could quickly become unlivable.

The prophet Micah is speaking for those agrarian peasants, most scholars believe, when he rails against those who have power, who scheme at night in their beds, who wake up coveting fields, so they seize them, and houses, so they take them away. Because they can act on their covetousness, they do. Micah is unrelenting in his condemnation of these practices, announcing that God will take what they have gotten and leave them in ruins. Coveting leads to destruction.

I remember as a seminary student in the early nineties listening to musicians John Mellencamp and Willie Nelson be interviewed on MTV (I realize that shows my age). They were preparing for the annual Farm Aid benefit concert. These concerts had begun some years before as these stars and others recognized the disappearance of family farms in this country. Farmers were going into bankruptcy and watching helplessly as their houses, property, farm equipment, and livestock were auctioned off to the highest bidder. Mellencamp was asked about his song from 1985 called “Rain on the Scarecrow.” He responded that he felt his song was like one of those old songs, one of those Old Testament prophet’s songs.
The crops we grew last summer weren’t enough to pay the loans,
Couldn’t buy the seed to plant this spring and the farmer’s bank foreclosed
Called my old friend Schepman up to auction off the land
He said John it’s just my job and I hope you understand
Hey calling it your job ol hoss sure don’t make it right
But if you want me to I’ll say a prayer for your soul tonight
And grandma’s on the front porch swing with a Bible in her hand
Sometimes I hear her singing take me to the promised land
When you take away a man’s dignity he can’t work his fields and cows
They’ll be blood on the scarecrow
Blood on the plow.

One of them Old Testament prophet’s songs, Mellencamp called it, and it certainly
sounds like one, sounds like Micah. “They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take
them away.”

Now, I know farm policy is complicated, and I would not stand in this pulpit and
map out a four-point biblical plan for the safety and dignity of the neighborhood, the
nation, the world. All I can do, all we can do as believers, is allow space for these ancient
voices to speak, to listen for the ways they are speaking today, and together try to
prayerfully discern how we can respond. No response will be perfect. But we cannot
ignore Micah and others like him just because it is complicated and imperfect. Because
covetousness is not just an ancient problem. It is very much with us today.

James names it in the early church as well. He notes the conflicts in the church and
locates those conflicts in the cravings of the human heart. “You want something and do
not have it, so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you
engage in disputes and conflicts. You don’t ask for things, and when you do, you ask
wrongly, to spend on your own pleasures.” He calls them adulterers. Did you notice in
this reading how many of those final six commandments are covered? Murder, coveting,
adultery. All of them, James writes, emerging from the restless cravings of the heart.

I know this restless craving, and I suspect many of you do as well. On our own, I
suspect none of us can truly overcome the fearfulness that leads to covetousness, that
leads to thinking we don’t have enough, that our neighbor always has more, and therefore
we need more – more possessions, more love, more accolades, more power. We can feel
perpetually like we are missing out, which feeds a restlessness that becomes despairing.

When my family moved to Memphis, we wanted to live in the same neighborhood
as work, so we moved to Midtown Memphis, which is filled with old houses and has an
eclectic vibe, not unlike East Nashville. We moved into a home built in 1921 less than a mile away from the schools where the kids would attend. We loved it.

It started with Chandler’s bicycle. She went out back to the shed and it was gone. I had to explain to her that someone stole it. She was inconsolable for days. Then Caleb’s bike went missing. Then the lawnmower. After that, we decided to put nothing of value out in the shed. With each event, Kim and I became more anxious and fearful. And then, one weekend our friend Jessica, a college freshman at the time, came to visit us. On Sunday morning of that weekend, Kim woke me to ask if Jess had driven her car. “Of course,” I said. Kim said Jess must have left in the night because the car wasn’t there. Turns out Jess was sound asleep. Her car had been stolen, right out of our driveway.

As we were standing in the driveway talking with the police, a neighbor on the street walked by and asked me to come down to his house. He came to the door with The Club. You know the red device you put on your steering wheel to make the car undriveable? He said I could give it to Jess. I told him I didn’t want to take his club. He motioned me in and opened a coat closet. There were five more hanging in there. He said, “Whenever I have people over, I tell them to put these on their cars.”

That evening, Kim and I started looking at real estate ads in the paper.

Now, again, I know it is complicated. I know we were privileged enough to have things that other people wanted, perhaps even desperately needed. I know that our privilege gave us options on whether to continue living there, whereas others do not have that option. I know that the more faithful response would be to plant deeper roots in that neighborhood, care for the more vulnerable members of the neighborhood, and work to find solutions to the despair that drives covetousness. I know all that. But in that moment, all I wanted to do was get out. I didn’t want to live in a neighborhood where I had to give out clubs as party favors when having people over.

Surely this is what Brueggemann means when he says that coveting makes life in the village unbearable. It results in a spiraling where trust fails and fear reigns, and none of us are immune.

Sabbath thus becomes even more critical as an antidote to despair. When we create Sabbath space, we are able to be more fully present to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to God. It is in that space where what might have seemed impossible becomes possible, where fear gives way to trust, and despair to hope. In our restless world and our restless hearts, Sabbath invites deep restfulness that restores and creates pathways yet unseen.
So, once again, I invite you to Sabbath rest. In that space, free from despair, may you notice beauty, silence, open air, gratitude, unbidden happiness, affection, and unegotistical desire. The world longs for such things. May they be ours, and our neighbors, to the glory of God. Amen.