

Observing Sabbath: Celebrating Grace and Freedom

From the series: The Sacramental Character of the Church

Text: Deuteronomy 5:15; Colossians 2:20

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Pentecost VI, July 19, 1992

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Remember that you were a slave ... and the Lord your God brought you out ...
Deuteronomy 5:15

If with Christ you died ... why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?
Colossians 2:20

The call to Israel to observe the Sabbath is contained within what we call the Ten Commandments: the Law. Sometimes the first five books of the Old Testament are called the Law. But that translation, “Law,” is really inaccurate in terms of conveying how Israel received that teaching. *Torah* was the word. The first five books were the Torah. *Torah* means “a way of life,” and Israel received that word as a gracious gift of God, an invitation to fullness of life, a way in which life could be lived most richly, and human potential realized most fully. But because the call to observe Sabbath is in what we call the Ten Commandments, the Law, there has always been that tendency among us to legalize that command as though it had a kind of compelling compulsion about it that forced us into a ritual of servants and we often failed, I think, to sense the gracious gift that was the Sabbath.

The original Ten Commandments, is in the book of Exodus, the 20th chapter. There, as we noted last week, Israel was called to observe Sabbath in order to recall week by week the creative act of God, in order to be reminded one day in seven, in order to have their being permeated with the realization that the whole world was alive with the life of God, to understand that the whole reality was to be viewed as a sacrament, as a source of knowledge and a cause for worship, that the world, what we call nature, the cosmic expanse, was to be received as a means of grace.

It is only in the last couple of hundred years, in the wake of the Enlightenment, that we have spoken about nature as something over against us and as a kind of self-contained reality that could exist on its own. The breakthroughs in scientific understanding and technological advance have tended to reduce nature to a realm out there, as though it had independent status and was a self-contained

existence. How many hours haven't we argued fruitlessly about whether or not there is such a thing as a miracle? Have you ever been in a heated discussion about whether or not "prayer changes things?" I think that those very questions are the wrong questions. They propose a model in which there is the whole realm of nature, with God out there somewhere, having to break in. We speak of intervention, breaking in, as though all of this kind of exists on its own and now and then, on occasion, here and there, God drops in but, if God would be involved, would impact, would influence, God must come as permeating, as breathing in, as the life of the cosmos being the consequence of the breath of God. "You breathe and give them life," said the psalmist.

The last couple of hundred years in modern culture we have lost that sense of the world as Sacramental. Israel was called to pause at the end of every week, to stop, to look, to listen and to delight in creation as the gracious work of the good and gracious God; to rest, to let go, to cease their ceaseless striving and struggle, their desire to control and to manipulate; to give them a sense that they were not after all indispensable for the sustaining of all things. God is quite able to keep the planet in motion and the stars in the sky. God is beyond us; God is in us, with us and in all things so that all things must become a Sacrament that points us to God. To stop on Sabbath and smell the roses and luxuriate in the prodigal goodness of God who made the world, whose intention is for us to live in the world as if it were a Garden of Eden, a place of delight - that is the call of Sabbath.

In a wonderful essay entitled "On Common Prayer," Catherine Madsen makes the point that there is a holiness there - there! It is a given. She makes the point that holiness, that otherness, is in us intimately, permeating every atom of our body. God can't abandon us. God is with us, in us, permeating the whole of reality, holding all things together. And then she goes on to make this wonderful connection to that sense of God that haunts us whether we name God or not. That presence of God that permeates us whether we are conscious or not is that which gives rise to unrest and the dream of redemption.

She writes that "there is something that loves you in the world. ...there is something that loves you in the world." A voice that speaks to you within, in the worst despair, is not different than the voice that called the world into being. What makes your body give off heat? It is the same fire that sleeps in the rocks and is changed from light into matter by the plants. The fire that lights the sun and the other stars. Holiness is there and there is "something out there in the world that loves you," and the world is a means of grace if we would pause to take it in, to give heed, to pay attention with a kind of regular, rhythmic discipline. Observance of the Sabbath - resting, pausing long enough to dream another dream, and to allow our imagination to connect us with that which is not simply beyond us but is woven into the very fabric of our being.

But that raises a question for us. There is something that loves you out there in the world - how would one name that love? God created the heavens and the

earth, and so nature is not some independent existence but is in-breathed by the breath of God. But God is not only the God of our space, but the God of our time.

Israel was called to observe Sabbath in Exodus 20 to be reminded of the spatial dimension of its home in God. But in the second giving of the Law, in the book of Deuteronomy in the 5th chapter, the verses we read a moment ago, Israel is called to observe Sabbath - not to remember creation, but to remember its liberation from Egyptian slavery. There God calls Israel to remember the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath in order to be reminded one day in seven that they were slaves one time and God set them free. The God of creation is the God of covenant faithfulness. The God of creation is the God of redemption. The something that loves you out there in the world – that which is intrinsic in the very fabric of reality – has a name and a face. It is a God who is for us, who would always liberate and set us free, the God who is gracious and who is on the side of God's people.

And so Israel was called every seventh day to stop, to rest and to worship. And in that pause, in that oasis at the end of the week, to have its perspective shaped once again. To know that it lives in the environment, the spatial expanse brought forth by the Word of God, and that it lived as a people graced by the God that would set all humankind free.

The God of Creation. The God of Redemption. And we can see how Israel annually in its Passover Feast celebrated that release from bondage, from the slavery in Egypt – but not only annually in the Passover Feast, but every Sabbath. Every week in the rhythm of labor and liturgy, in the rhythm of work and worship it was called to remember and to hope. God is not only the God of creation, but the God of history, the God of our time. So Israel was called always to remember that the God of its past would be the God of its future, and Israel was the one who gave to the world a whole sense of history - of movement.

The ancient Eastern cultures lived in the eternal cycle of the coming and return. Israel gave to the world the idea of a beginning, and an end, and a meantime, and in its festival celebrations, it remembered and it hoped. It had already received and it had a promise of more to come, and it lived always in that remembering and hoping. Christian worship is patterned obviously on that as well, for we are a people who come together weekly. We celebrate one great central event, when God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. We celebrate on the first day of the week because on the first day of the week God raised Jesus from the dead. We call the first day of the week the Lord's Day. And we come together, not only on Easter Sunday to celebrate the Resurrection, but we come together Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, because every Sunday is a little Easter. Even the Sundays in the season of Lent are not Lenten days, they are Sundays in Lent, because in the inside of the church it was recognized that, after Easter, you cannot keep Lent on Sunday.

You know I see how difficult it is for churches to make changes, but twenty years ago we changed our name to Christ Community Church. For twenty years pastors

have contacted me to ask, "How in the world did you do that? We had a "Name the Church contest and everybody got offended and we lost the whole thing." I don't know how we did it, but we did. But most of the time churches can't do anything. Most of the time you can't change anything in the church because it is all absolutized and made sacred as though it is God's way once it's done. And it seems the greatest blasphemy to violate the principle "we have always done it that way."

I would have liked to have been there in the early church when they moved the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Can you imagine the discussions around the table as they were breaking bread and pouring the cup? For centuries, for generations, it's in the Bible, the seventh day.

When I was a kid there was an old man in the north end of Kalamazoo who had a stake truck with big sides. It looked like that house over on Jackson in Grand Haven, where it's written all over you know - verses, and you can read the news by going by the house. (Laughter) This truck was plastered with writing. I remember as a little kid that he offered so much money to the person that could prove that the church should move from the seventh day to the first day of worship. I always wanted to take up that challenge, but the prize wasn't enough to validate the work. But I will never forget that, and I wondered about that as a kid. But now I wonder about how they were ever able to do it. Can you imagine? Moving from Saturday to Sunday? And, obviously in doing that, they were moving to the first day of the week as the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead because they knew now that the center of their life was in Christ. "Your life is hid with Christ in God, if then you will be raised with Christ." Their whole life was in Christ. The whole ball game was the new life, the new creation in Jesus Christ.

And so they moved from that Sabbath observance to the observance of Sabbath on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, Little Easter, in order, week by week, by week, to remember. It wasn't enough once in the springtime to come together in a great press of people in the resurrection. Once every week, the first day of the week. Every time we gather here it is because God raised Christ from the dead. And because he lives, you too live! Every week we come here in order to have confirmed again in the depths of our being "that there is someone out there that loves us," that the God that we serve is the God of grace and liberation and freedom, who would break the shackles of every form of human bondage and servitude. The God whom we worship is a God for us, the God who brings us joy and springs forth from us - doxology and praise and hallelujah.

The whole worship of the Church is celebration of Easter, and that was so overwhelming that they were able to break with that deeply imbedded tradition. Something written in the Word of God to observe the seventh day - moved to the first day, which shows that they were liberated. They were freed from religion.

Oh, to be free from religion. Religion binds and cripples. Jesus was so angry at the religious leaders who piled legalism upon legalism, regulation upon regulation. He said, "You make these people seven times more the children of hell than when you began with them." Paul writes after the resurrection and after Easter to those who were disturbing the Easter at Colossi. And he said to the believers, "Don't let anybody upset you and deceive you with philosophies about don't handle and don't touch, and don't taste. Don't let anybody lay on you some kind of ironclad rule that says you've got to do this on Sunday or Saturday or on Monday or Tuesday. Are you not free? Have you not died with Christ and been raised again? If then you be with Christ, set your mind on the things that are above, while your life is hid in Christ with God. You are free by God's grace, and don't forget it." The only way not to forget it is to observe Sabbath, to pause in the regular rhythm of one's life. Instead of six and one it becomes one and six. And it is the same principle. It is that we might never doubt that there is a great, gracious life force permeating into the whole of reality and every molecule and atom of our body that could never abandon us.

"Something out there loves you in the world," and that love has a name and a face, and it has appeared in our midst as Jesus Christ our Lord, who was raised from the dead.

As I was thinking about this I realized how important it is. I confessed to you last week and said that being raised as a kid amid the heavy legalism of Sabbath observance, I was tempted to kick the habit. Going into this profession that was difficult, but I did everything possible to convince myself that I wasn't really still bound in that kind of legalism. Then I began to see that the observance of Sabbath was such a great gift and grace, and that the *only* way that the people of God have continued through the generations is that they have been a people who have never forgotten because they have always been called to remember.

And unless there is a discipline and a routine and a rhythm in our lives, we will soon forget. It is easy to forget. God will not cease loving you, but you will cease being conscious of it. And what is it to be loved and not be conscious of it. And so we are called to take heed, to pay attention. So I grumble a bit about ugly Sundays, but as a kid I did know that there was a special day, and as a kid I did know who I was and to whom I belonged.

The only problem is, I think in the western tradition of the Christian church, we somehow or other got our focus off Resurrection and Easter, and moved it to the cross and Good Friday and our sin and our guilt. You say, "Well isn't that what the Bible says?" No. Not the only thing the Bible says. You say, "Well isn't that Christian?" No. It's western, medieval, Catholic Christianity that permeates our Reformed Protestantism as well. The focus of the Western Church – Roman, medieval, filtering into Reformation, Protestant – has its center in the cross. Its fascination is with sin and guilt as the major problem, and the atonement.

Now if you were raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church in Istanbul, if you were a child of the Eastern Rite, you wouldn't know all about that cross and heavy sin and guilt, and strong emphasis on atonement. You would come into this church and it would be foggy. You could hardly see me - and that might be a means of grace. (Laughter) But the reason that you wouldn't be able to see me clearly is because there would be these clouds of incense. If you went to San Sofia in Istanbul in this marvelous, marvelous place you would see an old mosaic of the victorious *Pentocrater*, the triumphant Christ. And from the altar there would be billows of smoke going heavenward and there would be priests everywhere in all kinds of flowing garb. There would be all of the warmth and sensuousness of that which is human, poised and praising in Doxology the Creator who had raised Jesus from the dead.

A totally different feel. A different focus. A different center. Which is right? Well, you need a little of both. But I would have to vote with the Eastern Rite because - and this is my basis for saying that - in the Eastern Orthodox Church, with its focus on Easter, on Resurrection, on a risen Christ and Doxology as worship and praise, you still experience the original intention of moving off Saturday to Sunday, rather than moving off Saturday to Good Friday. Now I have never read that anywhere and I can't swear it is true, but I wonder. Isn't that interesting? In the instance of the infant Christian community, they did not make their sacred day Friday, they made it Sunday because the central thing is not sin and our guilt and the cross, it is the life-giving gracious God who raises Jesus from the dead and permeates us with life, who promised "because I live, you too shall live." So Sunday is a celebration. It is a day for Doxology. It is a day for incense. It is a day for pulling out all the stops. For dancing and singing. (From the congregation - "Amen.") All right - I have been waiting twenty-five years for that. (Laughter and applause.) I'll bet you I am right. I bet I'm right. And I'll bet you church going wouldn't be just a heavy obligation, a legalistic demand, if it were such that one came just one day in seven into this place and was lost in wonder, love and grace and praise, knowing that the whole world is resplendent and shot through with God's life, that the something out there that loves one is the Creator and the Liberator, the God revealed in the face of Jesus. Then Sabbath observance would become the gift and the joy that I suspect that God always intended it to be.

Paul said, "Don't let anybody lay a lot of legalistic clap-trap on you, but don't forget to remember." As I said, I grumble a bit about all those ugly Sundays. They nearly killed me as a kid. But I'll tell you what, parents and grandparents. You bring your kids here regularly Sunday after Sunday, bring them to the Eucharist Sunday after Sunday, kneel with them. Let them hear you sing and watch you pray, and they'll be as hopelessly addicted as I am. The center of Christian worship is Doxology, and the central act is *Eucharist*, which is a Greek word for thanksgiving. And on Easter this past year I celebrated the bread and the wine as Eucharist for the first time in my life - I took Holy Communion on Easter and suddenly understood its true heart: the presence of the risen, living Lord. That - that's worship. That's good, huh? I like it.