

Finding Rest in God **Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Matthew 11:28-30**

A Sabbath and Liberation

I believe you all know the Ten Commandments. Like many laws, they may seem tedious and not particularly uplifting. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me; Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal.” Does this sound exciting? It sounds restrictive and even intimidating. What about the fourth commandment, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.” Does this sound uplifting or like another tedious command? I don’t know how you feel about it, but this commandment is actually liberating and uplifting because it’s about rest.

To keep a sabbath day holy, people had to stop all work. Not only the Israelites themselves, but also their slaves, oxen, donkey, livestock, and the resident aliens in their towns should stop working and REST. An interesting point is that Moses explains the meaning of the sabbath day in relation to their experience of liberation from Egypt. “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.” How could rest relate to God’s mighty act of salvation and liberation?

The Israelites had lived as slaves for about 400 years. This slavery was a system under which people were treated as property and their values were determined solely by their productivity. A brutal whipping waited for them if they were not as productive as they were expected to be. In that system, rest was not an option as they had to keep working for their survival.

This sounds familiar to us. Doesn’t it? While we are all free and live in the land of freedom, we live in a system called capitalism. Surely, capitalism is not a slave system though there are many historical connections and similarities between slavery and American capitalism. Like slavery, capitalism prioritizes productivity and our value and worth lie in how much we can produce for profit. So this system keeps pushing us to work and makes us feel guilty as if we are not productive enough. At the same time, this toxic system makes people addicted to work, success and money.

Ann Anderson wrote a book, “Seduced by Success.” The subtitle of the book is “No longer addicted to pills, performance & praise.” Anderson was a very successful woman in every field. She was a devoted Christian and a famous writer with five of her books making it to the New York Times Bestsellers list. She was a model mother of four children so she was often invited to speak at Christian gatherings where she received standing ovations from thousands of people. She was also an excellent athlete, participating in the Boston Marathon three times.

However, one day, Anderson fell ill and had to undergo multiple major surgeries. Not only did she endure physical pain, but her inner world began to crumble. Problems arose in her marital life. She could not tolerate even a little criticism from others. The biggest problem she faced was her relentless desire for success, born from constant efforts to do better. This led to anxiety and fear, completely destroying her inner self. Eventually, she became dependent on sleeping pills to sleep and morphine to write, turning her into a wreck. She was already successful in many aspects but she couldn’t rest and drove herself to the brink of death.

Perhaps Anderson’s story is our story though to varying degrees. We keep running forward without rest, striving to live harder, earn more money, gain more fame, achieve more satisfaction, receive more love, and seek more influence or whatever else we desire. However, when we live in this way, we become slaves to capitalism and think and act to please our masters. Moreover, we begin to think of rest as a reward to be earned.

As you all know, Juhee and I had a wonderful vacation time in the Canadian Rockies in July, but before we left, Juhee and I had to juggle our busy schedules. Even at the airport, I had to communicate with our church leaders through email about an urgent issue until Diane Newman-Goins cut me off from church work. Then, Juhee posted our picture at the airport on social media and many people left uplifting comments like “Have fun. Safe travel. Enjoy a well-deserved vacation! Have a relaxing, invigorating, and enjoyable well-earned vacation. Have a wonderful time! You both deserve it.” So I could fully enjoy my well-deserved vacation, without feeling any guilty. I know well-deserved, well-earned vacations are expressions of appreciation for my hard work. We positively use them. However, in this understanding of vacation, rest is viewed as a reward to be earned and we are all familiar with this kind of understanding of rest.

Rest Is Resistance

If so, we need to listen to the Sabbath command in which God tells us a different understanding of rest. For God, rest is not a reward to be earned. Rather, it's the starting point to be new people, free people of God. Slavery defines the value of people in terms of what they produce, but the Sabbath command declares that we and all other people are not to be defined by our output or our performance. Pastor Kara Root wrote, "One day in seven everyone rests, and all distinctions that you erect to define your value and measure your worth disappear—old, young, rich, poor, slave, free, citizen, foreigner—you are all simply and completely human beings, alongside one another, all beloved children of God."¹ To be God's people, God commands us to stop and rest. Anyone can rest if they will. Rest is not a luxury, or a privilege we can enjoy only after we work hard and achieve certain things. We don't have to earn rest. It's God's gift and more importantly, it's a sign that we are God's people. Isn't it an exciting and uplifting message?

Rest is resistance against any toxic systems that refuse to see inherent sacredness in all human beings and measure one's value only in terms of usefulness or productivity. To counter those deadly systems, God makes people stop working and rest. If we are Christians, we should rest and rest well, not because we need to recharge ourselves for more work but because rest itself is our confession of faith that we are not God but human beings whose lives are dependent on God's love and care. Just as a Psalmist sings, "The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing," we can find rest when we trust God and accept that we are like sheep living under the protection and guidance of God. I wish you rest today. Exhaustion is not a normal way of living. You are enough. You can rest. Find rest in Jesus Christ, our Savior, and the Good Shepherd.

Rest from... Rest to

Jesus invites people to come to him. He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are 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." The rest Jesus promised is not exactly like the rest we are familiar with or expecting. For us, rest often means to be free from all obligations and burdens and relax by do nothing. However, Jesus asks us to take his yoke and learn from him. How can taking on another yoke help us to find rest for our soul?

In the farming practices of ancient Palestine, two oxen were yoked together. To determine the leading ox, people made two oxen wrestle and the ox that lost the fight would take the assisting yoke, following the leading ox. "Take my yoke upon you" means to walk with Jesus and accept him as our Lord. As St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you," we can find rest in Christ when we walk with him.

Tricia Hersey wrote a book, "Rest Is Resistance." In that book, she shares a story about her grandma, Ora. Just like many African Americans during the Great Migration, her life was not easy. But she magically raised eight children and took care of her grandchildren. One thing Ora insisted on was "resting her eyes" every day for thirty minutes. Tricia always thought her grandma was sleeping while sitting up. Whenever she asked if she was sleeping, Ora's response was always the same. "Every shut eye ain't asleep. I am resting my eyes and listening for what God wants to tell me." She was resting in God. Tricia wrote, "While all the world around her was attempting to crush her Spirit, she rested and resisted the beast of grind culture." We can do the same. Take the yoke of Christ, yield to him, walk with him and rest in him. Let us listen a hymn to come and find the quiet center and while you listen, try to be still and rest in God. [ppt]

I wish you rest. Rest well in Christ. Amen.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-sabbath/commentary-on-deuteronomy-512-15-matthew-1128-30>