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1-Narrative – Summer – Sabbath – Week 1
Deuteronomy 5.12-15

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“The Horizontal Dimension of Sabbath”

How many of you believe in keeping the 10 commandments?
Anyone believe they're not important?
OK, then, so are agreed: we should keep the commandments.

So how did we all do this week?
Anyone kill anyone? Steal? Lie? Commit adultery? Covet? Dishonor your parents?
Make a graven image? Take God's name in vain? Worship another god?
At least on a literal level, it's not too hard for most of us to keep these commandments.
But there is a commandment that I think most of us in today's society ignore: the one about the Sabbath.

Now I don't want to get into whether the Sabbath means Saturday or whether it means Sunday
or whether it simply means 1 non-specific day out of 7.
But I do want us to look at where this commandment fits into the commandments as a whole.

When Jesus was asked “What is the greatest commandment?” what did he say?
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and body.
This is the first and greatest commandment
and a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself”.
Obviously, Jesus was summing up the 10 commandments,
pointing out that the first ones are about loving God
(I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me,
you shall not make any graven images, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain)
and the last ones are about loving neighbor
(honor your parents, don't kill or steal or lie or commit adultery or covet)
and it's in between these 2 sets of commandments that we find this one: Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.

It's a different kind of commandment – different in a number of ways.
First, it (and the commandment following it – honor your parents) doesn't start off with “thou shall not...”.
Second, possibly because it doesn't start off with a strict “thou shalt not...”,
we tend to treat it as a suggestion rather than a commandment.
And third, it's not clear whether it belongs with the commandments about loving God,
with the commandments about loving neighbor,
or with neither.

In its shortened form (Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy) it seems to stand alone.

And in its longer form? Well, then it depends on which longer form you're talking about.

The commandments, you see, are recorded in two different places in the Bible –
in Exodus 20.8-11, and in Deuteronomy 5.12-15.

In both places God says that 6 days are for work, but on the 7th everyone is to rest –
parents, children, slaves, animals, guests – everyone.

But the reasons given in the 2 accounts are different.

In Exodus, the reason has to do with God – because God rested on the 7th day.

In Deuteronomy, the reason has to do with people – because you were slaves but are slaves no longer.

And so this commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” is a sort of bridge commandment, one that can belong to the commandments about loving God or one that can belong to the commandments about loving neighbor or one that can stand by itself, alone and apart.

This commandment to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy is a commandment that helps re-order our lives – in relation to God, to neighbor, and to self.

Let’s begin with perhaps the least obvious reason for Sabbath – the one pointed to in Deuteronomy, the one that has to do with loving neighbor. And to do that, let me tell you a story.

Her name was Bina, and she had been born a Hebrew slave in Egypt. Her life there had not been easy. Ripped from her mother’s arms at the age of 6, she had been taken to a slave market where she had been stripped naked to be examined by would be purchasers. Men and women had taken turns opening her mouth and examining her teeth, feeling her arms and legs and back to insure they were straight and strong, and even checking out what would one day become her womanhood. She had eventually been purchased by a wealthy Egyptian couple and taken to serve among 20 other Hebrew slaves on the couple’s vineyard estate. From that time on her world was controlled by the head female slave, and she worked non-stop from dawn’s earliest light until after the master and mistress had retired for the night. The days were long, filled with non-stop work, every act proscribed, and every day the same as the one before. It might have been bearable had not the master of the house taken a fancy for her, requiring her to accede to his insatiable desires, and had not his wife, in return, made it her mission to see that Bina was worked harder and punished more severely than any of the other slaves.

Bina’s life had not been her own. She had been looked down upon by her owners because she was from a different race, a different class, a different religion. She had been treated as “the other”, “the lower”, “the despised”. She had had to work twice as hard because she was Hebrew and again twice as hard because she was a woman. No matter how smart she was, or how talented she was, or how strong she was, or how beautiful she was, or how kind she was, or how good she was, she would always be a slave, she would always be at her master’s beck and call, she would always be in a lower position. She would never have a day of rest, or a moment of grace, or an experience of freedom. And it would be the same for her children and their children and theirs.

Until the day God said,
“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the 7th day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God;
You shall not do any work—
you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock,
or the foreigner in your towns,
so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.
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.

So the purpose of this commandment here in Deuteronomy
is about more than setting aside 1 day a week for worship.
It's about more than setting apart 1 day out of every 7 to rest.
It's about remembering at least on a weekly basis
that we are in no way better or worse than anyone else in God's eyes,
that our value is not based on our race or class or religion,
and that none of us is ever to completely control or be completely controlled by anyone else.

God said remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Set it apart and sanctify it.
And do that by living in a way that removes barriers, breaks down walls, and overcomes divisions.
Don't let race or ethnicity or culture or country of origin or class or religion or gender or age
or anything else divide.
Don't treat anyone else as deserving less because of who they are or what they do or what they own.
Don't use wealth or power or privilege in the service of self, but in the service of others.

This is the point of Sabbath observance in Deuteronomy:
to reorder our lives in relation to our neighbors,
to level the playing field,
to set us not above or below but beside our neighbor.

Almost 60 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that in this country
Sunday morning was the most segregated time of the week.
Sadly, it still is.

To keep God's commandments, to find the source of life and love and joy, and to live in a way that shines light
means that we are called to go and build relationships of deep love and mutual respect
with people who are different from us.

The church God is building is a church for all people –
a church where differences like race, culture, class, age, and gender
are not feared but welcomed,
not just accepted but sought,
not simply tolerated but celebrated,

The church God is building is a church
where power and privilege are not used in service to self but in service to others.

The church God is building is a church
where the man volunteering in a soup kitchen doesn't just serve food to hungry strangers
but can meet a homeless man who ends up becoming the volunteer's good friend and spiritual guide.

God did not give us the commandments to place on us a burden,
but to open to us the way to light and life and love.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath is not about whether it's Saturday or Sunday
or a particular day of the week at all.

It's not just about resting or going to church.

It's not just about reordering our own lives to find a balance between work and rest
or reordering our relationship with God to understand that God is God & we are not.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath is also about living in community
in our neighborhoods and schools and workplaces and church.

It's about re-ordering our lives in relation to our neighbors.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath is a reminder of our work as church
to remove barriers, break down walls, and overcome divisions.

My prayer this day is that this week each one of us will experience this kind of Sabbath moment –
that each of us will find someone who is different from us
and have an encounter that will leave both people changed.

I look forward to hearing how God changes you! **Amen**