

The Reclaiming Sunday Sermon Series Part 2: Daily Bread

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Exodus 16:4, 13-29

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

I've mentioned this before, but one of the facts about my life that makes me feel a little old is the fact that when I was a child and my mother took my brother and me to buy school supplies, we went to the drug store. This was before advent of the big box office supply stores, where one can choose between literally dozens and dozens of kinds of three-ring binders, folders, and pens. When I was a kid, whatever they had at Rite Aid was what you got. This was also before teachers gave long lists of specific school supplies to parents to buy for their kids, a list that requires a Staples or an Office Depot to complete.

I mention this not because I have been waxing nostalgic about my childhood, but because in reading about the Sabbath I have learned that one of the reasons that things that have nothing to do with medicine can be found in drug stores is because back in the days of blue laws, drug stores were often granted an exemption from the requirement to remain closed on Sunday. Shrewd drug store owners realized that they represented the only option for shopping for

anything in many towns, so they made their stores as appealing as possible to shoppers in order to take full advantage of this corner on the market.

It reminds me of the story Garrison Keillor tells in his novel *Lake Wobegon Days*, where the local Catholic priest, Father Wilmer, instructed his parish to turn their television sets towards the wall on Sunday so they would not be tempted to watch T.V. on the Sabbath, and the people obliged, although many turned their television towards a wall with a mirror on it. Father did not say to turn the television *off*. Where there is a will, there is very often a way, and Sabbath-keeping is very much about *will*.

The term “blue law” can be traced back to 1781, where Anglican clergyman Samuel Peters used it in a history he wrote of Connecticut in reference to certain laws enacted by the Puritan colonies in the century prior. The word “blue” was commonly used in the eighteenth century as a pejorative term for rigid moral codes, and the term “blue laws” exists today in reference to any law that seeks to enact a (usually) religious standard on the citizenry. Often shopping, purchasing or consuming alcohol, gambling, or even playing baseball or fixing a wagon wheel was illegal under blue laws. Yet while the term remains, most blue laws have been repealed, declared unconstitutional, or simply are not enforced.¹

Last Sunday, I spoke of Sabbath as something God commands us to *remember* (as God does in the book of Exodus) and something God commands us to *observe* as God does in Deuteronomy. I made the point that Sabbath is a *commandment*, one of God’s top ten, right up there with adultery, murder, and worshipping the wrong god. Therefore we are commanded to obey the Sabbath in obedience to and imitation of the God who demonstrated Sabbath rest by not creating on the seventh day.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_laws

I'd like to revisit that text prior to visiting our text for this morning. **Here is last**

Sunday's reading from Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh 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 alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

It is this point that I fear we too often miss when we consider what it means to keep the Sabbath, we think it is all about us. Now, next Sunday, as I conclude this sermon series, I am going to argue that in its own way, the Sabbath is about us, as Jesus finds himself in an argument with the religious authorities about just what one *can* do on the Sabbath. However, if we consider that you and I are commanded to keep the Sabbath first and foremost because the God of life says so, we have to consider that it isn't all about us. It isn't even all about God. The commandment to keep the Sabbath comes with a catch: you can't make other people work either: "not your son or your daughter, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

In that one short sentence, we can see just how universal this commandment is. It does not care about your gender, your socioeconomic status, your species, or even if you are an outsider to the faith. You are to get a divinely sanctioned day off, because God says so.

As chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus begins, the Israelites, freed from slavery in Egypt, begin to complain about their current circumstances. They are hungry, and it only takes them a few short verses before they are complaining about hunger and (amazingly) wishing they were back in Egyptian slavery because the food was good ("Other than the slavery part, Egypt was great!"). So God rains down bread on the people, but there is a catch: each day, they get enough for one day and only enough for one day.

The only exception to this is the sixth day of the week, the people were to gather two days' worth of bread, because there would not be bread on the seventh day, because it is the Sabbath. What is amazing about this is that the whole Mount Sinai/Ten Commandments thing has not yet happened, and God is already teaching the people to live within that six-day-you-shall-work mindset.

But in this text, the Israelites have what may be the first blue law: they cannot gather bread on the Sabbath because the heavenly bread machine is closed on that day. In a way, Sabbath-keeping was easy for them because there really was little else to do. Yet, as the people settled and developed a society and culture, their lives more closely resembled yours and mine. There was always something else that needed doing. There was always something else that came up, or there were weeks when you just got behind and needed a day to catch up.

However, the God of Israel, who was the *sole means* of sustenance for this nascent nation decided that it was worth it for the people to have a day with no food but the extra bread from the day before so that they could understand what being a people shaped by the Sabbath was like, so that they might learn obedience to God, to their own sense of self-care, and for the sake of the other worker as well. Indeed the old saying is true, that Israel kept the Sabbath, but the Sabbath also kept Israel.

We have become so programmed to work, to labor, to toil, and to expect others to do the same, especially when we believe we need something. It is automatic. We pick up the smartphone, open the laptop, stop by the market, order the pizza, without even realizing we are doing it, and when we do not do it, it evokes a strange, foreign feeling in us. One of my daily routines is to stop by the BP station here in Crozet to buy a soda to drink while performing my morning work. One morning, I was up so early that when I arrived at the store, it was not yet

open. I was dumbfounded; I literally stood there in front of the locked door with no idea what to do. *I am an American with money who wants something. There is supposed to be someone here to take it.*

In his book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, Wayne Muller writes, “Sabbath is a time to stop, to refrain from being seduced by our desires. To stop working, stop making money, stop spending money. See what you have. Look around. Listen to your life.”² I believe that perhaps the greatest gift Sabbath gives is an awareness of the present, and awareness of the passage of time. Everyone knows that the busier we are, the more quickly time seems to pass, and no one ever remarks that their children seem to grow up so slowly. Given those two facts alone, does it not make a case for slowing down, listening to our lives, becoming more aware of the passage of time, feeling as good about what we are *not* doing as we do about what we *are*?

But here is the thing, it is now on us, more so than ever before. I mentioned earlier the Garrison Keillor story about the priest who told his parishioners to turn their television sets to the wall on Sunday, and the people just turned the televisions to face a wall with a mirror. Today, all of our cultural walls are mirrored, the blue laws are gone, and it is up to you and I to develop on our own the discipline necessary to let some things go be truly present with God and the ones we love.

Now, if you are considering what I’m saying on the one hand, and thinking about your agenda for this afternoon on the other, and the sum of this equation is that I am some pie-eyed idealist religious wacko crazy-person, you are right. I am. I am realistic enough to know the

² Wayne Muller *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, Bantam Books, New York, 1999, p. 137.

strength of the cultural tide against which we will have to push to make a reality life that is equally about *doing* and *being*.

Yet I am enough of a dreamer to believe that God wills for my life and your life a life that is far greater than the accumulation of that which we do not yet have. Living the life I am describing here requires great faith that the God who provides for us on the other six days will not only provide for us, but *bless* us on the seventh, just as God blessed the people hungry and wandering in the wilderness, searching, anticipating, expecting, that the God who delivered them from bondage, would make sure that they and their children received their daily bread.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.