

Center of Gravity

Rev. Katie Murchison Ross

Psalm 73:1-3, 23-26; Exodus 20:1-17

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The Israelites have just been freed from slavery in Egypt, liberated for a new reality. In that new reality, God offers to the people a new law, beginning with these ten commandments. They outline the new way: a free, just life outside Egypt. At the center of those ten stands Sabbath, perhaps the most unique or unexpected.

The first few commandments have to do with our relationship to God and the last few have to do with our relationship to our neighbors. Right in the center is the commandment to keep the Sabbath. The Sabbath is about God—honoring God and trusting God, setting aside a time to worship, trusting that we'll make the rent even if we lay down our burdens and labors once a week. But the Sabbath also has to do with our neighbors—for we are called to rest not only for ourselves but for our families, our subordinates, anyone in our employ.

Because the Sabbath lies in the middle of the two tablets, it is a bridge, reminding us that love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. One day in seven, we pause to really remember that we are beloved children of God, held tightly by God's right hand. This pause helps free us to extend that same love and grace to one another. When we forget to keep Sabbath, forget to rest, forget who we are, we get tied up in the rat race until we slander, hate, and envy our brothers and sisters. The sabbath is in some ways the center of gravity of the law. If we ignore it, we risk throwing everything else off balance.

We've talked already in this series about how Sabbath is related to trust in God. And in the first commandment, God demands our trust. *I am the Lord your God. I am, and no one else. You shall have no other gods. Not Pharaoh, who would work you to death. Not Money or Success, which would consume you and steal your joy. The world is not on your shoulders, either. I am your God.*

The Sabbath reinforces this first commandment. Practicing Sabbath calls us away from these other gods that lure us during the week, and reminds us who our true God is. We worship a God who made the whole world and then... took a nap. God didn't spend hours anxiously tweaking every little detail, but finished the creation and let it be. God is not a workaholic and certainly doesn't want us to be. God invites us to trust that God will sustain us and our families, as we rest.

What we haven't talked as much about is how Sabbath is related to loving our neighbors. In light of two mass shootings in the past 24 hours—and Lord, we cry for your mercy on the people of El Paso and Dayton—this connection to loving our neighbors feels especially critical. Our nation desperately needs the grace and love God offers to us in the gift of sacred Sabbath time. Our nation desperately needs God to teach us another way to be in community with one another. Our nation desperately needs to learn how not to kill, how not to envy, how not to hate.

We tend to think the best thing we can do to serve others is to work, to act, to keep moving. Sabbath invites us to a time for reflection, to ask whether our work is feeding people or just feeding a system of power. Sabbath can help break our compulsion to work and our addiction to acquiring new things, slow down to notice our neighbors anew. **Sabbath invites us to**

experience God's love and wholeness more deeply, that we might receive new energy and new imagination needed to become part of the healing of the world.

The last of the ten commandments is *you shall not covet*. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor*. This commandment is often misunderstood or ignored. But it's intricately tied in with Sabbath, because it's all about the pursuit of wealth and power.¹ It's all about the pursuits that drive our compulsion to keep working. The word for covet is not so much a feeling of jealousy as a desire that's tied to action. To covet means not only to wish I had an awesome job or hair or musical talent like my friend, but to act in order to acquire it, often with no regard to the harm caused my neighbor in the process.

Think of the story of Bathsheba, where King David saw another man's wife, and desired her, and took her. Acting on covetous compulsion, he showed no regard for the woman or her husband.

Or there's a lesser known story in 1 Kings, about a man named Naboth, a simple peasant farmer with a vineyard. Naboth lived on the same land, cultivated the same vineyard that had been in his family for generations. It had great meaning to him. Now King Ahab, who already had everything, decided his kingly riches weren't enough, that he needed to consolidate the central vineyards near his palace. King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard and asked to buy it. When Naboth declined, King Ahab created false accusations and had him stoned so that he might seize the vineyard. Acting on a covetous need for power and domination, he showed no regard for the poor man.

In both these situations, coveting escalated to murderous grasping for power.

The problem is, coveting, which was seen as so troublesome and harmful in God's law, is kind of like an American *virtue*. Corporations, families, individuals—we are *encouraged* to be ambitious, seeking to move up. And sometimes we're encouraged to turn a blind eye to the people who are casualties of our covetous ambition.

It comes in small, insidious, subtle forms: Most of us have a desire for cheap goods. We want the same awesome hats and gadgets and electronics and cars we see our neighbors have. We want the newest stuff. And in the pursuit of those *things*, we turn a blind eye to the children laboring in factories who are sacrificed for the sake of our acquisitions.

Most of us have a desire to be seen, to be valued, to be respected. Sometimes that causes us to fill our social media outlet with descriptions of our success and photos of our joy. We forget that we are fueling the same spirit of comparison and inferiority and envy that we all need to escape.

And coveting escalates quickly to discrimination and hate and even murder. I see it, for example, in the way our country responds to immigrants. Fear that "they" are taking "our" jobs and benefits and resources has led to a kind of hysteria, an envy and acquisitiveness. We collectively snatch our resources and say no to sharing them with immigrants. It's progressed to the point that our nation is quite literally taking the children of refugees.

And isn't the sin of covetous greed connected with all these shootings? There are preliminary reports—in both the El Paso shooting and the Gilroy, California shooting last Sunday—that the

¹ This connection is explored in Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 69-87.

shooters may have been motivated by white nationalism, by anti-immigrant ideology. Grasping to hold onto their own goods and power and security, envious of the power of others, they escalated to violence. Even if this was not the motivation for these shootings, is it not a spirit of acquisition, a grasping for power, that fuels our love of guns? I want to know when we will finally throw up our hands as a nation and say *Enough! We are willing to give up our desire for commodities and power and guns! We are willing to give it up because our covetous desire is killing us!*

Lord, have mercy, and teach us a better way.

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What does coveting have to do with Sabbath? How can the Sabbath make a difference about mass shootings and sweat shops and social media? What does a tiny little individual spiritual practice have to say about all of this?

I believe it's a feedback loop. Coveting is what drives us to keep working and consuming, until we never rest. And Sabbath rest is what gives us the chance to step back and say, *Wait. This chasing after false gods, this chasing after my neighbor's wealth and status and resume—this is vanity.* Sabbath rest is what restores the hope we want to lose every time we read the newspaper. Sabbath is both a gift of grace, and a mode of resistance. If we want to demand a better way, we have to begin to live into it ourselves.

How do we enter into that grace and resistance?

Sometime this week, take a few minutes to reflect on Sabbath in your life. Identify the day of the week that feels most like your Sabbath, your day of rest or potential day of rest—and make a list of all the things you do on a typical Sabbath. Include church and charity stuff, too! Include chores and technology and entertainment and social media and naps and recreation. Then look over your list and ask: which of these activities exacerbates worry, anxiety, desire for wealth and status? It might be taking out your work laptop. It might be something that seems relaxing, like going to the pool and comparing yourself to everyone else there. Whatever it is, perhaps you can work towards eliminating or lessening those activities that promote coveting, that hinder your practice of rest.

And meanwhile, I'd like to offer three traditional Sabbath practices that help us embrace sabbath not only as a gift of rest but as a mode of resistance to our insidious culture.

One- rest from technology, especially social media. Maybe there is some social media group or text chain or app you have that is incredibly liberating and restorative. But I think most of us could benefit from unplugging a little. Last week at Tri Cities Work Camp, I saw twelve Grace Presbyterian youth put away their phones—well, *mostly* put away their phones—for the week. I am sure they were all happy to have them again on Saturday. But I don't think it's a coincidence that this low-tech, social media free camp is a place where *everyone* feels accepted and freed to be the beautiful selves God created them to be. Each work crew is present to one another, and takes intentional time throughout the week to observe the gifts of the others. By being away from social media and present with kind and affirming humans, the youth and I got a kind of rest from the usual pressures to be more beautiful, cleverer, funnier. Would a weekly break from Facebook or Instagram help you pause from the constant comparison to the lives of others, the kind of comparison that drives coveting?

Second, rest from commerce. God's gift of the Sabbath invites us out of a focus on the idol of wealth, away from the greed to acquire more things. If we never break from these economic patterns, we won't recognize the prominence they have in our lives. So what if we took a break from buying and selling on the Sabbath? It's tricky, because it can seem restful to eat out. And sometimes knocking out grocery shopping on Sunday afternoon makes the rest of the week feel more manageable. But consider an experiment in halting the buying and selling once a week, because it might reveal something about your own relationship to acquisition, and it might be more freeing than you expect.

Third, practice gratitude. What's the antidote to coveting our neighbors' things? Being grateful for the gifts we have. On the Sabbath, take some time for gratitude—sharing aloud with your loved ones, or writing down blessings from the week, or taking photos of beauty. Sharing thankfulness with others, sharing ways we see God's presence or feel joy, can feel cheesy sometimes. But with practice, it is a powerful way of uplifting one another and reminding one another of God's presence with us. And oh, how we need that presence.

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I confess I still have plenty of my own theological and practical questions about Sabbath. I've got a lot of growing to do. And there are so many reasons to question Sabbath. Isn't it irresponsible to rest when there is work to do? What about those who are truly fearful of losing jobs by not checking email constantly? What about those who *have* to work seven days a week to make ends meet, to pay off crippling debt? And anyway, what's the point? Aren't there more pressing things to worry about? An individual taking a break each week isn't going to change xenophobia and violence!

Good, real questions. Yes, change has to happen on a systemic level to address the American virtue of coveting. Yes, God calls the *whole* people to just living, to Sabbath rhythms, to freedom from greed. And that is something beyond our personal control. One family deciding not to use social media or make economic transactions on Sundays doesn't change the system.

These things are true. And these things are also easy excuses. The powers of greed in our world try to maintain their power by limiting our imaginations. We can't break out of that unless we give space to God to transform our hearts, so that the Spirit can use us to change communities and systems. The Sabbath is just such a space for us.

And for any who still have reservations or barriers to sabbath-keeping, there is grace. We won't be social media free and work-free every Sunday. We won't immediately withdraw from the pervasive system of greed that surrounds us. That's okay; God gives us grace. But remember, one of the ways God extends that grace to us is through the gift us a day, one in seven, to rest from the exhausting work of living in this world, this oh-so-broken but oh-so-beloved world.