June 3, 2018 Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

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“The Forgotten Commandment”

It’s number four on the top ten list, nestled in the Book of Deuteronomy between “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” and “honor your father and your mother.” It’s included among the religious laws that command we must not murder and we must not worship any idol in place of God. Most people, whether they identify themselves as religious or not, know about The Ten Commandments. They were delivered by Moses and etched on stone, and are the foundation upon which the covenant life between God and God’s people is built. We who are religious recognize how important the Ten Commandments are, so why are we so casual in our approach to number four, “Observe the sabbath and keep it holy”?

Many remember Blue Laws, called “blue” because of the color of paper they were originally printed on and they were meant to restrict business or the sale of goods on Sundays. There are states and local communities that still observe some form of Blue Law, but it’s increasingly rare. I’ve shared the story before and it came to mind again, what my dad told me after he retired following 44 years of ministry. One Sunday morning after retiring, my dad and mom decided not to go to church. Later that day, when I spoke to dad on the phone, he said to me, “Son, I finally know where the people have been all these years on Sunday mornings. Walmart!” Well, if not Walmart then many other places of commerce and business because Sundays in our culture look pretty much like Saturdays, which look like every other day when we buy and sell and go out and enjoy entertainment with little thought to what the fourth commandment is asking of us. I’m calling it “The Forgotten Commandment” this morning because I think it is the one of the 10 that gets the least attention, “Observe the sabbath and keep it holy.” What can we say then? Are we in trouble with God? When we go out to eat after worship today or work in our yards later this afternoon or run a load of laundry or fire up our computers to deal with work related emails on this first day of the week, are we breaking a religious law and setting ourselves up for punishment later on?

Let’s remember that Jesus went against sabbath law numerous times. He stirred up controversy when he performed healings on the sabbath. Jesus fed those who were hungry on the sabbath. He was criticized for not observing religious law and, in a strict sense, the criticism was justified. Why did he do it? For Jesus, love is the greatest commandment. Every other religious command is interpreted through the filter of love. For him, not only the sabbath day but everyday belongs to God. When we connect the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of Moses God’s commands are not just about setting restrictions. They are about freeing us to be centered in God’s love. As we consider the fourth commandment, Jesus is our guide. Observe the sabbath and keep it holy. Jesus doesn’t want is to be rigid or restrictive about it. So, instead of thinking about sabbath only in terms of our weekly calendar, instead of limiting sabbath to a 24 hour period, let’s think of sabbath as our intentional focus on God’s presence and love. To observe the sabbath and keep it holy is to take on the spiritual practice of being fully aware of God. This can certainly happen on the first day of the week, the day we gather for worship but it’s not limited to this day. Our experience of sabbath can happen anywhere and anytime. The commandment instructs us to lay aside our work so that we can focus on God. A sabbath experience, rightly begins with our ceasing from all that we do. We observe the sabbath and keep it holy when we let go of our agenda, when we give up our anxious need to produce. We observe sabbath everytime we relinquish our hold on trying to control life. In the story of creation we’re told God rested when the work of creating was finished. God ceased the work to enjoy all that had been accomplished. This is the model for our experience of sabbath. When we cease all of our doing, when we stop all of our frantic accomplishments, when we pause and catch our breath and notice the blessing of what God has created we are in sabbath mode and there is a holiness in this that enriches our lives.

I mention catching our breath and there is a meaningful connection between keeping the sabbath and our breathing. This past week I read a piece that correlated the pace of our breathing with our obsessive drive to work and work and work even more. When we are rushing about our breathing grows fast and shallow. This makes our minds spin faster and so our thinking can become more shallow, too. I would add that our rushing around makes our spiritual awareness grow thin, as well. When we slow down, when we pace ourselves, our breathing relaxes. This suggests that our thinking grows more measured and I would add our spirits are then about to make more space for God to enter in. You get the idea. When we cease from all of our doing not only do we experience a physical calm we notice God more and, therefore, see what God is doing. Observe the sabbath and keep it holy. Take time, slow down your breathing and be more aware of the presence of the Lord.

I want to leave you with more than words this morning. I share with you a spiritual exercise that may help you experience more sabbath time. Let’s come back to our breath. We breathe without thinking about it and this is the place to start. First, let’s think about it, our breath. In and out. In and out. Slow it down. In and out. Now, as we breathe in silently say the words, “I breathe,” and as you let the air out say, “with God.” The phrase goes with the rhythm of your slow breathing. In (I breathe) and out (with God). I breathe with God. Practice this at your work. Practice it first thing in the morning. Practice it when you are taking a walk or when you are doing the things you enjoy. We breathe in and out with God. And one more thing. When you’ve taken the time to breathe deeply and be in God’s presence, as you are in the rhythm of being in sync with God, notice the world around you. Take notice of what you see, hear, feel and touch. You will be amazed at a sudden awareness of the holiness of it all. This is sabbath, and imagine the benefit to life if we could experience sabbath time more than just a few moments but even for a day, and maybe beyond a day to as often as we think about it. I breathe with God.

The Ten Commandments, and especially number four, aren’t meant to scare us into a life with God. This isn’t a “do this or you’re going to get it” kind of faith. We observe the sabbath and keep it holy in order to live faithfully and fully with God, experiencing all that God has so lovingly created. We breathe with God. We love with God. We live with God.