

12th Sunday after the Pentecost
September 1, 2019
Northfield, MA

Scripture: Leviticus 25:1-6

Driving here on Wednesday, I saw school buses. The speed limit by the school dropped to 20 MPH. This weekend marks the unofficial end of summer. Reflecting upon summer, or maybe the end of summer, I think of Ira Gershwin's lyrics, "Summertime and the livin' is easy."

People took vacations, whether a respite from work, or to visit grandchildren who were out of school. Others got away for a short visit to the lake or to the ocean or to the mountains. Communities held street festivals where we could justify stuffing our faces with fried dough because "I'll walk it off." Perhaps some people sat in the stands to watch baseball, a game without a clock. Or maybe people gathered in a backyard drinking beer while hot dogs and hamburgers sizzled on a grill.

Cooking is simpler. Freshly sliced tomatoes alternating with slices of fresh mozzarella cheese. Corn on the cob. A bowl of berries with whipped cream. Eating a peach for dessert as its juice runs down your arm.

Life's rhythm in the summer is different. Its pace seems slower. We amble rather than run. We stop to sniff the flowers because they're in full bloom. We watch clouds scuttling across the sky.

Rest and relaxation are summer's prescription for our overworked and oft times frenetic lives. We need time off because we're not meant to nor capable of working all the time. Although summer is probably our most obvious time off, it's not our only one. Weekends happen throughout the year. How they evolved vary depending upon the source one reads.

Weekends came out of the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday. A 19th century English labor practice paid workers at the end of the week to give them Saturday evening and Sunday to spend with friends and family. However, so many workers took off on Mondays to drink and gamble at public houses that the day became known as Holy Monday with soaring absenteeism. Factory owners compromised and offered half-day Saturdays in exchange for work attendance on Monday.

Saturday and Sunday became an accepted norm when a New England textile mill in 1908 gave Saturdays to its Jewish workers. As the mill was closed on Sunday already, its Christian workers, who were the majority, sought and received Saturday off as well. The practice spread so that in 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act designating a 40-hour work week with Saturdays and Sundays as weekends.¹

Though rooted in Sabbath, these rests, whether the weekend or summer breaks, are not necessarily Sabbath. We typically treat them as “our time” as opposed to “our employer’s time.” We fill “our time” with our activities: yardwork, shopping, home repairs, meal prep, kid’s sports events, and the myriad other things we have to do because we have so much to finish just to get to the next week.

In Judaism, Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday night and ends at sundown on Saturday night. Sabbath, also known as Shabbat or Shabbos, is a cessation from work, but not just the work of 40 hours of employment. Depending upon how strictly one observes, a few examples of Shabbat (which its root means “cease” or “desist”) practices would be to refrain from cooking, to

¹ <https://bigthink.com/scotty-hendricks/who-invented-the-weekend-2> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/where-the-five-day-workweek-came-from/378870/>

not ride in a vehicle, do not fix things or finish projects, and to not transact business (which means not spend money). Shabbat in Ancient Israel was universal. As noted (Exodus 20:9-11),

“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.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel contrasted space, which is the way we live our lives, to time, which is the sacredness of living. He wrote, “The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.”² Heschel invited us to see Sabbath as a cathedral in time, thus enabling us to glimpse eternity. He wrote, “What would be a world without Sabbath? It would be a world that knew only itself or God distorted as a thing or the abyss separating Him from the world; a world without the vision of a window in eternity that opens into time.”³

Sabbath is not just time off, but time off with the intention of strengthening our relationship with God as we delight in God’s presence. Like God, who on the seventh day rested after six days creating the world, observing Sabbath allows us to reflect upon what we’ve done the previous six days and perhaps even to believe that it was very good.

Sabbath, though, extended beyond humankind and animals. It also included the land. Every seventh year was a sabbath year for the land. It allowed the land to rest. Furthermore, Leviticus reminds us that the land is God’s, “When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. The land

² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. **The Sabbath**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York 1951, renewed 1979. Page 6

³ Ibid. Page 16
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shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.” (Lev. 25:22-24)

That the Torah commands a sabbath for the land, agriculturally it is a good practice, too. By letting the land lie fallow, the land replenishes the soil’s nutrients that certain plants have leached out. It increases levels of carbon, nitrogen, and organic matter as well as microorganisms. Following a fallow year, crop production from that field is higher.

We, however, don’t just stop our activities and call it Sabbath. Sabbath practices are intentional. We don’t say, “I don’t feel like cooking today.” Rather, we cease cooking today in order to dedicate our cooking time to God. When we realize that Sabbath requires us to cease our daily tasks, we have to prepare in the days leading up to the Sabbath, such as making extra food to last through the end of the next day or making sure that the home repair project is done in order to have true rest, giving us time for God rather than the daily work that occupies our lives on all the other days.

Sabbath is not just rest. It is sacred rest. Sabbath is not a vacation or a weekend away. Sabbath is not to complete the business we couldn’t complete during the week. Sabbath is not merely to stop and relax. Sabbath is to cease the busyness of our lives and turn our lives over to God and in so doing see beyond tomorrow, beyond the next year, in order to see the splendor of eternity.