



Rest Like your Life Depends on It

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The Fourth Sunday in the Season of Creation: Harvest~ October 29, 2017

Leviticus 23:1,22; 25:1-7

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

The Lord [also] spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

No. X of "The Sabbath Poems" by Wendell Berry

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

Mark 4:1-9

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Leviticus is not usually the Biblical book that most of us go to for inspirational words. It's largely a collection of commandments, and a whole lot of commandments, at that. You may have thought that there were only 10 commandments, but there are actually 613 distinct commandments in the Hebrew Bible.

Now, when we think of commandments, we mainly think of prohibitions, don't we? We mainly think of things we aren't supposed to do: thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not lie, etc. But many of the Bible's commandments are, in fact, prescriptions rather than prohibitions. Things God really wanted the people of Israel to do. Of course, it's a pretty exhaustive list, and most contemporary Jews and Christians have given up on trying to abide by all of them. There are just soooooo many, and they often feel random – even arbitrary – to modern ears. For those among us who hunger and thirst for justice, however, there are indeed some inspiring words embedded in Leviticus' complex legislative scheme. I remember first hearing this verse:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

I was in Divinity School, and I was just beginning to learn about the Bible's deep preoccupation with justice. "Leave remnants in your fields for the poor." "Don't harvest everything." "Leave some behind." Hearing this passage immediately brought an image to my mind—a painting I first saw in an undergraduate art history class: Millet's 1857 painting, entitled *The Gleaners*. In the foreground, 3 hunched-over women are harvesting in what looks like a mostly denuded field. In the distant background—almost imperceptible—are carts laden with the bounty already harvested. Their work looks as back-breaking as it likely was. They are "bent double, eyes raking the ground" to find the sparse leftovers from the harvest. Their faces are mostly hidden from the viewer, their individuality obscured. Their task, and their strong bodies performing the task, are what is emphasized.

Now, I don't remember the particularities of these women's task being explained in my art history class. I probably assumed that they were part of the farm family, gathering what they had missed on their first pass. My professor never mentioned that the Bible commanded that remnants be left in fields for those in need. That these women would likely have been hungry. Engaging in a kind of pre-modern dumpster diving...which meant that we all missed something important when looking at this painting... The produce of the earth is for everyone. Some should always be left behind for those in need. God needed to officially command sharing, of course, because God's people weren't always too keen on the idea, then...just as now.

Greed is not new. Hoarding is not new. And hunger is not new. But the people of Israel were a people set apart by God—to be a light to the nations—a people who were meant to reveal and embody God's dream of a peaceable, generous Kingdom. And sharing was just the beginning.

Looking back at Leviticus, then, we see that there are other components to God's plan to create a new kind of human community, a new kind of Earth community. It wasn't just sharing that mattered, but sharing AND rest. Both are vital Biblical antidotes to greed. Now, we all know about the sabbath commandment. "On the 7th day, God rested." And God told us to do the same thing. But, of course, we usually don't. And because we don't rest, we tend not to want to let anyone else rest, either. And this extends beyond our interactions with people, and right into our relationship with creation. Perhaps, most pivotally, we refuse to let the land rest. We act as if the land is an infinitely renewable resource. And it is, of course, if we don't exhaust it, don't violate it, don't abuse it. We seem to have a hard time understanding natural limits, though. We want and expect many things to be limitless...including ourselves. But, as you might be learning to expect—God, and the Bible, often powerfully defies our expectations. So, just as God commands sabbath for us, God also commands sabbath for the land...every 7 years: a complete and total sabbath. Complete and total rest. Which probably sounds impossible to most of us. All production stopped. For a whole year.

We, of course, live in a land where monocultures of corn and soybeans are harvested by enormous combines operated from within cockpits that would seem more at home in a spaceship than on a farm field. We've invented all manner of chemical inputs and genetic modifications to prevent us from having to allow the land to rest. Sabbath seems like a burden to modern agriculture and to modern consumers.

Yet as fanciful as the Biblical requirement to let the land rest may sound, it actually isn't that far off from what most pre-modern farmers did anyway, through a practice called crop rotation. Rotation involved planting different types of crops sequentially in a given field in order to replenish the soil's nutrients. Rotation also involved letting each field lie fallow every several years. So not a complete sabbath of the land, but sabbath

* http://www.musee-orsay.fr/index.php?id=851&L=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=341

nonetheless. And just as letting a field lie fallow is vital to its ability to continue to produce abundance, so letting human beings lie fallow is vital to our ability to live peaceably with ourselves and with one another. How we treat the Earth and how we treat ourselves and others are intimately intertwined.

Indeed, Catholic theologian and mystic Thomas Merton has this to say about our refusal to allow fallowness:

“There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

The language of violence may sound a bit extreme to your ears, as it initially did to mine. But is it, really? Isn't this in fact the reality in which so many of us live? Spiritual writer Wayne Muller elaborates on this theme of overwork, saying:

“Life has become a maelstrom in which speed and accomplishment, consumption and productivity have become the most valued of human commodities. In the trance of overwork, we take everything for granted. We consume things, people, and information. We do not have time to savor this life, nor to care deeply and gently for ourselves, our loved ones, or our world; rather with increasingly dizzying haste, we use them all up, and throw them away.”

We have so much difficulty recognizing our need for rest.

Our need to stop. To just BE. Restfully aware. It's funny that “just BEING” is just about the most difficult thing for most of us. It's why we have such trouble with meditation and prayer. They require us to be...to be in the present moment, to be present to God, to be present to ourselves. They really don't ask us to DO anything, except to be attentively awake. And yet, this is the hardest thing. Rest, sabbath, presence... all are sacrificial in our world, in our lives. NOT Doing feels like it always comes at a cost. And yet in and through the rest of sabbath, God promises us abundant life.

And so, we should probably try it, right? We should probably take God's command seriously, even if it's hard. But where to begin? It needn't be a whole day, to start, of course. Just some time set apart. Consecrated.

How, then, will you use this time? Can you give yourself permission to Be, rather than to Do? Can you allow yourself to get in touch with the holy freedom of true rest, of really letting go? As the prophet Isaiah reminds us:

“Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

Rest isn't a luxury. Rest isn't a waste of time. It's a lifeline. It's salvation, even. Ours, and the earth's. We're all in it together.

So rest like your life depends on it. Because it does. Amen.