

## **The Fourth Commandment**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **Exodus 5:1-9** NRSV

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go."

Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword." But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" Pharaoh continued, "Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!" That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words."

### **Mark 2:23-28**

Jesus was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and his disciples began to make a path by plucking the heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look! Why are they doing what isn't allowed on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the consecrated bread which only the priests are allowed to eat? And how he gave some to his companions, too?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for the sake of people, not people for the sake of the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath, too."

### **Children's Story**

Do you know what a rhythm is? It's a recurring pattern. Something that happens over and over: 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. That's a rhythm. Or A-B, C-D, D-C, B-A. A-B, C-D, D-C, B-A. That's a rhythm too.

Songs have rhythm. Like this . . . Or this . . . It's very important when you play a song to play the song in rhythm . . .

Not only do you have to play songs in rhythm, you also have to practice in rhythm. What I mean is, you have to practice over and over again in a routine. Practice for forty-five minutes at 3:00 in the afternoon every Monday, every Wednesday, every Friday. That's a routine, a rhythm, of practice.

I don't know if you know it, but you are in the middle of a rhythm right now. You are. Every Sunday, we gather here to worship God. Every seven days, we are here in these seats. SUNDAY, Monday, Tuesday . . . SUNDAY, Monday, Tuesday . . . SUNDAY, Monday, and so on.

It's a very old rhythm, a pattern that has been repeating for thousands of years. For thousands of years, and you are a part of it. Imagine that!

### **Sermon**

Once upon a time, the Christian Reformed Church was serious about Sunday observance, very serious. Some of you remember this. The lawn was mowed on Saturday afternoon so it would look its best on Sunday. Potatoes were peeled on Saturday night in preparation for Sunday dinner. Sunday itself was framed by worship services, morning and evening. In between, bicycles stayed in the garage and the gate to the swimming pool stayed locked.

Sunday was a special day, the special day of the week. The "day of rest and gladness," the "day of all the week the best, emblem of eternal rest." (We sang songs about Sunday!) Sunday was a day set apart, and we set it apart religiously. That was our response to the Fourth Commandment:

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. (Exodus 20:8-11)

And, a little differently,

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Without going overboard we hoped, we did our best to keep that commandment, to keep it by adhering to the words as closely as we could. Of course, we would still milk our cows on Sunday, and we would still cook our pot roast. (If the cows only knew!) But as much as we could, we set the day apart.

**The Sabbath is a day of rest, a day without work.** The commandment establishes a rhythm in human life, a rhythm of work and rest: Six days of work, one day of rest; six days of work, one day of rest. That rhythm has, for a long time now, seemed quaint. Our world has little room for the work and rest, work and rest rhythm. Shopping is now a seven days a week quest, 24/7 thanks to the internet and a few stores. Kids' sports, organized sports, have expanded to Sundays. And city-sized Chinese factories churn out laptops, i-pads, and cell phones in an ever-flowing stream.

We used to keep the Sabbath rhythm of work and rest, work and rest. We ourselves did not work on Sunday. And we did not make anyone work for us either, so we stayed out of stores and did not go out to eat on Sunday.

I think most of us have by now abandoned that rhythm. We still don't work on Sunday. Well, maybe a couple of hours in the home office to get caught up. And long ago we reclassified homework as okay for Sundays. But besides that, we don't work on Sunday. Of course, most of us don't have to.

It's a different story, however, for the people at work in the stores we run into for a few things on our way home from church. It's a different story for the people washing our dirty dishes at Applebee's or assembling our next generation smart phone at a Foxconn facility in China.

The abandonment of the one in seven rhythm of the Sabbath is most obvious with the other main element of the Sabbath: **the Sabbath is a day to the LORD.** For the longest time, we framed our Sundays with worship. We gathered in the morning, and we gathered again in the evening. Besides everything else those gatherings were about, they set the day apart. The whole day, from morning to evening, was set apart to God. Dutch Calvinists have never been very good at clapping in rhythm. But the rhythm of one day in seven, set apart to the Lord, that used to be in our blood and bones. That was our way of life: a day of worship, of fellowship, of feasting, of rest, every week.

Now, on the other hand, we set aside one morning a week, most weeks. Actually, it's not even a whole morning, just a couple of hours for most of us. We run around frantically, then pile into the car (or several cars). We walk into the building with a minute, or maybe even two, to spare. Then we compose ourselves and quiet ourselves, and then we express ourselves for an hour and a few minutes. Then we visit over coffee and cookies and maybe attend church school. Then off we go in multiple directions, the rest of the day much like any other day.

**So we've changed a lot; but how did we get here?** It has been clear enough to me for years now that we did not get here through deliberate theological thinking. We did not take a close look at our traditions for keeping the Fourth Commandment, what we did do and what we did not do, the whys and the why nots. We didn't rub all of that against Scripture and come up with a better way. No, we dropped the old

ways, it seems to me, largely because we didn't feel like following them any more, and because we had better things to do with our time, with our Sundays.

That's nothing new, of course. Look at Pharaoh and the Israelites. Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh. What did they ask for? Some time off for the Israelites, a three-day weekend for the sake of worship. That's the story they told. They wanted to step away from their burdens for a short time. They wanted to be able to focus their attention on the LORD. And what did Pharaoh say? "Fat chance!" He was not about to lose three days' production. What mattered was work. What mattered was productivity. "Keep working!" said Pharaoh. "In fact," he added, "it's time for you to do more with less."

We still live in that kind of world today. The pressure to work, to produce is relentless. The pressure to squeeze more into life and to squeeze more out of life doesn't let up. Who can afford to rest? Rest, and the competition will get the better of you. Rest, and you'll lose your business, your job, your home. Rest, and you will never fit in all that you want to see and be and do. Rest, and you and your brain and your body and your bank account and your golf swing and your social network and your kids will never reach their potential.

What happened to our Sabbath rhythm? It was replaced by a jackhammer beat as relentless as Pharaoh, a beat relieved only by sleep, too little of it and too often dependent on chemical inducement. But what does the psalm say, Psalm 127?

In vain you rise early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to each —  
for he grants sleep to those he loves (v. 2).

**So what's left, for us — what's left of the Fourth Commandment?** First, there's an important theological point. We are not bound by the one in seven rule of the Fourth Commandment. We're not. That commandment was given to Israel through Moses. It has not been given to the church through Jesus Christ. First century Israel found its identity in the Temple, in the food laws, in circumcision, and in the Sabbath. None of those remain for us in Christ. All food is clean for us. Baptism has replaced circumcision. Jesus himself, not the Temple, is where we meet God and find forgiveness. And Jesus himself is our rest.

So, we are not bound by the one in seven rule of the Fourth Commandment. Does that mean the Fourth Commandment has no authority for us? Not at all.

The Fourth Commandment calls us to rest every day, to rest every day from evil. That's how our Catechism puts it (A 103). It's not enough to take one day in seven off from kicking and scratching and clawing, from abusing and taking advantage of others, from ignoring or even forsaking God as we busy ourselves with the "real" work of the world. That's stuff to leave behind every day, not just one day in seven. Because the Sabbath has always been about this, about enacting at the center of living a deep trust in God as the source and the giver of life, trusting God enough to rest, trusting God enough not to follow the ways of the world, not to dance to the jackhammer beat.

And this trust, trust that expresses itself in rest, has broad implications. Everyone needs rest, regular rest. People need rest. Animals need rest. Even God rests; that's a point made in Exodus 20. We need to take rest for ourselves. And we need to do what we can to ensure rest for others. That's a burden of Deuteronomy 5. I'm not sure how to do that. I doubt staying home from restaurants on Sundays will make a difference. People are overworked not just on Sundays. On a larger scale, we could challenge Apple and Dell and Nokia to keep closer tabs on labor practices at Foxconn. But that's only one Chinese supplier. And how much impact could we few have? Nevertheless, Deuteronomy 5 is adamant that rest needs to be secured for those who can't secure it for themselves. And lots of people, even close to home, are in that spot.

Beyond rest, the Fourth Commandment calls us to a pattern of worship. Is any call more obvious and more universal than the call the worship God? God who is the Creator, the Giver and Sustainer of life, God who is the Savior and the Renewer of all creation, God who is the Spirit of life and holiness? To worship God is not Israel-specific. Again and again, the Bible summons the entire creation to praise God. And one day, the Apostle assures us, that praise will ring out and never fade. We anticipate that ever-lasting praise through our worship.

Which brings up, I think, something wonderful about the Fourth Commandment. I said a few minutes ago that the one in seven rule has not been given to the church through Jesus Christ. That's true. But the

church has given that rule to itself. It could have been another rule, a different rhythm. (John Calvin is clear about that.) But the church chose to adopt and adapt the ancient rhythm and rule, from Exodus and Deuteronomy, from Genesis, and from the practices of the first century synagogue, where Jesus himself went one day in seven for worship. This is a wonderful thing, a gift from the church to every one of her children.

I don't know about you — I can guess, though — I don't know about you, but I've always had a hard time making space for God in my life. I've tried again and again to establish patterns, a rhythm, of personal piety and devotion. It works for a while, but then I stumble and it all falls apart. And I have to start over again, trying to claw out some space for God in my life in the midst of everything I have to do and everything I want to do. And I don't do it very well.

But in the midst of my attempts and my failures, there is this gift. The church has for long ages carved out a space in time, one day in seven, a day to worship God together: to hear the Word, to give praise and thanks, to take bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. That space is there, carved out of every week, at the beginning of every week. That space is there, establishing the most basic, the most critical rhythm for our lives: life begins when God speaks; life itself is a response to God, whether of faith or of unfaith; and life is nourished by Jesus Christ, offered up to save the world. There is that space, a one in seven gift, by which we can start each week on the right foot.

Well, that's a lot about the Fourth Commandment, not all that could be said, by any means, but enough.

We've lost our old rhythm, our old way of marking time. There's more than a little bit to mourn about that. Yes, we went too far in our one day in seven rule-making, acting in too many ways as if we were Israel. But we did set aside a good block of time every week, time devoted, without much distraction, to the Lord.

But there's more to the Fourth Commandment, more that we paid too little attention to. Resting from evil every day, that's more important than Sabbaths and worship (just ask Isaiah and Amos), and with the Spirit's help, by the Spirit working in us, we really do work at changing our way of life in the world. We also do what we can to change other people's lives, so that no one is enslaved by work, deprived of rest, denied occasions to worship God. No, we don't have that at all figured out, what our role is. There, too, we depend on the Spirit of God.

But here's the thing, and where the rhythm is so important: to be changed ourselves and to make a difference in the world, not only do we need the constant presence of the Spirit, we also need the regular practice of worshipping together, of time devoted to the Lord. That time is ours through the church's gift to her members, the gift of space carved out in time, a space for God, the one in seven gift that keeps the Fourth Commandment.