

Sermon: October 2, 2011
The Rev. George Anastos

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Being Intentional

I know a woman who was teaching a course in the Old Testament at a private, elite prep school, a high school. And over the years that she was teaching very small sections, seven to eight, maybe nine, kids per section, she'd ask them all a question: "If you could remove one of the ten commandments so there would be nine, which one would you take out?" Let's list the Ten Commandments: 1) You shall have no other gods before me, 2) you shall not make any graven images, 3) you shall not (as we used to say) take the name of the Lord your God in vain, you shall not take God's name for emptiness, 4) you shall remember the sabbath day and hallow it and keep it holy, 5) honor your father and your mother, 6) you shall not kill, 7) you shall not steal, 8) you shall not commit adultery, 9) you shall not bear false witness, 10) you shall not covet."

Okay, so if any of you were to give one up, is anybody brave enough to say, "Here's the one I'd give up?" (Someone from the congregation volunteers "graven images.") Graven images is the one you'd give up. All right. Anybody else give one up? (Someone else volunteers "covet.") Covet. You like to covet? Great. And you admit that in church?!? Okay. Anybody else? When I said this to the choir earlier, "Which one would you give up," one of the members said, "adultery." I said, "adultery?" And he said, "Yeah, I'm getting old now, it's time to start having some fun." It is an adventurous church, I'll give you that.

Interestingly enough, of the 187 students, one of them said, "I'd give up adultery." And the teacher looked at him, this responsible boy, a Syrian Christian, and said, "Adultery?" And he said, "I figure it's already covered under 'thou shalt not covet.' And so if I had to give one up, that's the one I'd give up." The other 186 had the same response, all these high school students said they'd give up the sabbath day. Why? Because it is so outdated. You simply cannot keep the sabbath in today's world. It is an impossibility. It's impossible for us as students, and as we watch our parents, it's impossible for them. Impossible. What's fascinating about that is that they're right. They're right. Back at that school they started class at eight in the morning. Classes went until two-thirty or three each afternoon. Then there was mandatory athletic activity during the afternoon. They had mandatory sit-down dinner, and then they did their homework. And the teachers, as a rule, considered the minimum they would give to their students per class, and all kids took at least five classes, was an hour of homework a night. Do the math as to when they get to bed. This is what we're teaching our kids about how to spend time. Now the question becomes, "Why?"

Taichi Ono – anybody know who Taichi Ono is? He was the genius behind Toyota's manufacturing system that made it so flawless, because way back at the beginning when they

were setting it all up and the line would go down, something would go wrong, Taichi Ono would go out to where things broke down and say, "What happened here?"

And they'd say, "Well, the belt broke."

And he'd say, "Why?"

"Well, because the flange was sticking out."

"Why?"

"Well because the flange had slipped in its race."

"Why?"

"Well because the screw had come loose."

"Why?"

"Well because of the vibration of the machine."

"Why?"

"Because the ball bearings are worn." Aha. Finally they'd get to what Taichi Ono would consider the root cause, and he'd say, "Fix that." It's become known in industry as "the five why's."

Well, why do we drive our kids so hard? Why do high schoolers start at eight in the morning and end at twelve or one in the morning? Why do we do that? If you were to ask the parents, they would say, "Well, we want our kids to get good grades."

Why?

"Well they have to get into a good college."

Why?

"Well then they'll have a competitive edge."

Why?

"Well that's important."

Why?

“So they can succeed.”

And these parents are not unlike any of us. Wherever we turn we are caught up in this race, and we all know it. What are the expressions we use? “It’s a rat race.” Or “I just want to step off the treadmill.” Or “I don’t have time for this.” Or “there are only so many hours in a day.” Or “time waits for no person.” Or, “I don’t have TIME for this!”

We hear all this and yet we still are obedient, fully and almost unquestioningly obedient to a value system that will drive us into the ground, that will teach us to have fourteen and fifteen year olds having sixteen and seventeen, eighteen hour days. We’re obedient to this value system, and we don’t even know why.

And if we think the church is any different, think again. I get together with other clergy, and every once in a while somebody will have the courage to raise whether or not we keep sabbath. The answer when we’re honest is “no.” We don’t have time. And we bring all the value systems of the world right in here into the church. We don’t have time to keep sabbath. We run our churches as if they were commodities. We offer people something that they want to give them value for their dollar when they pledge. . . . What’s wrong with this picture? What happened to the gospel here? What happened to sabbath rest? What happened to the gospel, and what happened to the church that church is not supposed to be about giving people what they want but instead inviting people in to a way of life and a way of being that is rich and joyous and as it says in the opening hymn, to be servants of the servant, to love and care for others.

Sabbath. I would love to stand up in front of you today and tell you how to keep sabbath. But I can’t, because I don’t know how. I, like many, most, or even all of the people in the Sanctuary, struggle with this. I say to myself, “Well, I’ll do it when I retire. I’ll have time then.” But what if, as individuals and as a community, we said, “We don’t want to be obedient to the values of the world that drive fourteen-year-olds to work sixteen hour days. Call it school, but it’s still work. We don’t want to be obedient to the values of the world that are so consumerist that we understand the church as a commodity. Instead we want as a community to stand for something different and to be a parallel culture to the larger culture. And I offer you the question, could it be that the most revolutionary, important thing that we could do as religious community, **the** most revolutionary thing we could do to challenge the unquestioning obedience to the world’s values, would be to practice sabbath, to remember the sabbath day and to keep it holy. For each time we do that we are stepping out of the system, stepping out of radical obedience to the world’s values, trying to put ourselves in the way of God’s values. We are stepping out, *every week*, and saying, “Perhaps there’s another way to be, another way to live, another way to love.”

I don’t know how to keep sabbath. In today’s world, the old ways wouldn’t work. But what I’d like to do is explore this with you. On your way out, if any of you would like to explore as a group with me and others what it means to keep sabbath, I’d love to be part of this with you, to find ways we can say, “We stand in the way of God. We stand for something different. We stand and we rest and we love.”

Abraham Heschel, a great Jewish scholar, was speaking about sabbath. He argues that there is the realm of space where we acquire things, where we do our work; and there's the realm of time. Heschel wrote, "To have more does not mean to be more. . . . The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisitions of things of space, becomes our sole concern." And Flannery O'Connor, in terms of what it means to stand in the way of God and to stand for something different, writes this, "You cannot understand life and its mysteries as long as you try and grasp it. Indeed you cannot grasp it, just as you cannot walk off with a river in a bucket. To have running water, you must let go of it and let it run. The same is true of life and of God."

So the invitation, and it truly is an invitation, is to learn together how to keep sabbath. Uniquely. Each one of us will likely do it differently, but as community to say, "This is a value – that we are intentional about being obedient to the way of love rather than being unintentional about being obedient to the way of the world.

Amen.