

## The Heart of the Matter

### Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For 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.

What struck you about this “commandment”? This is God speaking, through Moses, to the people of Israel. Did you notice, God says “do this; observe the sabbath day and keep it holy,” which means to keep it separate from other days; you need to hit “pause,” because there is something especially important about this day. Then God says, the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord; it is a day we are to offer up in honor of God. And how shall we do this? By not doing any work. Sabbath simply means “cease” or “abstain from.” It is a day of rest. How nice and considerate of God to make sure we rest.

Yes, AND, you know what else? Did you notice something peculiar in the way God says this? Listen closely to the way God puts it: you and everyone in the sphere of your world, your family, your livestock, your immigrant neighbors, and your slaves, should not work, **SO THAT YOUR SLAVES** can rest....as well as you. **YOU** are almost an afterthought. God’s primary concern here is for the slaves, whose rest was otherwise not guaranteed, for they were at the mercy of those who had claim over them and they had no say in the matter of rest.

Really? Is that how God put it? Well, to make sure the Israelites understand this, God follows up by reminding them that they were once slaves themselves in Egypt, until God brought them out of it.”

What does this commandment tell us about our God? What kind of God would show such concern and provide protection for the powerless and the disadvantaged? Our God provides for the needs of all of God’s creation and especially looks out for those who are powerless and disadvantaged in the society and expects God’s people to do the same. This Commandment speaks for the heart of God.

It is all the more striking when we realize that this commandment comes in 4<sup>th</sup> in the Ten Commandments. The first 3 commandments are all about our relationship with God: you are not to have any other God, not to make any graven image of God, and not to take God's name in vain. They speak of the heart of God who so want us to set our mind and rely on God alone, and not to make for ourselves a handy substitute for God or trivialize who God is by using God's name in vain, because God is the source of our life. Through the first 3 commandments, God calls out to us: I am the one who has your best interest in mind, so stay with me.

Our relationship with God is the foundation of our well-being and God wants to make sure we remain in the right relationship with God.

Then, the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment on Sabbath is the first commandment that shifts this focus on what we are to do or not do in order to be in the relationship God, to what we are to do or not do in order to preserve our well-being, and immediately it brings us in our relationship with others, especially those who are most vulnerable in our world. This Commandment on Sabbath teaches us that our actions are bound up with the well-being of others. By bringing this commandment right after the first three, God again reveals God's heart that is most compassionate and fiercely protective of God's creation, especially the vulnerable ones. That is the heart of the matter when it comes to observing the Commandments, the Law of Moses.

For "too" many years, I worked in NYC and saw how paralegals and young associates working under powerful partner-lawyers in a law firm, and the rank-and-file employees of a Japanese bank working under workaholic and success obsessed bosses, toil away 24-7. The pressure to prove themselves if they wanted to get promoted, or out of fear of losing their jobs, was so great that made many of them just miserable and burnt out. They "dedicated" of all of the days of the week to this pressure and fear, rather than pausing to rest and remember whom they truly beloved, their Creator. Any system in our society that exploit or abuse workers, and those who "work" that system so dishonor God who created us to "need rest" to live an abundant life God.

Keeping this about the commandment about Sabbath, hear now the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark, Chapter 2: 23 – 3:6.

One sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God,

when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so, the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

Again, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Here is a scene of confrontation between the Pharisees, the experts on the Law of Moses, and Jesus. We must be careful not to think of the Pharisees as the “bad guys.” The Pharisees, scribes, and other religious authorities had the necessary and important job of interpreting the Law so that people could follow it to shape their lives.

But here, the Pharisees took a particular portion of Scripture and read it in a particular way. If you were hungry travelers, plucking grains was allowed by the law, but harvesting grains would be considered as “labor” that violates the law on Sabbath. And Jesus defended his disciples by pointing them to another portion of Scripture, about what King David, the beloved king of Israel, and interpreted the law in a different manner, reminding the Pharisees that God’s commandments are there to promote and protect the well-being of the people: that’s the heart of the matter.

And when Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the question, what is lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ Jesus expanded the concept of saving a life or killing to more basic judgment of doing good and doing harm: the heart of the matter.

The answer would have been clear to the Pharisees because there was a principle in Jewish law called “Pikuach nefesh” that saving a life is more important than most other laws, including observance of the sabbath. They could have answered what they knew to be right, but their hearts were so turned against Jesus that they kept silence.

As the chaplain for Menaul School, I was blessed to work with a few Muslim students, with whom we Christians share the faith in the God of Abraham. They graciously shared in the chapel time their experience of observing Ramadan here in the US, away from their home in Egypt. They explained how different and how much harder it was for them to fast here in the US, living in the school dormitory. Back home in Egypt, everybody fasted together and the

whole society accommodated the practice of fasting as a matter of faith. Living in the dorm, their friends were eating and drinking around them, and what's worse, they would offer them drinks and food, out of very friendly intention to be sure.

They also taught us that the purpose of fasting, as they understood it, was to empathize and stand in solidarity with the poor, who went hungry not just during the month of Ramadan but throughout the year. They also taught us there were exceptions to the fasting requirement to protect the sick and the weak. In fact, it was against the law to fast, when doing so would jeopardize their health. The heart of the matter was protected.

When the Pharisees refused to admit the obvious answer to his question about saving life or killing, doing good or doing harm, Jesus was angry AND deeply saddened by their "hardness of heart." Depending on the Bible, this "hardness of heart" expression is translated as "obstinate stupidity," or "they were so stubborn and wrong," or "they had closed their minds." This expression is used in the Bible elsewhere to describe different persons who resist God.

In the Gospel of Mark, "hardness of heart" elsewhere describes the human resistance to the divine will, like what the Gospel writer John means by the word "the World."

Jesus was angry AND grieved at the hardness of their heart: angry because they refused to accept the heart of the matter, the loving intention of God for the world, and grieved because they were the ones God sent him to save. It is ironic that on that Sabbath day, these Pharisees, clueless of God's loving intention for them and feeling humiliated and shamed by Jesus, plotted to destroy Jesus; they chose to kill.

What does it look like for us today to observe this commandment to keep Sabbath? The heart of the matter to which the Commandment points is to do good and not harm, to promote and protect the well-being of all people, especially the powerless and disadvantaged, whose life and wellness depends on what we decide to do, that is the law of the land in the kingdom of heaven.

As the citizen of heaven living here on earth, we know the answer to the question just as these Pharisees did. As citizens of this country, we elect people who create and implement the laws of our land. So, when we vote, we impact the life of everyone living on this land. May we remember the heart of the matter Jesus lifted up, caring for the powerless and disadvantaged. May the Spirit grant us wisdom and courage to do our part, following Jesus's teaching in our days.