

CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER, AND REST

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Once there was a man who wanted to become a logger. He had never done it before but it looked exciting. He liked being outdoors and he was of the age where he needed to earn his own living. He thought that logging would be a good match. He went to a place where they were cutting down trees and asked the supervisor for a job. He acknowledged that he didn't have much experience but promised that he was a quick learner and a hard worker and he was sure that he'd be able to do good work.

The supervisor decided to give him a try-out to see how fast he could work before hiring him permanently. Gratefully, the logger responded by borrowing an axe and cutting down a tree very quickly. Impressed, the supervisor gave him a job and the logger went to work right away, cutting down tree after tree. He out-paced everyone else on the site.

That was on a Monday. On Tuesday, the logger showed up and worked again at the same pace. On Wednesday again, and Thursday too; he never slowed down his pace. And yet, at the end of the day on Thursday, the supervisor let the logger know that regrettably, that would be his last day. He handed him some money and wished him well. The logger didn't know why. He had worked steadily and at the same speed, chopping down trees all day, every day, since Monday. He had worked very hard. The supervisor replied that he had worked hard; he could see that, but for some reason he just wasn't chopping down as many trees as everyone else. Someone had to go and the supervisor just went with whoever wasn't making as much progress.

The logger just didn't understand how that could be the case. He chopped wood constantly. In fact, he told the supervisor, he had noticed that each day many of the loggers would spend an hour or more sitting down on logs, sharpening their axes and taking it easy while he would be busily chopping away. He never took those breaks. How could he have fallen behind? The supervisor said, "You don't sharpen your axe before you chop?" The logger replied, "No, I just get right to chopping down the trees." "Well, that's why you've fallen behind," the supervisor said. "You have to sharpen your axe every single day. If you don't, it'll take more swings to do the work. You can't keep up that way. Try again, and sharpen your axe every day."

One of the lessons in this story is that what looks like rest is really work, or preparation for work. An adage – good rest leads to good work. Or another lesson; that preparation is key to success. Plan, then do. There are lots of takes from this story, which is one of several versions of various wood-cutter parables that float around, usually of unknown or unclaimed origin. They're often lumped in with a quotation attributed to President Lincoln, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening my axe." Maybe that quotation will help if the image of felling trees, in today's world, is unpalatable. Just imagine President Lincoln saying it and it takes on a different air.

I've always loved that sentiment, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening my ax," though I do indeed fail to heed it from time to time. Sometimes I just rush right at the tree, dull axe in hand, when I would be much wiser to stop for minute, have a seat, sharpen the axe, and in the process take a breath and think about things for a minute. I'm not sure taking a minute has ever been the wrong choice in my life. To be fair, it doesn't always lead to the right choice, but I don't think that extra minute has ever really hurt. I do know that

rushing into things has; that there are times when taking a minute would have been the wise choice to make; when it would have been better to stop, breath, be, and prepare for what is to come rather than going to tree-to-tree, without break, working toward diminishing results.

I remember, a long time ago now, back in seminary, during one of the end of term rushes when we were all trying to turn in a bunch of papers at the same time. Among the classes I was taking was one titled, *Sexuality and Black Church* and another on the works of the great theologian Paul Tillich. These are very different subjects. The two classes were not alike. Yet final papers were due on each, as the rest of life was happening, and I had mixed up the assignments such that the question of the Tillich class was what I began to answer in the final for the *Sexuality and the Black Church* class. I was about half-way through when I realized that I was writing the wrong essay for the wrong class, and that I had to start over, and that what I had written was useless in either class because I was answering the question for one class by writing about another. And I can still remember how that started; I sat down in the library, looked at the essay topic, and dove right into the writing without taking a minute to make sure my head was in the right space.

At the time, that was momentous and stressful. Now, it's no big deal. But it shows how easily we can become overwhelmed and not take a breath and focus, and rest for a minute when we really need to. And it reminds us of how we can lose time, and effort, and energy, when we fail to rest as required.

And it is required; rest is required in the Hebrew Scriptures. The God of Moses famously demands a day of rest as one of the Ten Commandment in Exodus. And they are uttered by the voice of God for all the people to hear. To this point, most interpretations of the Exodus story have God speaking just to Moses, who relays the information to the people, but in Chapter 20 God speaks directly to the people and God announces rules that are formulated differently in various faiths and traditions, but the keeping the Sabbath holy is in all of them. Generally, the ten are:

1. No idols,
2. Don't take my name in vain,
3. Remember the Sabbath,
4. Honor your parents,
5. Don't kill,
6. Don't cheat,
7. Don't steal,
8. Don't lie,
9. Don't covet your neighbor's partner
10. And don't covet your neighbors' stuff, or just don't covet.

And God says these words which are followed by lightning and thunder and the Scripture says that the mountain starts smoking and there are trumpets in the air. The people are terrified. They had just been griping to Moses about God always speaking to him and not directly to them, and then God speaks to them and the first thing they say to Moses when God is silent again is, "Yeah ... let's just have God speak to you from now on. And then you can tell us what God says because if we go through that smoking mountain and trumpet and thunder thing again, we will die." The scripture has them saying that; "If God speaks to us we're going to die."

That story is one source of the wisdom behind the millennia-old advice of rabbis around the world who caution people about praying for God to speak directly to them. If that prayer is

answered, you might not like what you hear, and you might really not like how you hear it. Or, be careful when asking for God's personal attention and presence because ... you might get it. And it might be terrifying. It may be better to lay low and let God do the God things.

And from that divine/human interaction of comedy and fear on Mt. Sinai we, in the tradition as it has journeyed through millennia to us today, have this commandment to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. To do no work. Not only us, but our children, people who may work for us, our animals, and every stranger in the land. We are to not work ourselves, and we are to require no one else to work either.

This is reflection of the seventh day of Creation in which God rested. The seventh day is not a day in which God created nothing; it's a day in which God created rest by observing it, and then God blessed the day in which rest was created. The only day of creation that God blesses is the seventh day; not the sixth when God creates animals and people on the land, or the fifth when animals of the sea spring to life or the earlier ones with light and dark and earth and sky and sea. The days of work aren't blessed; the day of rest is.

Those creations are called good, but the only day that is blessed is the one of rest, and that sense of blessed rest permeates everything about the faith that follows, and the traditions that would emerge, including our own. Work, and work hard, but also rest and be well for that part is blessed.

There is a sense in the world, ancient and modern, that our value is determined by what we can produce; that our worth is something that can be measured economically, that health and strength and favor are made evident by what we possess, or manage, or control. Productivity is seen as a measure of worth. This leads to the market becoming an object of worship; becoming that which we serve. And the commands of the market, which can run counter to the commands of Sinai, become that to which we ascribe our lives, even though the commands of the market can never, ever, be satisfied. For as one command is met, another more demanding one comes to life, and the escalation of work and the market cycles on and on and leaves less and less, and eventually no room, for that blessed rest, Or, that rest even becomes scorned as something seen to detract from the what the market demands we produce. It's a kind of profanity; in Moses' time and today.

Similarly, there is a sense in the world, ancient and modern, that our value is determined by how well we serve Pharaoh, or Caesar, or the state; that citizenship and nationality and devotion to political leaders and rulers and parties are measures of our favor and integrity and wholeness. There is nothing biblical in unquestioned devotion to a political leader; any political leader, and it is completely biblical; literally the stuff of the prophets, to raise faith-based objections to immoral actions of political leaders, but devotion above the Holy to a leader or party is a luring temptation, then and now. In ancient times and today, it is easy to confuse who we are as children of creation, with how we live in a political world of markets and productivity.

In in the midst of both of these ancient and modern confusions, when we think we are products of the market, or we think we are products of the state, we are reminded, through keeping the Sabbath, that we are products of the Holy. We belong to neither the market, nor the state, but to the Holy. That's what makes our lives blessed and the day blessed, and that's why the Sabbath is to be regularly observed. For one day, we serve not the market so that we know that our worth comes not from what we produce but from who we are. And for one day we serve not the state so that we can remember that our faith and allegiance must be in something greater than something as small as the power and ambition of political leaders.

It's in these ways that practicing Sabbath is inherently a political and economic act of human freedom and dignity. It's a statement, then and now, about who we are, and who everyone is, as children of creation. It is not a statement of dissent from the ways in which we organize our lives and societies; the ways in which we earn livings and build families; the ways in which we care for one another and future generations. But it

is a dissent from allowing those tasks, responsibilities, and sometimes distractions to become all of who we are.

And while a complete day of rest is in the ancient sense is probably not workable in many lives; not my own, not many, I'm sure that regular Sabbath periods are possible, if practiced with intention. It takes intention though. Awareness. A few weeks ago, I went to check my phone to find out that it had completely lost all of its power. The battery was 0 and I think what I did was leave the music on for a long time; I had turned it down but hadn't turned the phone off. I'm not actually sure what happened, but for some reason it was at 0, reminding me that it been working that whole time. It's a machine – it works until you turn it off. And it runs out of battery power and you have to plug it back in.

And it's exactly like us, in ancient days and today. We are going until we're not going. We are working until we, with intention, stop working. And recharging, remembering who we are, and whose we are, and why we're here, and what we really want our lives to be about, needs and demands the practice of Sabbath on a regular basis. We have to step away from that which demands our attention and commands our obedience to know again that our value is not a marketable, political commodity. Our value is in being children of creation.

Our value is that day six image of creation springing forth cattle and caterpillars and butterflies and bison and porcupines and people meant to live in harmony with creation and one another. Life is the gift; not what we make, how much we have, and what we can buy. The measure of our worth was settled eons ago when stars and cells conspired to bring life forth and bless us with it and with one another. Through life calls us to many things, on many days, it calls again and again to one day that is blessed, and that is the Sabbath, which we keep holy by remembering the Holy source of our lives.

It doesn't have to be a whole day, and it can happen more often than once a week, and the ways in which we keep the Sabbath do not have to mirror ancient ways. But we must practice blessed rest in our own ways with intention. We must resist the urge to run head-first into the market and the world day after day after day and chop away with a dull axe so much so that life becomes more difficult for us than it otherwise be. We can instead look at the work to be done, and look at the people sitting on tree preparing. And join them, and sit down, and learn with and from them. And when the time to work comes, we can work. Hard.

And when the time to rest comes, we can rest. Well. And when the time for study comes, we can study. For that is how the ancient ones, for the most part approached, Sabbath – as a time to study. It was a time to remember to ancient stories and consider their wisdom anew; to listen for the voice of Holy through ancient hymns and prayers; to learn anew the miracle of creation, and to find astonishment in our role in it, and to know again how that connects us with every being, everywhere.

Sabbath is a time to remember that our worth comes from the Holy. It has nothing to do with what we own, or what owns us, or whose power we prefer. Sabbath reminds us that our worth was determined eons ago, by an unimaginable universe of grace and wonder. We never earned our worth to begin with, and our worth will never go away. It's an original blessing, bestowed on every life, and Sabbath intends to remind us of that original goodness and grace. Praise be for that challenge and that gift, and may Sabbath keep the assurance of worth and grace in our hearts and minds this day and always.

Amen.