

“Sabbath Liberation and Grace”

Sermon by Vicar Kevin Tracey

September 1, 2019

Sabbath Series 3

Deut. 15:1-2, 7-11; Luke 15:11-32

*Grace to you and Peace from God our Creator and Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.*

We’ve come to the final week of our series on the Sabbath. And our readings this morning do a really good job of framing this as the grand finale.

The past two weeks we’ve talked a lot about rest—about interrupting our over-booked and over-planned schedules and of breaking out of the cycle of work that separates us from each other and separates us from God. And about how important it is to claim our place in the loving community of Christ; a place we emboldened to claim because God exemplified rest and made it sacred...

Today, we find ourselves in Deuteronomy, exploring the concept of the Biblical Jubilee Year. We get a brief snippet of what that means in our reading this morning—if you want the full details, you’ll have to head back to Exodus chapter 21. There we find the full outline. This was an intentional “rebalancing.” You worked and worked and worked for 49 years but then, in the 50th year, after seven Sabbath cycles, you rested. It was a Sabbath but in grander scales. Instead of just a day, a whole Sabbath year. And in this year, all leased land was returned to its original owner and any material things rented were given back to the loaner. Additionally, all financial debts were forgiven, and all slaves were set free.

Now, if you read Exodus 21 through 23, you will get an extremely detailed account of how this was to happen. For example, there is a specific prohibition against accruing a bunch of debt in the final year before the Jubilee, knowing that it was to be forgiven soon—we get the summary of that law in our reading today. These weren’t just haphazard laws thrown together—they were carefully thought out and planned with very real implications and effects if they were not followed. These laws encouraged the people of Israel to rely on God—to recognize that their own power was not sufficient, and that God’s was.

The main point of the Jubilee year was not the nitty-gritty details. The point, was liberation.

Liberation in a very real and practical way—liberation from debts and loans... from the material stuff that holds us down. This echoes the words we’ve heard from Scripture the past two weeks; Words of rest and comfort—words that call us into the presence of God and offer love and the chance to just exist. To be, without a schedule or a deadline looming overhead.

And yet, even more than that, the Jubilee year offers a different kind of liberation too. Social and emotional liberation. A liberation from the human structures and systems of inequality and marginalization that infringe upon the vision for the world that God has.

In a lot of ways, this Sabbath year shifted the entire narrative of ownership and property. And it was entirely counter to what the rest of the cultural groups surrounding the people of Israel would have been doing; it gave ownership a new meaning. And it gave relationship new meaning. As opposed to the traditional methods which had been in place for millennia, and which relied on human power and individualism.

This new method established by God, required the people of Israel to focus on and rely on God’s power and their relationship with the community. God’s ability to work and move in the world, Not their own. It was God’s way of teaching that Sabbath observance is one of the things that can help refocus our perspective; It reminds us that the debts and burdens we are carrying are not the final stop. And that control over others and

their resources is not the goal here either—these things just get in the way of our relationships with each other and with God. And they try to convince us that we are powerful—that we have the same power that God does.

But Sabbath is liberation from all of that. It's freedom and it's release from the material things that hold us captive

Now, to be explicitly clear—the sabbath is not a required step to somehow make God show up. But the Sabbath does remind us that we cannot do this all on our own; that God offers love and grace in the midst of the messiness of the world.

And the parable we hear today reminds us of that. This parable can be interpreted in a lot of ways—it's been subject to extensive scholarship and work, especially because it is unique to Luke's Gospel—it doesn't appear anywhere else in the Bible. I've always loved this story—and not because I'm the younger of two brothers and the older brother definitely gets told off...

I love this parable because of what happens on the road. When Pr. Lee and I were discussing the bulletin for this week I was really clear that I wanted an image of the father and the son meeting on the road; an image where the father is embracing the son and welcoming him home, not an image where the son is on the ground or bowed in submission.

Because the scripture is clear—while the son is still far off, the father sees him and filled with compassion, he runs to him on the road and embraces him. Before the son can even get his rehearsed apology out, the father has welcomed him back.

As one commentator put it: "Jesus tells [this story] to make a simple point. No matter what, just come home."

This is, fundamentally, what grace is. We like to throw that word around a lot, especially as Lutherans. "Grace." And it can be really hard to actually put some weight behind it—to recognize that in God's view of this world, nothing and no one is irredeemable. That God's extravagant and occasionally offensive grace is extended to everyone. This parable offers a reminder of what Grace is in action. It is an act from God. An act that claims us as God's own and erases all the stuff that gets in the way of relationship: The divisions and the boundaries, The burdens and the pain, Grace is the welcoming arms flung wide that say welcome home.

In Grace, we are claimed as God's own. In this freely-given, incomprehensible, radical-and-world-changing act, God extends Godself to us on the road and before we can even begin to fumble through whatever apology we've constructed, the love of God is already pouring out, welcoming us home.

The Sabbath is all about liberation and the Jubilee year encapsulates just how radical a change it is to embrace this. And it offers us a chance to remember that it is because of Grace and in Grace and through Grace that we are liberated and freed to embrace this. This is God's invitation to rest—to interrupt the temptation to try to earn our way by working harder and harder. Instead, God interrupts that cycle and comes to each of us, arms flung wide, welcoming us into the embrace of the Divine.

Its radical and its world changing.

And it's God's way of saying "come home."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.