

Letting God run things without my help

When I was a parish minister, my only hope of remembering the sabbath was to make it a moveable feast.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 5, 1999](#) issue



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As best I can tell, most Christians follow eight commandments, not ten. The second commandment was dispatched at the Council of Nicea in 787, when the church decided graven images were OK. If it had pleased God to become incarnate in a person, the church reasoned, then it should not displease God for us to have images of that person. Iconoclasts have continued to rise up over the years, but few Christians regard icons, stained glass windows or Jesus T-shirts as sinful.

The fourth commandment has undergone a more gradual demise. When Jesus declared that the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath, many of his followers deduced that they were free from sabbath observance. Since the rabbis themselves had said as much ("Sabbath has been

given to you; you have not been given to the sabbath"), it seems more likely that Jesus was sharpening his disciples' sense of sabbath as divine gift instead of divine burden.

Sabbath was the day when Israel celebrated its freedom from compulsion. On that one day every week, the people did not work and still they were fed. On that one day every week, they remembered their worth lay not in their own productivity but in God's primordial love for them. Sabbath offered them a foretaste of heaven, when they would lie back in God's arms and behold the glory of creation for all eternity.

I remembered all of this several Sundays ago, when I left home late for church. With nine miles to go and 15 minutes to travel them in, I hardly noticed the dew-soaked cobwebs in the tall grass by the side of the road, which the morning sun had turned into pockets of light. I barely glanced at the herd of deer grazing in the meadow, and had less than my usual appreciation for the red-tailed hawk that lifted off from a fence post as I ruined his morning watch.

For seven miles I had the road to myself. Then I roared up behind a red sports utility vehicle that was traveling significantly below the speed limit. The driver, who was all alone, was sipping a cup of something hot enough to steam in the cool morning air. As I rode his bumper, he admired the mountain view with one elbow propped on his open window. All I could see was the solid yellow line that forbade me to pass him. He slowed down a little when he saw the Holstein cows circling the old Indian mound. As he turned his face toward them, I could see him smiling in his side rear-view mirror. Finally he pulled over to read a historical marker and I zoomed past him, wondering who was doing a better job of observing the sabbath.

When I was a parish minister there was no hope of remembering the sabbath, at least not in the Hebrew sense of resting from my labors. If I wanted a sabbath, I had to make it a moveable feast. Often it was a Friday, or a Monday, when I turned off the ringers on all my telephones and spent the day in solitary pursuits. It remained a work day, however. I did laundry. I wrote sermons. I balanced the checkbook. As much as I craved a true sabbath, I did not believe I could afford one. There was so much work to be done. If I did none for one day, then there would be twice as much the next day. I worked guiltily on my days off, like an alcoholic sneaking a drink.

When I left parish ministry, Sundays were free and clear. There was no reason in the world why I could not observe sabbath--except for that compulsion of mine to

produce, perform, accomplish. I continued to work seven days a week until this past Lent, when I decided to obey the fourth commandment. One day a week, I would lie back in God's arms. One day a week, whether or not my work were done, I would live as if I were free.

While Mishnah and Talmud go into great detail about what may or may not be done on the sabbath, Torah is very straightforward: you shall not do any work. The key, for me, was freedom from compulsion. One day a week, "should," "ought" and "must" had no power over me. On Sundays I did not worship the clock, the dollar or my superego. I worshiped God instead, whom I trusted to run the world for one day without my help. I cannot even bring myself to tell you how I spent those days, since my mind still calls it sloth.

It was not sloth. It was sabbath, and its effect was immediate. Relationships became more spacious. Prayer became more spacious. Time itself became more spacious. Instead of charging out of the gate on Monday mornings, I found myself sauntering instead, still relishing the freedom of the day before. There was never enough time to get everything done, but I finally understood there never would be. There would only be enough time to live, with as much gratitude as I could muster.

Now Lent is over, and sabbath remains. My hold on it feels so tenuous. Week by week, I am so tempted to worship other gods, whose first requirement of me is that I relinquish my holy freedom. Week by week, I keep reaching for the gift God has offered me--the one human beings are so reluctant to accept that God made it a commandment.

Once when I attended a funeral at a black Baptist church, the preacher consoled us by telling us that the person we loved had gone on to that place where every day is Sunday. At the time, I believe I flinched. Now I know what he meant. We do not have to wait until we die to experience resurrection. God is ready whenever we are, with a weekly rehearsal for those who are willing to lie back in God's arms.

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