

THE FORGOTTEN COMMANDMENT

The Ten Commandments God handed down to us contain some rules and guidelines that we probably have no qualms about accepting and obeying. You're familiar with the list, I'm sure. We may not be able to recite all of them by memory, but we certainly recognize them when we hear them. I won't recite all ten laws because we just heard Eddie read them so well, but let me hold up the ones I'm sure most people think are most significant.

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not testify falsely about your neighbor in court, or covet any of your neighbor's possessions.

But there's one commandment—we could call it the forgotten commandment—that's often overlooked by us, and by our society and culture; and it seems to be considered a less important, and thus okay to ignore, commandment than the other nine God gave us. I'm talking about the fourth commandment.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy."

I think we could rightly call the command to keep the Sabbath day holy the "Rodney Dangerfield" commandment. Back in the day, comedian Rodney Dangerfield had a well-known and memorable catch phrase. Maybe you remember it: "I tell you, I get no respect."

The command to keep the Sabbath holy often gets no respect from people. It's not considered one of the more imperative, needs to be followed rules that the Lord came up with.

Don't murder? That's a very important regulation to keep, and it seems especially pertinent to us after the recent mass killing in Las Vegas. People shouldn't be going around killing each other in cold blood, if for no other reason than to possibly lessen the chance that someone will kill us in cold blood.

And the prohibition against stealing? That's another logical one to agree with. We think everyone is entitled to the money and possessions they earn. And besides, since everything in the world belongs to the Lord (yes, even our money), when we rob another person of their possessions we're actually robbing God.

But keeping the Sabbath holy? What's the big deal? I mean, we appreciate God's concern. And it makes us feel good that the Lord wants us to take a day

off once in a while. But hey, my time is limited. I work during the week, so I don't have any choice but to use the Sabbath day productively. How else will the grocery shopping get done? And what other day in my child's or grandchild's busy, active life can he or she get to play soccer or football, if not on a Sunday? The weekday is crowded with school and other busy time activities. Sunday is the perfect day to forget about everything—even God, unfortunately—and have a fun, relaxing time.

Listen to the Forth Commandment again, including God's commentary at the end. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work . . . For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but the LORD rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Okay, let's review. Why did God rest?

Well, in Exodus 31, God said to Moses, "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. . . ." Then God went on to say, The Sabbath "will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed." Did you catch that? On the seventh day God "rested and was refreshed." The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann pointed out that the term translated "refreshed" in this Scripture passage is a verb form of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, or "life." As a verb it means, literally, to be "lifed" or "selfed;" to be given more of one's nephesh.

It seems that God worked so hard on the first six days of the week, creating the heavens and the earth and all life on this planet, that God depleted God's self. God was worn out and exhausted by the labors of Creation. Isn't that astonishing? The Lord made the Sabbath, first and foremost, for God's own self, in order for God to be refreshed and God's life to be replenished. And God is gracious enough to share that holy day of rest with us, God's human creatures, because God knows that people get tired and need to be replenished, too. So the Sabbath Day is an important blessing for humankind, given to us out of the goodness, kindness and loving concern of God's heart.

If the Sabbath day was made by God to restore God's life, how much more will it restore the lives of you and me and those human beings who keep it? We know what it's like to be tired, frazzled, run down and wearied, don't we? That must be true, because whenever I ask someone how they're doing, I almost always get a one word response to that question: "Busy!" And sometimes it's supplemented with a second comment. "I'm so tired!"

Have you ever heard either, or maybe both of those responses when

you asked someone how they're doing? They're "busy"? They're "so tired." And, perhaps more relevantly, have you ever given that response to someone when they asked how you were doing? Does this sound familiar coming from your or someone else's lips? My life is crazy right now. My mind is racing so fast with things that are going on and things I have to do that I can't even think straight. I have a "To Do" list that's getting longer by the minute. It's just one thing after another. I don't have any time at all for myself. Stop the world, I want to get off!

Well, if you've ever found yourself in that kind of a physical, emotional or spiritual condition—frazzled, weary and wiped out—I have some wonderful news for you. It's the forgotten commandment; the law of God that gets no respect. God wants to stop the world for you and give you an opportunity to step off for a time and catch your breath, on at least a once a week basis.

It's called the Sabbath, and the Sabbath day of rest and restoration is so important to God that God commanded us to take it. It's non-negotiable, children. For your own health and wellbeing you need to unwind your bodies, calm your minds, replenish your souls, and draw closer to me.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Just as I, the Lord, did.

Here's something I learned while I was working on this sermon. The great Jewish prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel both pointed out to Israel that their failure to observe the Sabbath was among the reasons their community collapsed. It seems that, instead of taking Sabbath time to rest, restore their souls and refocus their attention on the Lord, the Israelites ran after other gods and practiced injustice. Instead of prayerfully relying on God to provide, they relied on their own greed and willingness to cheat and steal from others to make themselves secure. The end result was that the Babylonians conquered Israel, and the Jewish leaders were sent into exile.

When a faith community ignores the Sabbath and doesn't rest and refocus itself on God's priorities, that community eventually forgets what it is, why it exists, and how it's supposed to live. And the ultimate result is that the community dies.

I think it's imperative that we rediscover—or for some of us, discover for the first time—the value of Sabbath time. That doesn't necessarily mean having to take all day Saturday or Sunday off, although that's actually a pretty good idea. But maybe an alternative kind of Sabbath is to find brief periods of time during the week to renew our bodies, minds and souls, in order to help us remember who we are and whose we are.

I can't really be more specific about to what kinds of things we might do on our personal Sabbath times because everyone is different and is renewed in

different ways by different things. Some people can regenerate themselves by taking one day a week off, and others by taking a week or more off a year. Still others are able to have a daily mini-Sabbath by engaging in a brief ritual—such as silent prayer or some kind of meditation—while they’re sitting at their desk at work or doing something at home. The important thing is for each of us to discover the best way for us to experience Sabbath rest; and one of the first things we can do to help us find such a way is to pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to it.

Of course, to be able to pray we first have to stop our usual activities and put aside our busyness for a time so we can focus on our praying.

As many of you know, this past summer I traveled to Vermont and went on a five day retreat to a place called the Weston Priory, a Benedictine monastery located up in the Green Mountains. I had never done anything like that before, and to be honest I was nervous about going there; but it turned out to be one of the most positive, spiritually uplifting experiences I’ve ever had. I didn’t realize just how much I needed such a retreat until after I actually did it. Going to the Weston Priory was a genuine, blessed time of Sabbath rest and refreshment for me.

A number of weeks ago I was asked by someone if I was planning on talking about my retreat experience with the congregation in some way, such as in a sermon. At the time I wasn’t sure how to answer that question or whether I could effectively share what happened in those five blessed days, because the truth is, I didn’t know how it would be possible to do that.

A lot of what I experienced when I was there was internal, very personal and seemingly indescribable. But because my message today is about God’s command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy; and because my retreat at Weston Priory was by far the most powerful and significant Sabbath experience I’ve ever had, not just as a minister but ever, I want to share a little bit of what happened during it that I hope will give you a little taste of what I experienced.

As great as the retreat ended up being for me, for the sake of full disclosure I have to confess that the first two days were a challenge for me. I arrived at the priory a little before noon, in the pouring rain, and during my walk from the parking area to the reception building I got drenched. Not a great start. After settling in and drying off a bit, I was invited to eat with the brothers. They prepared wonderful and delicious meals from their own gardens and livestock, but things were done a little differently at mealtime, and at first I felt awkward.

For example, I assume that we would pray before we ate, but I didn’t expect the grace to be sung by us and all the brothers standing around the table,

holding hands. That caught me off guard and made me kind of uncomfortable. Also, the tradition at the Priory is to eat without talking—no idle chit-chat with the people beside you at the table—while the eldest brother, Brother John, who was 90 years old, read to the group in a monotone voice from a book entitled, *A History of the Benedictine Monks in China*.

Trust me, the story was as exciting as the title.

An hour after lunch I went to my first prayer service, and the entire liturgy was sung. It was very nice, but I wasn't familiar with any of the songs so it didn't really give me much spiritual sustenance. My residence—a room in a building called The Romero House—reminded me of college dormitory. It could accommodate eight men, but I was the only person in the entire building for the five days I was there so I had no interaction with any fellow retreaters at night. During my time alone I did a lot of reading and silent praying. Also, as a spiritual exercise, I hand-copied the Gospel of Mark in a journal I had brought with me.

So, for the first two days, I wasn't sure what to make of my time there. I felt out of my element and wondered if I'd made a mistake. I was lonely, and all the silence I was experiencing was deafening. It got to the point where I seriously considered leaving early. But I decided to give God a chance to change my mind.

After lunch on the third day—yes, on the third day, which in hindsight I now realize was very significant—I went into the beautiful and quaint chapel and sat down on one of the rough-hewn wooden chairs. I bowed my head and entered into what I think was the deepest prayer experience I've ever had. I poured my soul out to God, sharing my uncertainty, loneliness and uncomfortableness. "Okay, Lord," I prayed, "please tell me. Do I go home now, or do I stay?" I didn't want to be vaguely told what to do—whether to remain there or go home—I wanted God to hit me over the head with an answer I couldn't possibly miss or misinterpret.

After a few minutes sitting in that beautiful chapel, in a deep and intense state of prayer, my mind went totally quiet. I had entered a very deep and holy moment of silence. I strongly suspected that God was present, but I wasn't totally sure of it. Then, out of the blue, this inner voice spoke to me that was as real as any human voice. The voice simply whispered, "Be still, and know that I am God." One time. That was it.

"Be still and know that I am God."

The voice didn't scare me or startle me. The closest I can come to describing what I felt is: delight and joyful anticipation, because I knew God had made it clear to me that I was supposed to stay at the Priory for all of the five days I'd signed up for.

It was as though my soul was as light as a helium-filled balloon. I knew at that moment that I belonged to God, and the Lord wanted me to remain where I was so I could refresh my soul, rediscover God, and renew my relationship with God.

Let me share one last thing that happened. Soon after that experience, as I was walking back to my room at the Romero House, I felt this very strange sense I can't describe, but it was trying to get my attention. It was telling me to lower my eyes and look at the ground while I was walking because there was something down there for me. So I did that.

At first I wondered if I'd simply been imagining it, but I kept my eyes focused on the dirt road I was walking on. And after a few minutes I caught sight of a small stone—one of the thousands of stones I had walked past. And I could have very easily walked past this stone without noticing it, too. But this particular rock, which I picked up and still have, was roughly shaped like a heart. And I immediately knew what God wanted to tell me through it.

“For God so loved the world . . . “

And, more specifically, “For God so loved Fred Gagnon . . . “

That's one of the many wonderful things I took back with me from my five day Sabbath at Weston Priory in Vermont. A small stone signifying that God truly did love me. I knew that already, of course, at least in my head. But it had been a very long time since I genuinely felt God's love for me in my heart. And even though I already knew God loves me, it was so wonderful and uplifting to be reminded of that again, and to actually feel that love of God in my heart.

Now, I can't promise that the kind of wonderful spiritual experience I had at Weston Priory will happen to you if you keep the Sabbath holy. I also know that the kind of spiritual experience I had there might never happen to me again. I accept that and I'm comfortable with that, because I'll always have my memory of what God did for me at the Priory. And I'll always be able to draw on that memory of what happened and relive the experience when my soul is parched and in need of living water.

But this much I can tell you with total certainty: the chances are excellent that you or I won't have any kind of spiritual experience or powerful encounter with God if we don't remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. If we don't take time and make the effort to open ourselves up to God's presence and power—preferably on a regular basis—our relationship with God and our sense of God's presence will probably wither on the vine. And that would be very sad. For us, and for God.

So yes, my friends, as far as the Ten Commandments go, certainly we shouldn't murder or steal; we should be faithful to our spouse, and not lie about

our neighbor or covet our neighbor's things. We should worship God alone and use God's name with honor, reverence and respect.

As Christians, those are important rules to write on our hearts, and we should thank the Good Lord for them. But may we not overlook the law of God that seems to get little, if no respect. I'm talking about the forgotten commandment. Commandment number four.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Amen.