

Proper 20, Year A, 2020, Exodus 16
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St. Peter's Episcopal Church
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According to a 2018 article in *Business Insider*, there are several work habits of Americans that Europeans refuse to embrace. While the average full-time worker in the US puts in forty-eight hours of work per week, employees in Germany and Sweden tend to work closer to thirty-five hours per week. Most employers in the US offer just two weeks of vacation, and the average employee uses just 54% of the vacation time they are allotted. In comparison, most European companies offer at least four weeks of vacation, and workers don't hesitate to take them. Only one in five Americans take their lunch break away from their workspace. While many American workers are expected to reply to emails sent after 5 pm, in France a measure was adopted that allows workers to ignore emails sent after the end of the workday.¹

We often try to put a positive spin on these American work habits, describing people who work in this way as “energetic”, “devoted”, “ambitious”, or “driven.” Some workers say they do it because they love their jobs. But, even so, the costs to health and personal lives are real – sleep deficits, headaches, depression, burnout.² Increasing globalization and technology that allows people to work from anywhere at anytime has largely been blamed for the epidemic of current workaholicism, but I think we can find the tendency toward workaholicism even in scripture.

Take our reading from Exodus. Having just escaped from Egypt, the Israelites find themselves in the wilderness – tired, hungry, and cranky. And they begin to complain to Moses and Aaron, saying: *Why did you bring us into this desert to just die from starvation? We could just as well have died in Egypt, sitting next to our pots of meat and eating all the bread we wanted.* God hears their complaints and tells Moses that each morning God will send down bread for the people, and each evening God will send quail. But here's the catch: each morning the people are to gather enough bread for that day only; the only exception is the day before the Sabbath, when they can gather enough for that day as well as the for the Sabbath day. The Lord tells Moses that these instructions are a test. A test of what? Well, scripture doesn't tell us. Maybe it's a test of sheer obedience. But I believe it is more a test of the people's trust in God, of their faith in God to provide what they need.

You would think that by now the Israelites would know that God was going to take care of them. A review of their history with God up to this point would seem to make that clear. God hears the cries of the Israelites in slavery, and God sends Moses to confront Pharaoh.

¹ Mark Abadi, “11 American work habits other countries avoid at all costs,” *Business Insider*, 3/8/18, <https://www.businessinsider.com/unhealthy-american-work-habits-2017-11>.

² Neil Osterweil, “Are You a Workaholic?”, *WebMD*, <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/are-you-a-workaholic#1>.

As expected, Moses meets resistance and God sends a host of plagues upon the land. The Israelites find themselves stuck between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army, and God parts the waters, letting the people cross on dry land. In the chapter just before today's reading, the Israelites complain that they can't drink the water where they are because it is bitter, and God makes it sweet. Everything in their recent past should have shown them that God will provide for God's people.

The instruction regarding manna is another way for God to prove to the Israelites that God will provide. "Only gather enough for this day and don't keep any of it for tomorrow; instead, trust that tomorrow I will send more." But immediately after our reading from Exodus, in the same chapter, we are told that the people didn't follow God's instructions.

Perhaps the Israelites were simply used to working hard to provide for themselves in slavery. Perhaps their disobedience was based in frugality, or worry, or what seemed like common sense. Whatever the reason, the Israelites didn't listen. They gathered more than enough manna for one day, keeping some for the next day, and it grew foul and bred worms. Except on the day before the Sabbath – when they gathered enough manna for two days on that day, the manna remained good the following day.

These instructions from God about gathering manna weren't the capricious whims of a power-hungry God; they were God's way of shaping Israel into a community that embodied trust in God's provision, justice in the equitable distribution of food, and a Sabbath reflective of God's own practice of rest. It was God's way of shaping Israel reflect the character of its God.

The practice of Sabbath shapes us today just like the practice of gathering and saving only enough manna for that day shaped the Israelites. Sabbath is, at its roots, a practice in trust. To take time out of our busy schedules, to put down our work, to take time to strengthen our soul and to rest in God – to do these things means we have to trust that God will give us enough time to accomplish what it is God has called or is calling us to do. (Note, not always enough time to do what others expect of us or what we expect from ourselves, but enough time to do what *God calls us to do*.) Sabbath shapes us into people who trust in the abundance of God.

But Sabbath is not always easy to practice. It is difficult not to internalize some of the subliminal and not-so-subliminal messages that our culture sends us about our work, messages like: we are what we do, or our identity comes from our work (and not from the one who created us), or the more we work the more we deserve, or the name of the game is not just having enough but having more. Such messages can turn us into the laborers who arrive early in today's gospel reading from Matthew.

Matthew tells the story of a landowner who goes out several times during the day and hires workers for his vineyard, saying to them: "Come and work, and I'll pay you what is right." But the laborers who arrive early in the morning want to be the ones to determine

what is “right.” And, according to these early morning laborers, what is “right” is not about what they need, but about what they feel they deserve. It’s not, for them, a matter of getting enough, but a matter of getting more than those who work fewer hours – more money, more status, more grace.

We are often more like the laborers who arrive early to the vineyard than we’d like to admit. We want God to work on a system of merit, not one of grace. That’s why we need the spiritual discipline of Sabbath in today’s culture. Just like the Lord’s instruction to the Israelites to gather only enough food for that day, the practice of Sabbath slowly teaches us to trust in God – it teaches us that the world doesn’t rest entirely on our shoulders, that God will provide, that while we may not have “more” we will have enough, that the kingdom of heaven embraces grace more than merit.

I confess that it can be difficult for me to talk about the practice of Sabbath, because I know that there are many people who work hard and long hours, often to the point of exhaustion, *without* being able to put enough food on the table, to keep the electricity turned on, or to provide for basic healthcare needs. Overall, one in six Arkansans are food insecure; the number goes up to one in four when we talk about children. What do we say about Sabbath to people who do not even have enough to eat?

Well, I don’t believe the existence of poverty undermines the importance of Sabbath and of trusting in God to provide; instead, I believe poverty highlights the communal nature of Sabbath. See, a renewed practice of Sabbath might lead us to a renewed trust in God’s provision, a greater belief in the abundance of God, and a different vision of what is “enough.” And if we begin to actually embody that trust in God, if we learn to be satisfied with “enough” and not “more,” just imagine what might be different in the world. Would we learn to gather just enough for this day, and leave some for our neighbors to gather? Would there, in fact, then be enough for everyone? Would becoming in-touch with the goodness of God in our own lives through the practice of Sabbath help us extend that same all-embracing mercy and abundance to those around us?

Sabbath is about shaping our lives to reflect the nature of the God we proclaim. And so, in a time of increasing evictions, unemployment, and fear, perhaps now more than ever is the time to reclaim the practices of gathering only enough and observing the Sabbath.