

# Sanctuary in Time

sermon digest

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Genesis 2:1-3; John 5:1-16

larry dipboye

If your memory has a long reach, you may recall the song that Tennessee Ernie Ford took to the top of the charts in 1955, "Sixteen Tons." The finger-snapping rhythm and the deep mellow voice of Ford were probably the key to the success of the recording. The song was particularly popular in the industrial community of my childhood. The lyrics addressed the injustice of the coal mining industry of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century :

Some people say a man is made outta mud. A poor man's made outta muscle and blood  
Muscle and blood and skin and bones A mind that's a-weak and a back that's strong.  
You load sixteen tons, what do you get Another day older and deeper in debt  
Saint Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go I owe my soul to the company store.

The song recalled the "truck system" common in the coal industry in Britain and the US and in numerous other manufacturing systems of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that grew out of the Industrial Revolution. From the French word for *barter*, the *truck* system made workers virtual slaves of the company. Wages were paid in writ or credit good only at the company store where prices were high and profits went to the owner. Workers usually lived in company-owned, substandard housing for which rent was subtracted from wages. The isolated mountain coal mine communities became economic prisons. Economic control allowed the company to keep workers in debt so that escape to another job or place to live was impossible. Exploitation of workers varied, and examples of benevolent owners could be found, but the scales of justice were tilted toward the owners and managers of the mines. Eventually the impoverished living conditions of the coal towns led to the formation of unions, strikes, and a violent war between coal miners and the coal companies.

By the time I was snapping my fingers with Tennessee Ernie Ford, I was convinced that, like slavery, the injustice of the coal mines had become ancient history. Following World War II, industry was booming and workers unions were thriving in the US. Including my father, workers in our town had never had it so good. We were somewhat aware of the impoverished Third World countries. Except for federal foreign aid, Christian missions, and some charitable organizations, they were not our problem. But gradually competition from developing countries became "our problem." We now live in a global economic system in which the old worker's prisons and virtual slavery are a stark reality.

The collapse of the eight-story garment manufacturing building in Bangladesh last spring with the death of more than 1100 workers and over 2000 injured thundered around the world. We learned that we can live on the cheap in wealthy nations like ours at the expense of the poorest people in the world. Industrial exploitation of labor, worker's prisons, virtual slavery continues to thrive in this global economy. Our distance from places like Bangladesh allows us to look the other way as we inadvertently lend support for the system, but our Jewish-Christian roots should call us to the defense of the "have-nots" of the world and shock us awake to the reality that we are among the "haves."

***The Sabbath principle of our faith is bigger than a day of the week or the definition of work.*** Having grown up with "Blue Laws" that limited entertainment and some commercial enterprises on Sundays, I have often reacted in the pulpit to the stark legalism in Sabbath Law in the Gospels. The stories usually speak to the legal limitations on work from sundown on Friday to sundown Saturday. Gospel references to a "Sabbath day journey," for example, connected to a known limitation in the culture on the number steps that could be taken on a Sabbath—ridiculous! Jesus defended his disciples for gathering and eating grain as they walked through a field on a Sabbath, technically an act of harvest—nitpicking! Jesus proposed a Sabbath principle: The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. In the healing events that took place on the Sabbath, Jesus was in conflict with the Jewish legal system about whether healing was work. Jesus asked whether harm or healing best suits the Sabbath principle.

John's story about the healing of the man by the pool is less about healing (the compassion of Jesus toward one who had lived with a disabling disease for thirty-eight years) or the question of selective miracle (why this man rather than another) than about the Sabbath principle. You have to wonder why Jesus did not avoid conflict by waiting until sundown or why he needed to inquire about the man's desire to be healed. The issue was healing on the Sabbath. Ignoring the miracle of healing,

the critics accused the man of violating the Sabbath by carrying his mat. When they learned that Jesus commanded him to carry his mat, the critics turned on Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. John concludes that the persecution of Jesus is rooted in his Sabbath violations.

Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells of growing up in Greenville, South Carolina. He identified the shift away church dominance of the culture when the local theater announced that it would be open on Sundays. Willimon joined a group of friends who walked through the church one Sunday to make a show for MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship) and slipped out the back door to attend a John Wayne movie. It reminds me of the running dialogue among people in my church at home about whether a Christian should “work on Sundays.” Most of the plants in our community ran 24/7. Having a job did not leave a choice.

In response to his critics Jesus affirmed the Sabbatical principle that transcends our petty arguments.

**God's gift to humanity is meaningful work and refreshing rest.** Rooted in the creation stories of Genesis, Jewish Sabbath followed the holy rhythm of creation. God worked to create the world in six days. On the seventh day God chose “to cease,” the root meaning of Sabbath, to make time to enjoy and reflect on the productive work of creation. Thus, the root principle of Sabbath applies to all of creation. In Old Testament application, Sabbath applied to farm animals and servants in the household and even to non-Jewish sojourners. The Sabbath principle is a divinely ordained rhythm of meaningful work and refreshing rest given by God in the creation of life.

The child's proverb, “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” is the reasoned principle of Sabbath. In fact, all of us have experienced the anxiety produced by constant work and deprivation of rest. The joy of creativity gets lost in the drudgery of constant striving. Eventually the work becomes slower and less efficient. Although the unusual work week of the Jews was a mark of identity, the Sabbath principle is not just an exercise to demonstrate one's faith. The practical effect of a day of rest and reflection, eventually a day of worship and reverence, has been proven.

I still experience the Sabbath surprise when I have strained to accomplish a task, like preparing a sermon, and find myself locked in and lacking inspiration. In the middle of the night, in the midst of rest, meaning comes together as if falling from heaven. Sabbath rest contributes to meaningful work.

Like many biblical principles of faith, the Sabbath principle seemed always to exist in theory that broke down under the strain of real life. The running debate with Jesus in the Gospels seems always to rest on the question of practical application. To their credit, the Jewish legalists worked to make practical application of the Sabbath rest as they understood it. The Sabbath rest was always a problem during wars with the neighbors. The economic cost of the Sabbatical year to rest the crops and the year of Jubilee to free the slaves was always too prohibitive to practice consistently in the real world.

**The Sabbath principle is the foundation of world economic justice.** Without regard to whether one is Jewish or Christian, the creation principle of Sabbath applies to all of humanity. If we are to keep Sabbath, we need to join together in commitment: every child of God in this world deserves meaningful work and refreshing rest. Although allowed and practiced in both Old Testament and New Testament eras, slavery is a direct contradiction to Sabbath. To treat people as property is purely and simply *evil*. To allow the rhythm of meaningful work and refreshing rest should be non-negotiable for workers and a top priority for managers and owners.

We have entered a new wave in the industrial revolution. The entrance of developing countries into commercial, industrial, global economics has created a pull toward the age of slavery in which workers were treated as property of their masters. Global competition has brought salaries down, applied pressure to produce more for less, and has encroached on the human necessity of rest, meditation, and worship. We have moved into an era where workers in this country are hesitant to take days off or vacations lest their employers give their jobs to someone who will do more for less.

Dorothy Bass concludes: “What time stressed contemporary people most need is not more time but time of a different quality, time that is beyond price, time that has shape and substance, time that need not be wrestled with each day as if it were an enemy, time that is the habitation of blessing”

*(Interpretation, January, 2005, p. 34-35).*