

WHY THE YANKEES ARE GOD'S TEAM

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Grace Church in New York
Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Mark 2:23-3:6
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My brothers and sisters in Christ, I need to preach a sermon that I never thought I'd have to preach, but it has become apparent that the situation is called for. I call this sermon "Why The Yankees Are God's Team."

But before I get into the details of why I believe that Yankees are God's team, we need to go back a ways to the story of Exodus. But I promise, if you go with me all the way back to Exodus, it will eventually bring us back to why the Yankees are God's team.

You will remember that at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the Israelites - that is, the Hebrew speaking descendants of Abraham - were enslaved in Egypt, and working under the harsh treatment of the Pharaoh of that time. The stories goes that their cries went up to God, and God heard them. And so, in a pivotal moment, God called out to Moses from a burning bush, and told Moses to be his spokesperson to Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites be freed from slavery. But the first time that Moses went to Pharaoh to say his famous "Let my people go," the Pharaoh rebuked him, saying "Who is this Lord that I should heed him and let the Israelites go?" And then the Pharaoh yelled out to the taskmasters that the people were crying to their God because they were lazy, and in response the taskmasters were to require the slaves to make the same number of bricks as they were making before, but this time, they also had to gather all their own straw for the bricks.

This may, at first blush, be an insignificant detail, but it is not. This is to say that the amount of work the people had before - enough to make their cries heard in heaven - was being made worse, because while they still had that load to bear, they also now had more to do. Before they may have had a moment to catch their breath, before they may have had time to sleep at night, before they may have had time to feed their children, but now all the time that was available to them in the whole world needed to be put to finding straw so that they could make the same amount of bricks that they had previously been making, or they would be beaten, sometimes to death.

I don't need to tell you, because we all already know, that time is a precious commodity. Imagine, for a moment, if all that you have to do in one day, your 'to do list' if you will, remained the same, but also, in order to do those things, you had to acquire all the natural resources to make those things happen. I know that I, personally, would not get very far in my day if my coffee beans weren't already harvested, roasted, and ground, ready for me to make my working coffee, and that if I had to do all that myself, I would never get anything else done, let alone all the things I *have* to do. Just imagining having to take the time to do everything myself - like the Israelite slaves who had to gather their own straw to make the bricks for Pharaoh - this idea gives me heart palpitations. This is because time is precious, and I don't want to lose any of it, or worse yet, have someone take it away from me.

But that is exactly what happened to the Israelites. Pharaoh took away any semblance they may have ever had for time off, for down time, for quality time, or for time to rest.

I know you know the rest of that story, so I won't belabor the details of the Ten Plagues that eventually convinced Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, including the angel of death passing over the homes of the Israelites, marking the first Passover, and the people leaving Egypt only to come to the Red Sea and realize that Pharaoh changed his mind, so the people were trapped between a death by drowning or returning to death by slavery, only to then have God have Moses part the Red Sea, so they could safely walk to the other side. Once there, on the other side, in what we now call "the wilderness" the people were free from Pharaoh, and that is how we find them in today's passage from Deuteronomy.

Moses has gathered the people and is recounting for them the Ten Commandments that Moses received on behalf of the people at Mt. Sinai. Moses reminds them, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

It's very easy for us, all these thousands of years later, to have forgotten the context of this particular commandment, but for the Israelites the connection would have been all too real: they had a Pharaoh once, a Pharaoh who took away their time, and thereby took away their life and well-being, but God liberated them and promised them that they'd never live that way again, and to remember that promise, and do their part to never let a Pharaoh have more say over their lives than God does, they would set aside one day a week as holy time, to thank God for all that God did for them. Keeping Sabbath, then, is a way to remember that God is the one who liberates us, who restores our dignity, and is an act of gratitude, not by doing *more* but by doing *less*, that is, taking the time that God has given us, and using it for God, alone.

We Episcopalians, and most Christians, don't have a tradition of keeping a twenty-four hour Sabbath period like our Jewish loved ones do. But this does not exempt us from this particular commandment. And yet, for many of us, this is probably the least kept commandment. I don't know about you, but I actually find it the hardest commandment. I've never killed anyone - and that's been pretty easy not to do. I've coveted a thing or two, but hopefully also shown more gratitude for what I already have that I hope it balances out in the end. And I'd like to think that I've honored my mother and father - although we'd have to fact check that with them, I guess. But setting aside time for God alone, that one has been truly difficult. And what's funny is that when I die, I suspect that God will say to me, "but I thought that would be the easy one."

It's possible that part of our lax views towards keeping sabbath time come from misunderstanding passages of the New Testament, like today's reading from the Gospel according to Mark. In today's reading we have - not one, but - two times when Jesus seemingly disregards the command to keep the sabbath holy by not working. In the first, Jesus and his disciples plucked heads of grain from the grain fields they were walking through. In the second, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. But Jesus is not breaking the sabbath, Jesus never rejected the Law, instead, Jesus is challenging the authorities' understanding of the sabbath. Jesus never forgot that the Sabbath was meant to promote life and wholeness, it was the

celebration of God the liberator and God the restorer of human dignity. It was the rejection of every Pharaoh-like figure who would try and place themselves over and above God. Jesus did two acts that preserved life and honored God. He made sure people had food to eat and the means by which to take care of themselves. He ensured well-being. He instilled joy.

By his actions, Jesus reminded those around him, and us today, that sabbath is not rest for the sake of rest, it is time for the things that are life-giving.

As many of you know, I studied at Yale Divinity School in New Haven when I was studying to become a priest. I made a friend while I was there, named Jane. Jane and I had a lot in common, and were fast friends. As Easter was approaching my first year there, I wasn't sure where I would go for Easter that year. I had a few parishes where I had worshiped on various Sundays, but I didn't know anyone at any of these parishes, and I didn't really want to go alone on Easter for some reason. I was really far from home, and couldn't afford to fly home for the weekend. In sharing this with Jane, she invited me to her parents home for the weekend. I worried that I would be an interloper in a family event, but agreed because Jane was so excited at the idea of having me there. Her parents lived here in the city, on the Upper East Side, and so we took the train into Grand Central on that Saturday, and hopped into a cab to their home. Her parents were so warm and inviting, but I still felt like I was crashing a family party. Not for any good reason, but still, that's how I felt. The next morning, Easter morning, we all got up and started to get ready for church. When I came out to the living room, I noticed that Jane's parents had set out Easter baskets - one for her and one for me. And mine was bigger! This is mostly because, while we had the same amount of chocolate eggs and marshmallow bunnies, mine had a Yankees hat on top. Not really understanding, and worried for a moment that they wanted me to wear this to church, Jane's mother came over to me and said, "we want you to feel at home here, and if you're going to be at home here, you're going to need a Yankees hat."

And feeling I had of being an outsider, an interloper, a party-crasher, these feelings were all gone. I was restored for wholeness and felt the transformative power of hospitality. These people, whom I had only met the day before, showed me great love and care, and I was utterly moved.

I had been fearful that I'd be lonely for Easter, and then I'd been fearful of crashing someone else's Easter. I was spent time on fear and worry. But God freed me from my Pharaohs of fear and worry, God restored me to wholeness through giving me a community, which happened to be a community of Yankees-lovers. And I am proud to be in this community of Yankees-lovers, because every time I think about the Yankees, or even hear about the Yankees - which come up a lot! - I am reminded of the goodness which God wills for me, the kindness that others have shown me, and I am moved to take a moment to give thanks and praise. For me, the Yankees are God's team because the Yankees help me to honor the sabbath by taking the time to give thanks to God.

Maybe another sports team is part of your sabbath. Maybe it's not a team, but watching your kids play sports, or maybe it's you playing sports, or spending time with loved ones, or going to a museum. Or, or, or... it could be anything. But it's something that is life-giving to you. It is something that holds your Pharaohs at bay so that you are free from them, and have the time to

rest and refresh in the presence of God. It is something that reminds you of God's goodness towards you. Something that fills you with joy. Something that heals you and restores you.

Whatever it is, it is your sabbath, and it is holy. It is God's gift to you. Don't ever let any Pharaoh try and convince you otherwise. Instead, hear this as an invitation: "remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy."