

Shalom and Sabbath

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[0 : 00] Every Sunday on my way to service, I take the S2 or the S9 bus that goes straight down 16th Street and across K Street. And this route takes me past both McPherson Square and Franklin Square.

And these two squares are less than a few streets away from each other, but they could not be more different. In case you're not familiar with the area, Franklin Square recently underwent some pretty serious renovations.

It closed for over a year during the height of the pandemic so that the city could revitalize it and install things like a fountain, a pavilion, a space for art exhibits, and a children's play area.

It is an absolutely beautiful space, and I love walking by it because it just fills me with a sense of peace to see the people gathering, to hear the water of the fountain.

But I cannot help but remember that these renovations did force the displacement of some of our neighbors experiencing homelessness. Franklin Square used to look a lot like McPherson Square does now.

[1 : 05] I do not think that there is a single part of McPherson Square that does not have a tent on it. And as I just went by it today, I can vouch for that. And this tent is the only shelter for someone who experiences homelessness.

And to me, the contrast between poverty and prosperity in these two squares is striking. It reveals the ways that our society often does not consider the impact on the most vulnerable before making financial decisions meant to support the city.

And I don't want you to get me wrong that I am happy that we have a new beautiful park in the city, but I am also concerned when more resources are not being used to help the people most in need. And part of that concern is due to the fact that I see the housing crisis in D.C. every single day. And I know that it's only getting worse as housing costs are skyrocketing across the city.

Right now, I work at a family shelter in the city, and it reminds me of the structural barriers that prevent people from accessing the resources they need. Even apart from displacement, people experiencing homelessness often struggle to connect with resources.

[2 : 12] And even then, there's no guarantee that they will find permanent housing and achieve even a moderate level of safety and security. This housing crisis is only one of many ways that we can see how there doesn't seem to be enough to go around.

And there are many other examples of this kind of scarcity that we might see. And not having enough can be used to justify things like exploitation, like asking people to work harder just to earn enough to live on.

And it can also be used to justify inaction, because this is just the way things always are. These two parks are a visual depiction of the vast gulf between having more than enough and not having enough.

Seeing these two parks makes me wonder what it would look like to close the gap, to bring everyone into a collective sense of peace, security, and wholeness, where we can all experience both the beauty of a public park and the safety and warmth of a house to go home to.

It makes me long to see a society where everyone can experience wholeness. But this example shows how our communal approach to things like finances, money and possessions, even public parks, often struggles to create that society.

[3 : 28] Sometimes it makes that society seem even further away. In Old Testament language, we are living in a society that struggles to realize shalom. Shalom is one of those buzzwords that often gets simplified.

I was always taught that shalom simply means peace. And that is true. But there is so much more to it than that. Shalom comes from this ancient Hebrew word, shalem.

And shalom carries with it ideas of well-being, safety, contentment. And it can also mean an absence of conflict, warfare, and violence. But that is only one small part of the meaning.

Shalom also implies action. We can't simply keep the peace, but we must actively make peace.

Shalom addresses the question of how should people live with one another.

Shalom is about so much more than our individual well-being. Shalom requires us to consider how we might ensure the well-being of everybody. Randy Woodley is an indigenous scholar and theologian who defines shalom in this way.

[4 : 39] Shalom is communal, holistic, and tangible. There is no private or partial shalom. The whole community must have shalom or no one has shalom.

As long as there are hungry people in a community that is well-fed, there can be no shalom. Where there are homeless and jobless people amid the employed and wealthy, shalom cannot exist.

Shalom is not for the many, while a few suffer. Nor is it for the few, while the many suffer. It must be available for everyone. Woodley goes on to say that shalom is always defined on the margins.

If we look at our society, we know there is no shalom because there is poverty, homelessness, and injustice around every corner. There are pockets of prosperity like Franklin Square, and there are pockets of poverty like McPherson Square.

If we are to become a church who cares about creating shalom, we must care for the people who are on the margins. This looks like moving from considering our own economic success to considering the economic success of the entire community.

[5 : 55] So the defining question of my sermon is this. How can we use our money and possessions to create a society of shalom?

Let us turn to the example of ancient Israel. Much like us, the Israelites knew what it was like to live in a society without shalom.

The Israelites lived under a system built around the exploitation of their labor and slavery while they were in Egypt. They were at the bottom of the economic ladder. They did not have the right to secure their own welfare, let alone the welfare of others.

They were forced to work in an environment where there was simply not enough resources to go around. They had to make bricks, but they were not provided with the straw they needed to make those bricks.

So they had to go out and find it themselves, but their workload only got more and more unbearable. Much of Egypt's wealth and success was created by these enslaved Israelites who did not get to experience any of the benefits.

[6 : 56] The Pharaoh monitored what the Israelites were producing and kept them to a schedule that allowed for no rest and no relief from the endless demands of productivity. There was no shalom here.

But once God delivered them from slavery, the Israelites needed to decide how they were going to live together. The story after the Exodus is about how Israel set out to create shalom on every level of their society, including economics.

One of their solutions to these problems of exploitation and scarcity was to create structures that supported shalom or the flourishing of all. They did not just see exploitation and scarcity, but they did something about it.

The Ten Commandments was the foundational document of ancient Israel. Most of us probably don't think right off the top of our heads that the Ten Commandments have anything at all to do with money or possessions.

But these commandments were meant to order every single aspect of their life, and that includes their approach to things like money and possessions. And from the Ten Commandments, Israel developed an extensive series of laws laid out how the Israelites would care for the poor and marginalized in their midst, and create a society where shalom could be communal, holistic, and tangible.

[8 : 22] So I can see five principles in Israel's economic structure that supported shalom, and I want to go through and explain each of them briefly. Please turn in your Bibles to Exodus 20.

I won't be reading the whole chapter, but I think it's just helpful as I'm going through it to reference the commandments. The verses that I will be reading will be on the screen, though.

So let us begin with the first two verses. It reads, Then God spoke all of these words. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. The first principle in creating shalom was simple. Remember the Lord your God.

The Israelites were called to remember their past. They were once slaves in Egypt. They lived under an unjust empire that exploited their labor and did not allow them freedom. [9 : 25] But they were also encouraged to remember their present. God delivered them. Everything that they then possessed, from their land down to their wealth, belonged to God.

When we understand the true character of God, we are reminded that we shouldn't repeat the system of exploitation and scarcity. Instead, we are called to the way of freedom.

The second principle of creating structures of shalom is to honor the Sabbath. The Israelites practiced their newfound freedom through the Sabbath.

In Exodus chapter 20, verses 8 through 11, God commanded the Israelites, Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, you, your son, or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

[10 : 26] For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Notice how the Sabbath is rooted in the rest of God. If even God rests, then we are also meant to rest. And I also want us to notice here that Sabbath was meant for everyone.

Unfortunately, we currently live in a society where rest can be seen as a luxury rather than a basic human right. If we live in a society where people are not able to rest, if they are required to work every single day or work multiple jobs to earn enough money just to make a living, then we do not live in a society of shalom.

Walter Brueggemann does an excellent job of explaining why Sabbath is so important. In his book, Sabbath as Resistance, he writes, The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgement that God and God's people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production, and so dispatched, as we used to say, as hands in the service of a command economy.

Rather, they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. Let me break this down a little bit further. In my own life, I often find it difficult to rest because of my own relationship with money and possessions.

[11 : 59] I grew up in a low-income household where I often simply resigned myself to not getting the things that I wanted. And half the time, I knew that I would not get the things that I needed, and so I learned to get by with less and less.

Now that I'm on my own, trying to make it at the beginning of my career, I feel like I constantly have to be doing something to earn money, to get a higher-paying job, to find a better apartment, and to achieve all the conventional markers of success.

I often feel inferior when I can't afford the latest iPhone, or I can't afford to move out on my own. I struggle to prioritize rest when so much of my life is consumed with acquiring money and possessions.

And it's hard to be generous to my neighbor, too, when I can't help but feel that I am not enough and I do not have enough. Sabbath is one of those practices that helps me break those bonds. It reminds me that no matter what I do or don't accomplish in the course of a day, I am enough. And my worth is not defined by my ability to earn money or accumulate more possessions.

[13 : 14] But Sabbath is also communal. Sabbath allows me to consider the needs of others. If I am worthy enough without earning every spare penny I can, then so is everyone else.

We are commanded to rest, yes. We are also encouraged to support the rest of others. Even the land was supposed to rest, which reminds us to take a break from endlessly producing and simply abide in the gift of creation.

Now, as we move on from the Sabbath, the rest of the commandments are part of Walter Brueggemann calls an economy of neighborliness. And we could also call it an economy of shalom. At first glance, the rest of the commandments don't really seem to be centered on economics at all. Honoring your mother and father, not murdering, not committing adultery.

All of these commandments are about how we live with each other, yes, but they're not really about, like, how we deal with money, right? But I have often heard it said in church that all the

commandments can be summed up with one.

[14 : 22] Do not steal. The idea of theft does seem to be the basis of a lot of these commandments. For instance, the first commandment about having no other gods before the Lord reminds us not to take glory away from God and assign it to other things.

We are prohibited from stealing someone's life or their spouse or even stealing someone's story by bearing false witness against them. Therefore, the third principle of creating shalom is do not steal what rightfully belongs to your neighbor.

I want to focus on the last commandment. In Exodus 20, verse 17, God commands the Israelites, you shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The word covet is interesting because we don't use it that much today. And in this context, the Hebrew word used, hamad, is typically paired with words that indicate that one's property has been seized or taken away by force.

In a book, Covenant Economics, theologian Richard Horsley says that this commandment should actually be translated, you shall not covet or seize your neighbor's house or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

[15 : 51] This commandment was meant to protect families from unjust practices that would take away one's land or livelihood, such as their house or other possessions. In ancient Israelite society, most people believed that God had given each family an allotment of land.

Similar to the concept of manna, each family had enough to survive. It was forbidden to permanently take what belonged to your neighbor. And this was meant to protect families from predatory practices that would take away everything that they had to live on.

And this prohibition against stealing can also relate to things like charging interest. If a family becomes desperate enough to take out a loan, the lender should not further take advantage of that person's misfortune by charging additional interest.

This ties into the fourth principle of shalom, which is to share out of your surplus. The Israelites recognized that an essential part of shalom was taking care of the needs of the poor.

This included honoring what the poor did possess, yes, but it also included opening their hands to give to the poor. Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 7 through 8 puts it like this.

[17 : 06] Israel used two major practices to meet the needs of their community.

One is the tithing system, and most of us probably have this idea that the tithe may be used to line the pockets of the religious authorities. The tithe in ancient Israel was used to support the religious class, but that was because they did not have land of their own.

So the community had to gather around them to support them. And in a similar way, the tithe was meant to be given to the poor and the oppressed, which were orphans, widows, and foreigners who also did not have an inheritance.

And there was also the practice of gleaning, which required all landowners to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so the poor could take what they needed. In this way, the more well-off were meant to support the struggling so that everyone would have enough.

But sometimes, when people were no longer able to provide for their family, they would sell their land. They would also be forced to sell themselves or other members of their family into slavery so that they would have enough to live on.

[18 : 42] But this was never meant to be a permanent solution. I want us to quickly go to Deuteronomy 15 with the first two verses. The first two verses read, Every seventh year, you shall grant a remission of debts.

And this is the manner of the remission. Every creditor should remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community because Yahweh's mission has been proclaimed.

This leads me to the final principle of Shalom, which is to forgive debts. The form of the debt doesn't matter.

Some may have owed back a loan. Other people may have been sold into debt slavery. Others may have sold their land to support their families. There were many ways that the poor in the society could find themselves in debt.

Debt forgiveness was meant to be a visible reminder of the character of God. God had delivered the Israelites from the exploitative practices of Egypt, and they were not to repeat those same mistakes

in their new society.

[19 : 53] They were to remember the freedom that they had by setting other people free from the bondage of debt every seven years. In this way, also known as the year of Jubilee, slaves would be emancipated, loans would be forgiven, and land would be restored to their original owners.

No misfortune was permanent. No person should be left destitute without the support of the community. Each of these principles were meant to contribute to the flourishing of everybody within the community, and not merely some.

And in all of these ways, Israel sought to create shalom. At this point in the sermon, you may be wondering how this relates to our lives together.

I do not believe that we are required to adopt the economic structure of ancient Israel, but I do believe that the principles of ancient Israel should require us to think more deeply about our own approach to communal economics.

Israel attempted to create a society of shalom through things like the Sabbath, prohibition against interest, debt relief, and the year of Jubilee. How then are we supposed to use our money and possessions to create shalom?

[21 : 14] Shalom starts small. Shalom begins right where we are. Shalom begins by knowing that we have more than enough.

Here at the table, we have an incredibly vast amount of resources at our disposal. So let us consider ways that we can leverage those gifts for the sake of the community.

If anyone is in need, let them ask freely, knowing that their needs matter and they ought to be fulfilled. If anyone has more than enough, let them share. This is how we create a society where everybody has enough and all can flourish.

This is how we create shalom. Consider also how our community spaces, which include our community groups, our affinity groups, our learning cohort, and others, can be a site where we practice these principles of communal economics.

Many of us are familiar with this concept of self-care, but it is long past time for us to consider community care. In other words, how are we caring for ourselves and for others around us?

[22 : 23] This looks different for each of us. So I want to leave you with some ways to practice communal economics and promote shalom. I'm going to list four practices, and I know that there are some perfectionists in the room who will look at these practices and want to add all of them to the to-do list and set about to cross them off by the end of the week.

But I want to encourage us not to do that. I want to encourage you to pick one of these practices and find a way to integrate that into your life.

Remember that shalom starts small. So the first is to promote your rest and the rest of others. And second, consider where you are spending the majority of your resources.

Take inventory of where your money is going and why. For me, I spend a lot of time ordering delivery. So one of the things that I'm going to do is consider ways that I can stop relying so heavily on the gig economy and support my local businesses instead.

This doesn't mean that I will stop ordering out, but when I do need to utilize that service, I will consider how I can better support that person by the way that I tip and how I promote that welfare through policy.

[23 : 42] So ask yourself, how can my resources be used to help someone who is in need? And then set out to meet that need. Three, actively divest from exploitive practices and systems and advocate for policies that promote shalom.

What systems are harming people? What systems are helping people? Align your finances, your energy, and your resources in a manner that promotes our collective well-being.

And then encourage members of your community to do the same. And fourth and finally, forgive debts and restore what rightfully belongs to our neighbor.

Reparations can be a hard word for some of us. There is nothing easy about wrestling with the harms done in the past. It requires a great deal of humility and God's help to accomplish justice here in this life.

But it is important for us to consider how we have participated in systems that have taken what doesn't belong to us. We can begin by having these conversations within our communities here at church and brainstorm ways to practice solidarity with our resources.

[24 : 53] This can range from advocating for land-backed policies that restore land to indigenous peoples to carefully considering our impact on native Washingtonians and low-income residents when we choose a neighborhood to live in.

It may also look like not holding someone's debts against them and advocating for policies where everybody is able to have enough. There are so many ways that we can create systems of shalom right here, right now, right where we are.

So as you leave this place, I hope that you'll consider how we can work together to create a society where all can thrive. None of us have to do this work alone.

It requires a great deal of prayer to discern how to do these things well, and it also requires the Holy Spirit to empower us. Creating shalom is the work of an entire community empowered by the love, the strength, and the freedom of God.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. . .

[26 : 14] .