An Indigenous theological perspective on Sabbath

Randy S. Woodley

Sabbath is a biblical concept long misunderstood and misconstrued. From Sabbath police still operating in the spirit of New England Puritans who punished violators of blue laws, to Christians who ignore Sabbath or reduce its observance to going to church on Sunday, people are confused about the true spirit of Sabbath. Yet our Scriptures stress the importance of Sabbath and offer instruction about its meaning and guidance for its observance. From this source, from nature itself, and from Sabbath parallels in the tradition of Indigenous North American peoples, we can learn vital perspectives and practices crucial for the restoration of our health and the well-being of all creation.

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Biblical Sabbath

Some Old Testament scholars see the Sabbath commandment as the hinge on which the other nine commandments swing. According to Walter Brueggemann, the first three of the Ten Commandments differentiate God (YHWH) from the gods of Egypt, and the society God intends for Israel from an Egyptian culture of never-ending work. The final six commandments explain what true rest in God looks like. Brueggemann points to the stark contrast between biblical Sabbath and the production-driven rat-race culture of ancient Egypt and also of our time and place.

> *The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–7). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the*

neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well.[1]

The Scriptures also inform us that Sabbath is intimately linked to Jesus's identity. Jesus is called Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). He is our Sabbath rest (Hebrews 3, 4). And because at least five places in the Second Testament reveal Jesus as the pre-existent Christ (John 1:1–4, 10–14; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:1–2), we can start to get our heads around the idea that it was actually Jesus Christ who created everything in six days (as the story goes) and then rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus Christ, who created the world, came to reconcile the world—all creation—to God. Because we too are reconcilers, following Jesus as our Sabbath means living as Jesus lived, adopting a lifestyle of neighborliness, especially in relation to the most vulnerable and outcast people in society. Following Jesus means living in restful peace even toward our enemies, even as we inhabit a world that normally operates through restlessness, competition, and strife.

Discussions on Sabbath often miss its core by neglecting the relationship between Sabbath and shalom. To observe Sabbath is not just to set aside a Sabbath day or even a Sabbath year. Sabbath is indivisible from the whole shalom system in which it plays a crucial role. Scripture mandates one Sabbath day a week so that we remember that YHWH is not the god of greed-driven production. One whole day was set aside for enjoying freedom from work and strife. At the same time Sabbath is directly tied into commands to leave produce in the field for the poor and to leave the edges of one's field unharvested so that the poor can gather and eat that portion of the crop (Deut. 24:17–22). Every Sabbath (seventh) year, God commanded that all the fields were to be left fallow so the land could rest, and so poor people and wild animals could find plenty. Here we see again that God's concern is not just for humans but for all creation.

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According to the biblical witness, Sabbath after all was never intended to be just for humanity; it was intended for all creation, wild and domesticated, as the fourth commandment explains.

> *Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the* LORD *your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the* LORD *made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the* LORD *blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod. 20:8–11)*[2]

Notice that God generates all creation and then expects all creation to rest. Later Moses, repeats the fourth commandment but adds more livestock to the list:

> *But the seventh day is a sabbath of the* LORD *your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. (Deut. 5:14)*

Also, tied into the Sabbath/shalom construct is the cancellation of debt in the seventh year. This provision meant that generational debt would not keep individuals or families in perpetual poverty; instead the Sabbath year would create new opportunities throughout society (see Deut. 15:1–18). Every seventh year the playing field would become more level, and the fortunes of those who were poor and disenfranchised would be raised. Then, after forty-nine years, at the end of the seventh set of seven years, Israelites were to wipe away all debts, free all slaves, and return any acquired land to its original owners (Lev. 25:8–13). This restoration of their property would lift people out of poverty and make it difficult for the wealthy to maintain wealth across generations. The whole of the Sabbath/shalom system was designed to benefit the most vulnerable in society—widows, orphans, and foreigners, the very people with whom Jesus was also most con-

cerned. Biblical Sabbath was not just a special weekly observance but rather a way of life with markers of days and years and festivals reflecting transfers of land and wealth in ways that restored resources to the most vulnerable in society. Those markers reminded the people who had covenanted with YHWH about the kind of God they served.

Natural Sabbath

Everything in creation has a job or a purpose. And the whole created order also rests at times from that job or purpose. Even those creatures we deem busiest, such as the ant and the beaver, take time off each day, ceasing from their labors. This time of rest is akin to Sabbath. All creation rests in order to restore harmony or shalom (to use the Bible's word).

In the first chapter of Genesis, rest appears after six days during which everything created is set in motion to be related to the other parts of creation. Even as all creation works together, embedded in everything created is a natural cycle of rest. Daily rest is a natural Sabbath; it is one of nature's ways of maintaining harmony in the world.

> *In the first account of creation, each action and each result of God's action is differentiated. Not one created part is the other, nor does it become the other. Each part of creation was made unique and after its own kind, special. And yet, each part is incomplete without the whole, and everything is being and becoming in relationship to and with the other. The writer of this creation account has given us a record of the most beautiful dance ever danced, the most engaging song ever sung, the most intimate sculpture ever made; and yet it is so much more than any one of these. It is the essence of harmony and balance. The celestials regulate the balance of the terrestrials. The night dusk comes to softly compel all creation to enter into rest and the calm brings about refreshing coolness to the world. The advent of the day provides new life and new opportunities like the embrace of warmth for plants, animals, and humans. The moon regulates all the waters. The sun regulates each season. The seasons regulate all creation on the earth and in the*

sky as annual activities; bears hibernate, and birds migrate, and people store wood and food for the winter and plant seeds in the spring. Everything created is in harmony and balance with everything else and with the Creator. The first week of creation is a grand picture of shalom on the earth.[3]

Jesus pointed out creation's natural cycles through teaching about lilies, birds, trees, and other parts of creation. The message of Sabbath found within such teachings is that people are not to worry about material gain but rather to trust God for their needs. This is the lesson we too must learn from creation.

Indigenous Sabbath

Traditionally North American Indigenous peoples did not have a seven-day week. We organized ourselves according to moons akin to what we now call months, so we had no Sabbath day of the week as such. But the lifestyle of Sabbath had parallels in our existence. In general, Indigenous North Americans did not work except to provide what they needed at the time. There was no drive toward overproduction, no fostering of greed for more than was needed. The Indigenous ethic was one of cooperation, not competition. The wealthiest people in the community were expected to provide the most help for others, and the most respected people were those who gave the most away. To be greedy in Indian country was the most heinous of crimes; it was understood that greed is the seed of the destruction of everything sacred. One simply could not love family and neighbors and live in a greedy way. Instead, extreme generosity was and is a core value among First Nations.

Even today, a Cherokee teaching instructs that when one is gathering herbs and medicines, one should pick only every fourth plant, leaving the rest for the earth (for seed) or for other people. Plains tribes who hunted buffalo used every part of the animal and left no waste. Eastern First Nations did likewise with deer, taking only what they needed for survival. Although there are stories of abuse, excessive trapping and hunting for skins only came about during the colonial period, fueled by the settlers.

Here is a story from the Cherokee that speaks to the kind of lifestyle against which Sabbath protests:

In the old days, all the animals, birds, fish, and plants could talk, and everyone lived together in peace and friendship under the delight of the Creator. But after a while the humans began to slaughter the animals needlessly, becoming wasteful. The humans no longer thanked the Creator for supplying food nor did they thank the animals for feeding their families by the giving of their lives. Every traditional Cherokee has been taught that it is considered polite to thank the Creator and also thank the animal when it furnishes its own life so people may eat and sustain their lives for another day. So in order to protect themselves from the evil that had come upon them from the once grateful Cherokee, the animals resolved to hold a council to discuss their common survival.

The Council was first led by the bears. The Great White Bear asked, "How do the people kill us?" "With bows and arrows," someone replied. "Then we must make bows and arrows," declared the leader. But soon the bears found they could not shoot straight with their claws, and they needed their claws to dig for grubs and such. After much debate, the animals decided to bring diseases upon the Cherokee people. The Cherokees began getting sick and dying from these diseases. After many Cherokees had died, they pleaded with the animals, "Please, we will become grateful again and kill only that which we will eat." But the animals would not take back the diseases they had created to kill the Cherokees.

At the same time, the plants were watching all of these things. They watched as the Cherokee children and old people got sick. Then the strong warriors and even the women began to die. The plants decided to hold a council. In the council they agreed to provide medicine for the Cherokee. Each night, as the Cherokees would sleep, the plants would come to them in their dreams and show them how to use the plants to heal the diseases that the animals had brought upon them.

The Cherokees recovered and agreed always to kill only what they absolutely needed. They also agreed to say a

prayer of thanks to any animal that they killed, and to any plant that would be harvested for food or medicine. The Creator was happy with the Cherokees once again because harmony was restored among all that he created.

Not only is the story an example of neighborly cooperation among all creation in order to bring about harmony, but it is a story of Sabbath rest. The human beings in the story came to understand that people can cross a line that moves us outside natural Sabbath/shalom living and into abuse, into a lifestyle of abuse that leads to destruction. It is because of the abuse of living things that we need markers that call us to stop and think about how we are living. We Cherokee had numerous ceremonies, stories, and festivals that marked and celebrated those times that led to a consistent lifestyle of Sabbath/shalom/Jubilee.

A festival among many Eastern Woodland tribes, including the Cherokee, is green corn. A friend who goes to the traditional Cherokee stomp dance religion grounds near Cherokee, North Carolina, sent me the following message about the green corn dance as a reminder:

The Cherokee Ceremonial Festival of the Green Corn Moon (which coincides with when the first, thinnest crescent of the moon appears after the "new" or dark moon) will fall August 20th this year [2013]. Celebration in the southeastern nations traditionally includes a lot of preparation.

- *Houses are cleaned but so are lives.*
- *Gifts of your extra or excess are given away.*
- *If you have more than one of anything—any duplicated item—you would give it away before green corn starts, preferably to someone who doesn't have that item.*
- *Extra food is also shared with those who need it.*
- *Debts are paid, and those who have grudges seek to end them before green corn begins.*
- *Weddings are planned—and divorces become final before green corn's first day.*

- *It was a time of celebration—so to make room for that, it was preceded by a time of reflection and contemplation. So now these days we find ourselves in the midst of preparing for green corn.*
- *We are to prepare our calendars—clear time off to celebrate it correctly by planning ahead.*
- *We are to prepare our minds—start choosing to do what is right.*
- *We are to prepare our hearts—begin shedding ourselves of all that might tempt us to be miserly.*
- *We are to prepare our bodies—medicine is taken, bad habits dropped.*
- *We are to prepare our home—so our clan may visit and be welcomed.*
- *It is solemn now—but the feast is coming!*[4]

The emphasis in this account is on not collecting too many material possessions. Extra, duplicate, and excess things are given away as we shed temptations to become miserly. Along with the material things being shed are sickness, bad feelings, and grudges. We experience a general sense of restoration of The Harmony Way (shalom) in our lives. Sometimes the Cherokees refer to this kind of living as walking the "White Path." The idea is that when we walk in The Harmony Way in all our traditions, we are on a pure road or path.

In preparation for the Cherokee Green Corn Festival, excess things are given away as we shed temptations to become miserly. Also shed are sickness, bad feelings, and grudges.

For traditional Native Americans and for ancient followers of YHWH, it was these occasions—festivals and Sabbath days and years—that fostered a lifestyle of generosity, sharing with those who have less, balancing out excess in our lives, and resting in order to think about what is important. Followers of Jesus may disagree on the markers, but we should never disagree on the core values of Sabbath that have to do primarily with how we handle wealth and power.

Here are a few of the many questions we may want ask ourselves about living out Sabbath.

- Is our wealth (money, land, resources) being saved primarily to ensure multigenerational family inheritance?

- Are we using our knowledge and wealth to alleviate need among folks caught up in multigenerational poverty?
- Are we actively empowering and caring for the most disenfranchised and marginalized of our neighborhood and society?
- Do our notions of the sacred extend beyond humans to all of creation, both wild and domestic?
- How are we actively caring for the earth—the land—during the current ecological crisis?
- What are the times that serve as markers in our own life that are set aside as Sabbath, during which we spend time contemplating and celebrating the sacredness of living out a Sabbath-oriented, shalom-invested life?

Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1.
[2] Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
[3] Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 44.
[4] Email message from a friend whose name is withheld by request.

About the author

Randy S. Woodley is Distinguished Professor of Faith and Culture and director of Indigenous and Intercultural Studies at George Fox Seminary in Portland, Oregon. A legal descendent of the Keetoowah Cherokee, Randy—with his wife, Edith Woodley (Eastern Shoshone tribe)—host Eloheh Village and Farm in Newberg, Oregon.