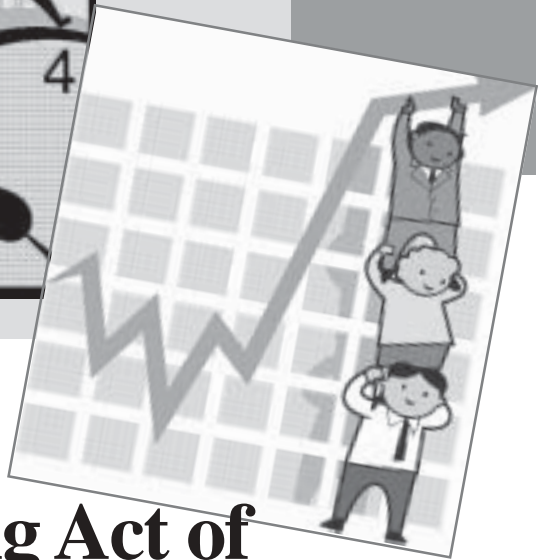


# Cultural CAPTIVITY



and the

## Liberating Act of SABBATH

**A Perspective from the Middle Class**

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***R***emember 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.

Deuteronomy 5:15

## Seeking Relief and Release

There are numerous powers and distractions at work in the lives of those of us who live in the Western world. Lifestyles, technologies, the diversity of people and expectations, while exciting and interesting, also weave a web of complexity and confusion. Seeking to meet the needs and expectations of our family, work place, school, church, etc., leaves little or no time for meeting our own needs let alone those of a community or the world. The neoliberal and consumerist ideologies are huge Powers at work in structuring the systems that impact our lives. To maintain a life-giving balance we must break out of the spiral of endless 'doing' and retreat into the Divine Wisdom of God.

Seeking to understand our place in God's creation is a continual journey. It is a process of discernment. It takes time and focus. It is not a process that works in isolation. We need community. It will bear beautiful fruit as we move toward wholeness and our integration in God's creation. It requires a commitment to listen to God. It requires Sabbath.

## Experiences Build Common Ground

Jubilee Economics Ministries' (JEM) works to create experiences

that enable diverse groups of people to explore life from different perspectives and to share sacred Sabbath times together. These experiences take the shape of discussion groups, classes, immersions in the inner city of Chicago and bi-national delegations to Chiapas, Mexico. Each experience weaves together knowledge gathering, personal sharing by those most impacted in a given area, opportunities for participants to creatively use their gifts, and group reflection. Interactive experiences, while challenging at times, break down walls and build bridges that interconnect us in the web of life.

One important thing we've learned from participants in JEM's bi-national delegations is that there are significant similarities in the ways the cultures of Mexico and the U.S. shape people in the middle class. JEM's February, 2002 delegation to Chiapas, Mexico provided yet another opportunity for sacred time with a very diverse group of people. During reflection one evening, Manuel, a university student from Mexico City, shared the four cultural values with which they are taught to shape their lives. They are; *control, security, competition, and what I think is what I do*. For those of us from the U.S., these values are familiar. They are woven into the very fabric of our culture.

### Questions for Reflection:

- ◆ *What are the forces at work that determine cultural values?*
- ◆ *Where do I (we) fit in God's creation?*
- ◆ *What are the guiding principals for my life?*

## Cultural values

Cultural values of hard work, security, competition, and being successful are good, important, and familiar messages. Our identity and self-worth are based on the belief that we are what we “do”. However, it is also important to look at some of the impacts these values can have.

In the U.S., employed people worked 142 more hours in 1994 than they did in 1973<sup>(1)</sup>. This data doesn't take into account the ongoing impact of restructuring and downsizing by corporations. Nor does it reflect the resultant multiplicity of jobs required to make ends meet that is the reality for growing numbers of people with all levels of education and experience. When working hard in order to be successful translates into less and less time for restoration or family, then it is important to question, *what is happening?*

When the need to have security translates into an ever-increasing desire for money and weapons, it is time to ask, *why?* For example, in the 2002 U.S. State of the Union address, President Bush described that the U.S. was under siege from

an “Evil Axis”. This ‘evil axis’, named as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (who happen to have a combined military budget of **less than \$12 billion annually**) was threatening the Free World. The president was asking Congress to increase defense spending by \$48 billion. This would increase the U.S. Fiscal Year 2003 defense spending to \$379 billion – **more than \$1 billion per day** <sup>(2)</sup>. Why is there such a huge investment in war making when the results are not a sharing of God's abundance but growing disparity between people, less security, and a rampant misuse and abuse of the earth?

The competitive global marketplace, driven by neoliberal economics, has dramatically impacted the economy of time. Thirty-six years ago when I entered the ‘Corporate World’ we were referred to as ‘employees’ and corporations talked about their ‘**stakeholders**’. Stakeholders included employees, the community, and the shareholders (those holding stocks). In today's neoliberal mindset and its focus on profit, people employed are referred to as ‘technical units’ and increased return for ‘**shareholders**’ is what matters. When financial profit becomes the

‘best’ or ‘only’ basis for decision-making – negating its impact on humanity, the earth and its other living things – it is time to ask, *where is God in this?*

Mexico and the U.S. are not the only countries to share this common ground in the messages and values

described here. Conversations with people from other countries (Colombia, Bolivia, e.g.) have revealed examples of how these same values were also a part of the culture of their middle class and how they have impacted the people and the land.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- ◆ *Who most benefits from these cultural values?*
- ◆ *How is God integrated within the choices we make?*

## **Good News for the Middle Class**

Jesus began his ministry by connecting with the Sabbath-Jubilee of the Old Testament. Sabbath is the soul of the matter that breaks us out of the patterns of doing. The biblical Jubilee is an alternative economic ideology that sustains life and keeps balance. It addresses the dominant system’s expectation of “doing” and the tendency for economic disparity resulting from human behaviors and natural disasters. In the Gospel of Luke, we are reminded that this ancient wisdom held great importance and was the fertile ground in which Jesus’ ministry grew.

*Luke 4:17-19, 21*

*And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

The wisdom of Jesus’ words is vital for us today. Were his words only meant for the ears of people who are poor? Or physically blind? Are people in the middle class to respond to this wisdom only through our charitable gifts of money or time?

Jesus was speaking to all people. Too many of us have become people

who function primarily with our minds negating the wisdom of the heart, body, and soul. How are we to be healed and liberated? JEM believes that as Jesus spoke of being sent 'to proclaim release to the captives,' he was calling us into a new awareness of the dominant powers at work in our lives, capturing us.

## Am I a Captive?

The word captive is most commonly used regarding someone being physically held, a prisoner. In Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary, a captive (and its synonyms) is also 'someone who is charmed or subdued in will or feeling: one controlled by a passion or vice; dominated.' As a person in the middle class, am I a captive?

The answer is 'yes' if:

- I am *dominated* by the cultural values of control, security, competition, and what I think is what I do.
- I have been *charmed* or *seduced* by the accumulation of material goods and the powerful message of 'more' or 'bigger' being better.
- My desires to analyze and to question the structural systems in which I function have been *subdued*.

The cultural fabric of our lives has many messages woven through it. Some are easy to discern in their

impact on individuals, communities, even the earth. Others are insidious or evolving in a way that is almost undetectable. So, much like the frog that is thrown in a pot of cold water, slowly heated to a boil, we are lulled into thinking we can handle what is happening around us. Perhaps you can identify with some of the following cultural threads that weave into our lives.

The Western world is filled with information and the ever-growing technology used to disseminate it. Walking the streets we are exposed to messages of words, sounds, and pictures. Many jobs require constant adjustment to the changes in computers, operating procedures, benefits, etc. Technology makes some people available by phone, cell phone, email, fax, and pagers. This list keeps growing.

Cut backs in personnel and growing demands at work or school require fewer people to be 'doing' more and more. Far too often, the increasing demands of a longer workweek, the busy-ness of activities with family, friends, church, and maintaining a household leave us exhausted or numb. Recreation defaults to watching the television, exercising at the gym, or reading some good fiction to escape.

Through the media we are presented powerful messages to consume and

acquire. These messages have so permeated our culture that our very identity is associated with it. Not only is life better if we are able to acquire things - the 'more' we are able to acquire, the 'more' we gain in value as persons.

Reading the local newspaper or watching TV news has become what many rely upon to know what is happening in their communities and the world. There is no time to

research an issue or to seek out alternative sources of information - information that is not diluted or filtered through the mainstream corporate media.

In many ways it is becoming more difficult to keep up....to have control. Life has become chaotic. Combine this with the rapidly changing job markets and corporate restructuring and even our basic financial security is threatened.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- ◆ *In biblical terminology, what are the Powers and Principalities dominating our lives?*
- ◆ *Who gets invited to the table to participate in making decisions about the systemic issues that affect all of us?*
- ◆ *Who is excluded?*
- ◆ *What are the forces at work here?*

## **The Impact of the Powers**

Life has changed for people all over the world, including those of us in the middle class. Many of the guiding principles, which shaped our societies, are very different. In the book, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, Ross and Gloria Kinsler write about today's socioeconomic system: "What is striking now is the degree to which current dominant ideology has an economic thrust rather than political. In Latin America we call this 'neoliberalism', which we usually translate as 'free trade' ideology."

Neoliberal economics has become the most dominating power in the world today.

The Kinslers continue by referencing the author, Ulrich Duchrow, whom they found most helpful "because of his comprehensive analysis and biblical critique of the ideology." Duchrow "explains how since the 1960s there has been a power shift away from the Keynesian balance of economic and social interests under government regulation, with a commitment to a wide range of social welfare concerns, toward a primary commitment to profit and wealth

accumulation through deregulation, government withdrawal, and increasing submission to the dictates of the marketplace.”<sup>(3)</sup>

What does this mean for us? It means the decision makers, in the systems that dominate our lives, are making decisions that alter our lives. Their decisions:

- Are based on financial profit and an insatiable desire for wealth.
- Consider people and the earth as commodities to be bought and sold.
- Are not sustainable.

Decisions are not being made based on the words (actions) Jesus announced as his ministry began which were to; **proclaim good news to the poor, release captives, free prisoners, and let oppressed go free.** Although many of these decision makers might attend worship regularly and even consider themselves generous, a huge disparity has developed between those that have excess and those that can barely feed themselves each day. People in the middle-class are part of this ‘free trade’ ideology. We benefit from it. Our patterns of consumption keep it going. However, the stress is deadly. We are becoming a burned out people because what is expected of us does not sustain a long, healthy, and balanced life.

Our lifestyles are having a devastating impact on the earth. **All**

people in the middle class are in the top 20% of the world’s richest people. We consume 86% of the earth’s resources. The poorest 20% consume 1.3%<sup>(4)</sup>. It would require four Earths for everybody on the planet to live the lifestyle promoted by the U.S.<sup>(5)</sup>.

Jesus’ use of the word “free” meant to be liberated, to have the will to choose. The use of the word “free” in the market driven economy would be more accurately changed to the word “managed” because, indeed, fewer and fewer people benefit from a system managed for profit and wealth accumulation. And the Earth –our source for life as living organisms - is suffering.

### Sabbath is a Radical Choice

From a spiritual perspective, life has gotten out of balance when we are so busy that there is no time for restoration. We are dominated when we don’t know how to break the spiral of doing. It is a form of slavery. Without the time or tools to break the spiral, we become more and more like the very thing that drives us. How do we stop or slow down the impact of today’s chaotic world? How do we create places of nurture to bring the numb parts of ourselves (and our lives) back to life? How do we begin the shift from human “doing” toward the human “being”, the beloved one, created by God?

In Exodus and Deuteronomy we learn of a people who were taken out of slavery by God. God's instructions for the released people of Israel came to them through Moses. In God's Divine Wisdom, even before the people were given the commandments, God's instruction was to enjoy rest regularly on the 7<sup>th</sup> day.

*"This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord.'"*

*Ex. 16:23*

*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 day 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 residents in your town.*

*Ex. 20: 8-10*

As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites worked seven days. God's liberating act broke that cycle. Choosing Sabbath breaks us out of the patterns that enslave us. Sabbath is more than church every Sunday or Temple on Saturday. It is a time to reflect on our lives, to process emotions and thoughts, to connect with nature and each other – most importantly, we

need to listen to the Divine Wisdom of God. To do this we must say, "yes" to God and step out of the spiral of doing. We need to get off the merry-go-round of denial that says we've got it under control, that we are not enslaved. Breaking away from the control that the dominant systems have in our lives releases us to seek security through relationship with God that opens us to relationships with other people, communities, nations, and the earth. What we think is what we do. So it is critical that we listen to what God has created within and around us and to seek alternatives that sustain life on this precious planet.

To discipline ourselves in a commitment to Sabbath is a radical but necessary step toward our liberation and spiritual growth. It goes against the powerful messages of self-worth, security, competition, thinking, and doing that are driven by financial profits, which dominate our lives. To listen primarily to these messages is to be out of balance. To

remain out of balance



w i t h o u t  
restorative time  
in the wisdom  
of God is to  
choose slavery.  
Seek liberation  
through the

radical act of choosing Sabbath. It's the fertile ground that feeds the soul where life blooms anew.

A reflection on *Freewill*;

*Sights, sounds, shapes, light,  
Angles, arches, concrete molds of wood and steel,  
Boxes of words reverberate  
Through our being in a percussive dance.  
Electronic energy titillates the cellular blanket of our  
bodies,  
Stimulating, numbing, beckoning us  
Along a path of expectation,  
Away from the fertile fibers that  
Weave each living thing into a web of life,  
We move  
Toward extinction.*

*Glistening petals of tender nurture  
Invite each one into the unknown.  
Drops of dew sparkle with sunlight kisses  
And trickle into our bodies  
Helping us to remember a time  
When there was no thirst.  
Solidarity expressed by an outstretched arm.  
Fear comforted in the risk of vulnerability.  
The embrace of silence  
Shifts us away from our separateness.  
We step  
Toward Life.*

*Which will it be?*

*Juanita*

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**Resources:**

- *Receiving the Day – Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*, by Dorothy C. Bass, Jossey-Bass Publishers
- *Sabbath – Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, Wayne Muller, Bantam Books
- *Turning to One Another – Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future*, Margaret J. Wheatley, Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc.
- *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, Ross and Gloria Kinsler, Orbis Books
- Contact [Alternatives for Simple Living](#), for books, videos, etc.

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