Book Review: SABBATH AS RESISTANCE by Walter Brueggemann

This week we bring you a short review of Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance*. Our reviewer is Richard Gahl, who last reviewed a book for us in Thursday Theology #676. Dick uses this review as an occasion to reflect briefly on the role of a God who promises rest in a world that's restless with getting and spending.

Peace and joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

SABBATH AS RESISTANCE: *Saying No to the Culture of Now*.
By Walter Brueggemann.
Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.
124 pages. Paper. $14.00
Reviewed by Richard Gahl.

The word 'resistance' in connection with 'Sabbath' is an attention grabber. But Brueggemann does more than grab our attention. He helps the reader to see a God of promise who gives rest to His people. *Sabbath as Resistance*provides well-documented diagnosis and prognosis regarding the commandment that serves as the bridge between the two tables of the law—especially the First and the Tenth Commandments. A vivid contrast of restless consumerism and restful neighborliness sets the stage for a new way of living that resists the way of the

world.

Pharaoh’s relentless production schedule for brickmaking as described in Exodus 5 is the context where “all levels of social power—gods, Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves—are uniformly caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production (p. 5).” Sitting at the top of the social pyramid, Pharaoh demanded everything should flow upward for his benefit. He was the only one who should benefit from the social system. Everyone else existed for him.

Matthew 6 gives evidence of a similar phenomenon with mammon (capital or wealth). It is a master of endless desire, endless productivity, and endless restlessness (p. 11). Commodity drives the system for the benefit of those with means. Brueggemann notes that we see this today in the political efforts “to own and control congress and court appointments in order that laws may be enacted concerning credits and tax arrangements and regulatory agencies to make way for production by the strong and well-connected in their desire for more (p. 15).” Maintaining one’s place at the top of the heap in the money game is paramount.

Brueggemann contends that in the Ten Commandments the world meets a different kind of God—a god unlike all of the gods the slaves from Egypt had known before. This One is a “God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness who is committed to covenantal relationships of fidelity. At the taproot of this divine commitment to relationship (covenant) rather than commodity is the capacity and willingness of this God to rest (p. 6).” So the Sabbath command becomes God’s gift of rest for those who have been caught up in the restlessness of relentless production. It establishes a new way to live.

In the face of mammon, Jesus invites all who are weary and

carrying heavy burdens to come to him for rest. This is a new Sabbath for the commodity society imposed on the many for the benefit of the few.

The neighbor is now seen in a new light. Brueggemann points out how both Exodus and Deuteronomy hold up neighbor in a new way in the bridge commandment. There were no neighbors in Egypt's system, only threats and competitors. Now God brings about a neighborly community (p. 26). As Brueggemann explains, "the odd insistence of the God of Sinai is to counter anxious productivity with committed neighborliness. The latter practice does not produce so much; but it creates an environment of security and respect and dignity that redefines the human project (p. 28)." Deuteronomy groups family, slaves, livestock and resident aliens in the Sabbath observance. Brueggemann contends, "this one day breaks the pattern of coercion; all are *like* you—equal worth, equal value, equal access, equal rest (p. 41)." All neighbors are included in these commands: "Coveting is the ultimate destruction of the neighborhood, for coveting generates mistrust and sets neighbor against neighbor (p. 69)."

This brief book concludes by connecting a stirring anecdote (which you will have to read for yourself) with a wonderful word of promise from Psalm 73:

> *Nevertheless, I am continually with you*
> *You hold my right hand.*

Brueggemann finds here no casual hand-holding but a life-or-death grip where God will not let go (p. 89). What a glorious promise in the midst of a world of anxiety-prone restlessness growing out of the relentless productivity that estranges humankind from one another. But, resting in the arms of God's faithfulness, the faithful move into the world to benefit the

neighbor in need.

An ongoing task for a Christian leader is to lead in the formation of a culture of generosity. Any stewardship emphasis will be enriched by *Sabbath as Resistance*, where the 24/7 treadmill of relentless production, continuous acquisition of things, and the ever widening gap of income inequality is brought into the healing light of Sabbath rest. We pray for the gift of loving the Lord with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and the neighbor as ourselves.