

***Learning to Release***  
**Sermon 199 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 8, 2023**  
**Deuteronomy 15:1-11**

I was in college when Facebook first came out. At the time it was only open to college students, people with a .edu email address, and so if you could imagine a whole new world for 18-22 year olds developing in its own, brand new, digital space, then you could imagine the fun that was had as we created the “first draft” of our digital images and identities... (of course, with no clue what would become of this digital social experiment)

We didn’t have all the options that exist now with pictures and videos, tags, and hashtags. So we had to get creative with what we had. This was especially apparent in the category of “relationship status”, one of the few areas for customization beyond the person’s name and the name of their school, AND one of the most public spaces for students to commit (or not) to that special person in their lives.

As part of my sermon preparation research, I did go to investigate whether or not this was *still* an option on Facebook and it turns out it is. Nowadays if one wants to clarify for the digital world their relationship status, they can choose between the following options:

- Single
- In a relationship
- Engaged
- Married
- In a civil union
- In a domestic partnership
- In an open relationship
- It’s complicated
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

And I kind of wish there was an additional category which I was surprised *not* to see offering the generously ambiguous title of: *Other*.

However, those of us who identify as GenX or Geriatric Millennials will remember when the options were simply: Single, In a relationship, and my all time favorite - It’s complicated. You can only imagine the fun that was had with that last category. Status updates often reflected both academic and social realities of college students carving out the new frontier of social media. I had a few friends who took the status thing seriously, putting up either “single” or “in a relationship.”

Most of them had a little more fun with it, exploiting that third category, posting things like: *it’s complicated with Biology 101 or Organic Chemistry, it’s complicated with the PAC*

(what we called the gym or the Physical Activities Center at Furman back in the day) or *It's complicated* with Krispy Kreme Donuts at 2am...

these were the updates that filled our news feeds as friends logged into Facebook - from their computers - to make periodic updates instead of studying whatever they really needed to be studying. It was a grand distraction and offered so much comic relief during those stressful days of midterms and final exams.

There is so much to say about the nature of our human relationships and the ways we label and present those to the world (both online and offline), but that is not the point of today's sermon and it has nothing to do with the text from Deuteronomy. But as I was thinking and praying about how to invite us into the Biblical text this morning, how to contextualize it in such a way that we might begin to *feel* the resistance within our own bodies, how to preach the text in a way that brings its challenge to life across time, culture, and geography, the refrain that kept coming to my mind was that old relationship status from 20 years ago saying: *It's complicated*.

The little headings in some versions of the Bible label this section of Deuteronomy: *The Year of Canceled Debts* while other versions call it *Laws Concerning the Sabbatical Year*. As those two titles popped up in the research this week I couldn't help but revel at the juxtaposition of the two titles and how they might land in today's society. I'd be willing to bet that if someone were to take a poll and ask us: "What was or is the year of canceled debts?" We might say: 2022, when the president declared forgiveness of some student loans debt. Or maybe we would say: 2020 or 2021 when the president rolled out PPP loans during the pandemic, loans given to all kinds of businesses and nonprofits, knowing that many of them would never be repaid. Forgiveness was built into the model.

And, I'd also be willing to bet that if someone were to take a poll and ask us what do you think of when you hear: *The Year of Sabbatical*? Professors and clergy may say - that's the year of stepping away from the daily grind of the job to renew our focus on the bigger picture. (Whether that is spirituality or academic research, depends on the discipline) Others may say that they know someone who got a sabbatical and it sounded really nice, but their jobs don't have that benefit, so it's difficult to understand.

For us these words and phrases can carry all kinds of contemporary baggage, and they tend to take us in completely different directions:

    canceled debts

    sabbatical

One a radically generous economic practice and the other a break from daily labor.

For us these are separate ideas which speak to different and distinct parts of our reality but for God's beloved community, as described in the ancient text of Deuteronomy, these two ideas are one and the same. The word, sabbatical, is related to the word *sabbath* which means to cease from one's labor. We all know the fourth commandment which says to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." This is why we worship on Sunday and attempt to set aside the day for things not classified as "work."

Despite our best efforts, we've gotten away from the historic meaning of Sabbath. (Some of you may remember a different culture around Sabbath.) Everything used to be closed down, women would prepare meals for the household in advance (maybe put them on time bake) so families could enjoy a warm meal without *too* much work; Sabbath used to actually bring rest, not sports practices, running errands, and eating at restaurants - but actual rest. And not just for those with enough privilege to afford it, but for everyone.

*Can you even imagine: an entire world resting and rejoicing in the presence of God.*

Sabbatical took the principle of sabbath and expanded it, applying it to the land and the community. Sabbatical was a wholistic Sabbath. Sabbatical meant that in the beloved community, which was organized around God's laws, every 7th day was Sabbath and every 7th year was Sabbatical. Everyone participated in these regular rhythms of rest and renewal. Everyone was offered a fresh start made possible by the redistribution of land and the cancellation of debts. This was clearly *good news* for those drowning in debt, those laboring in the fields of another land owner, for those barely scraping by and struggling to get ahead.

But it was also *good news* for those who had much, who did not labor in debt but who hired their help and kept ledgers listing the names of those who had borrowed. But... *Where's the good news for them?* we wonder, as we imagine the financial losses and the familiar feeling of a failed investment. It makes sense for those receiving the gift of forgiveness, but how is this *good* for those who didn't owe anything in the first place?

This is an important question because as people who hold most of the world's wealth and resources, I have a suspicion that the *good news* for the land-owners, the ones who did not qualify for debt cancellation... I suspect that the *good news* for them in the Sabbatical year might just be *good news* for us as well. You see, the *good news* for them - and perhaps for us as well - is in learning to release... In flexing our "let go" muscles and allowing our hands to open along with our hearts. Recognizing that our material wealth means nothing if our neighbors are suffering.

As civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer once said: *No one is free until we are all free!*<sup>1</sup> And then as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: *All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.* And then as a contemporary writer and rest researcher Tricia Hersey is now saying: *The gulf is bridged by the sharing of resources. Every day, individuals who are not rich but who are materially privileged make a choice to share with others. Mutual giving strengthens community. Mutual and collective rest disrupts, interrupts, and heals.*<sup>2</sup>

Maybe we just need to release.

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<sup>1</sup> Hersey, p.77

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Release our desire to control every penny ourselves. Release our sense of bitterness that emerges when others receive gifts that we did not ourselves receive.

Release our commitment to economics of Pharaoh (we talked about last week, the one that thrives on anxiety and a sense of scarcity)... Release the idea that our material goods are a mark of our inherent *goodness*. Release.... so that we have room in our hearts, our bodies, our souls, for God's abundance to be shared.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should confess to you that there is a bit of a scholarly debate about whether the cancellation of debts was actually practiced in the ancient world. Some say it was a holy principle that the people never really put into practice while others say that it was absolutely observed, honored and lived out in the rhythms of life and faith of God's people. No matter the reality of their application, the Laws Concerning the Sabbatical Year are clear in the scriptures.

Maybe the actual relationship between the people and their money could be classified as: *it's complicated*. To use that new, familiar term. Complicated not in the sense that it was confusing; people were not unclear about what God required of them in the Sabbatical year. No, complicated because the people *knew* what was required and *wanted* to be faithful and obedient to God and yet they *struggled* to commit to the doing of justice when it required them to release those who were indebted to them.

That's what *it's complicated* has always meant, at least where relationships are concerned. It means we know what kind of serious commitment is required. We know what is deserved, is holy, is good, and yet we also know that we are not capable of that kind of commitment quite yet. At least, that is what it meant for us college kids back in the early 2000s when we were declaring our relationship statuses for the first time on social media, uncertain about what kind of reach those labels might have.

But the time eventually came - as time always does - for all of us to grow up and figure out how to make the commitment. At Furman we called it a DTR [define the relationship] you know, that horrifying, anxiety producing conversation where two "complicated" friends or lovers finally say to one another what it is that they are and are going to be. Are we friends or are we dating? Are we committed? Are we going steady (as some of you may have called it)? Any outcome would change the shape of the future, would change one's whole identity, and would require a certain amount of *do-ing* to support the verbal commitment. You see, when "*it's complicated*," turns into, "*in a relationship*," there are new expectations and new rules to live by.

So in this season, as we consider *Our Money Stories* and our relationship with our financial resources.... it makes me wonder if it isn't time for us to define - or re-define - our relationship - *especially in light of the principle of Sabbatic Release*. I wonder if we might *wish* we could say that we were in a faithful relationship but the truth really is... *it's complicated*. Complicated because we live in the real world, which is not the fully realized Kingdom of God. Complicated because we have to think about our own stability and self-sufficiency. Complicated because we are all in different personal situations.

Complicated because we *want* to grow closer to God and we *want* to be able to live *as-if* the God's Kingdom were already here *AND YET* we have to admit that the Kingdom isn't fully here and we aren't able to fully commit. It's complicated.

But then, there are moments when we see a glimpse of possibility... When opportunities for release dance through our imaginations and we are called to release in ways we never conceived of before. I have experienced them in my own life and I have seen them in you... here are some **STORIES OF RELEASE** in our congregation:

Two weeks ago, a church member and I were on the phone and as part of our conversation, they wanted to share that they'd decided to give a financial gift to the church. A gift bigger than they'd ever given before. There was such **JOY** ....

Two or three months ago, a member knocked on the door of my office to express concern about the church's finances and had been dreaming up new ways to improve our collective situation. Maybe those of us who are retired could give from our IRAs - this would be a different kind of investment, but ... why not?

You heard the stewardship moment last week talking about giving up some dinners out or canceling some TV subscriptions in order to find more within their budget to give more... release... twice in one story.

About a year ago, I met with a member who had a rental property. They decided that when their tenant faced financial difficulty and couldn't make rent, they wouldn't move for eviction or tack on late fees... they'd just give thanks that they could afford everything they needed, without the income from that property. - release - of biblical proportion.

In each of these situations, release broke through the usual economic patterns and provided a new practice of radical generosity, forgiveness, grace, and even **JOY**. Because, as it turns out release is needed for everyone - no matter where we find ourselves on the debt ledger. We all need to learn how to release so that we can discover the joy of our shared liberation... the joy of our shared blessings, the joy of our shared generosity, and the joy of knowing we haven't held anything back out of fear or a false sense of scarcity...

It really is complicated. But the truth is quite simple. We will never know the freedom of sabbatical and sabbath until we release our grip, and open up our hands, open up our hearts....

And give everything away.