

Lectionary 9 – Sundays after Pentecost
June 3, 2018
Deut. 5:12-15; Mark 2:23 – 3:6

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Free to Worship

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.”

Did you know that most of us are disobeying that commandment of God? Even, in fact, those who attend church every Sunday?! That is, of course, if we take the commandment literally and define the Sabbath as the seventh day of the week. The seventh day, the Sabbath, is Saturday. And so, by worshipping on Sunday, we are disobeying God’s law.

But then, we are by our Lutheran tradition a people who regularly refuse to obey the letter of the law. So we observe the gift of the day of rest on the first rather than the last day of the week. And there are very good reasons to do so.

- Saturday, the original Sabbath, marks the end of the work of creation as outlined in the book of Genesis. We celebrate Sunday as the Sabbath in order to remember the beginning of the New Creation—begun in the Resurrection of our Lord.
- Christ rose on the first day of the week. Along with most other Christians, we prefer to commemorate the day of Resurrection.
- Worshipping on Sundays also honors the birthday of the Church—the day of Pentecost and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church occurred on a Sunday.

In making this choice to worship on Sunday rather than Saturday, we exercise Christian freedom. We choose to honor the spirit but not the letter of the law in order to give God greater glory.

After all, our Lord reminds us in the gospel this morning that: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:28)

We have freedom from the precise dictates of the law, granted to us from the mouth of Jesus. And we know from our fundamental Lutheran principle that we are saved by grace, apart from works of the law. We take the law seriously, but we don’t take it literally. Indeed, that is our general approach to scripture as a whole. As a matter of fact, we tend to consider a literal approach to scripture opposed to one that takes it seriously.

Our freedom, grounded in grace and love, permits us to see beneath the letter to the spirit of the law. In love, we can see that as long as we observe one day each week as a time for rest and worship, we are doing as God intends in calling upon us to observe the Sabbath. My own Sabbath, as may be the case for others who often work on Sundays, isn't either Saturday or Sunday. It's Friday.

So, what is the spirit, the intent, the purpose of the commandment to keep the Sabbath? Of course, the most obvious is what I have already stated—the gift and need for rest from our labors. This was, most assuredly, a great and glorious gift in those ancient days when Moses received the law. It was in the mid-thirteenth century B.C.—more than three millennia ago. And there were no labor unions or civil liberties or lobbying organizations in ancient Egypt or ancient Palestine. We tend to take for granted what must have been a profoundly radical idea in that time. The whole idea of rest from work was most probably an entirely new concept. Just imagine the relief to hear that God commands a day of rest, especially among those who were servants or slaves. It's an amazing thing, this gift of the Sabbath!

There are at least four apparent intentions in God's commandment to observe Sabbath:

First, it is an act of obedience to God. The one who created us knows us and our limitations, even if we would rather not acknowledge them to ourselves. And observing this period of rest and worship engages us in a practice that feeds our spirits. We honor our God by being obedient.

Second, it is an act of gratitude. Keeping Sabbath is expressed first and foremost in worship, which in itself is a form of rest. In worship, we express our deep thankfulness to a God who created us, yes, but who also provides for our growth in grace, faith, love, and community.

Third, observing Sabbath is important because we need to rest and we need to worship. Human beings were not designed to run at full tilt 24/7. The body needs time for recreation (re-creation). The mind needs the diversion and redirection of worship, rest, relaxation, and recreation. And our spirits will die if we are not permitted time to offer praise and thanksgiving to our God. That offering, while grounded in gratitude, has the side effects of refreshment and renewal. And the heart is strengthened by time for self-examination, confession of how we have wronged God, others, and God's good creation.

And finally, observing Sabbath gives rest to the animals and to the Earth. Did you notice that the commandment in Deuteronomy includes rest for livestock? I believe that this inclusion is exceedingly important, and I pray that we may learn to use Sabbath as an opportunity to give even the Earth itself a rest from the continual depletion of its resources and the pollution of this holy world that gives us life.

These reasons for observing Sabbath are self-evident for the most part. But perhaps the need for rest for the spirit might benefit from some illustration:

A minister was ready to put her car into the garage, and a 3-year-old boy from the neighborhood stood in her way. The minister asked him, "Do you want a ride?" "Yes," he said, "but it has to be quick because I don't have much time."

So the pastor took the boy for a short spin. A few days later, she met the boy's father and on greeting him, received the following reply: "Well, you know we business people have our troubles. As a pastor, you can't imagine what it's like to be in the business world."

The minister simply told him to come to church on Sunday, and he would find the one who would carry his troubles with him. The man lifted his hands as if to ward off something and said, "I don't have time for that!" Having heard this, the minister compared the son and the father, wondering if the busy-ness of the little boy was any less ridiculous than that of the father in the eyes of God.

Trying to see with the eyes of God—something we talked about last Sunday—might help us to perceive our deep need for worship, rest, and spiritual renewal. 19th century clergyman Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "The first half hour of prayer in the morning is the rudder of the day." Like a boat's rudder, orienting ourselves toward God helps to determine the direction of the day. So also worship on the first day of the week helps to determine the focus and direction of the week. Without listening to scripture, talking with God, singing and praying with the community of Christ, receiving the grace and mercy of forgiveness, our days are not as fully blessed. Both we and the Earth need rest and reorientation towards God and service to others and the world.

Even secular leaders know such things. One of the leading statesmen of European history addressed his legislators with these words:

"Never force us to put heaven into the second line, because then we would be very poor servants of yours, and you would be very poor servants yourselves. We must have our home with God. We must have our Sunday all through the week. Sunday must stay on as the symbol of the great gift of God, that gift that you cannot take away. And if it were taken away, our lives would collapse."

The speaker was Winston Churchill, whom many know only as a secular leader, a great orator, and one who enjoyed cigars and brandy. We forget that Churchill lived from the conviction that he voiced. Without God in the center of our lives, everything crumbles.

Such is an inkling of the import of spiritual rest.

Is this what we find in our Sabbaths—and in church on Sundays? Do we worship in freedom from the law and find the intent of the law—that is, spiritual rest? Or have we made for ourselves a new law to replace the old?

No, don't raise your hands. This is a rhetorical question. But, how many of you are here today because you felt you had to come? If your reflections lead you to something like coercion, then the Sabbath is not what it could be for you. It is not serving your needs, you are serving it.

The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.

Worship is not intended to be a new law that binds us, but rather a gift that opened freely and lovingly, yields blessings that are beyond our imagining—for us, for creatures, and for God's good creation.

An African American woman raised her son in an exciting congregation. When the young man reached college age, he was immersed in a more staid, mostly white, culture and church.

On a college break, he returned home and attended church, as usual, with his mother. It was a great celebration, with singing and shouting, Hallelujahs and Amens. After the service, as they were driving home, he said to his mother, "The pastor wasn't very good today, was he?" "Well," said the mother, "maybe not; but weren't we in the congregation good today?!"

That's beautiful—and not only because it may take a bit of pressure off of me. Worship is much more than a monologue by the pastor, with a few hymns, prayers, and communion. The Sabbath is made for us—to fulfill our spiritual and psychological and emotional needs. We are not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath is made for us. God's law regarding the Sabbath is not meant to afflict, but to bless; not to be a burden, but a boost; not to hinder, but to help. We are renewed in order to be a renewing force in the world. We are blessed in order that we may more fully be blessings.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could proclaim at the end of our Sabbath, "God is good!" Wasn't the Spirit present among us?! Weren't we all good in our offering of prayer and praise?! Weren't we blessed to be together?! The Sabbath is a gift to us! God is good indeed! And God sends us forth to serve. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.