

THIS IS THE DAY

TEXT: Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Mark 2:23-3:6

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. How often we at least remember these words from the Book of Exodus. But I chose to use the repeat version of the Ten Commandments recited in the Book of Deuteronomy, because it reads “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”. In today’s world many remember the Sabbath. It’s a day off from work for most of us and an opportunity to have fun with family or friends. But the unfortunate truth is, especially in our corner of the world, the Sabbath is not so often “observed”.

In our reading from Mark we hear other familiar words “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. Again, words we have heard, but don’t often contemplate how they fit into our busy lives on the week-ends. In all the biblical stories about Jesus, the Sabbath was integrated into his weekly rhythms. The clash that takes place between Jesus and the Pharisees is not over *whether* to observe the Sabbath, but over *how* to observe it. For the Pharisees, the Sabbath was primarily defined in negative terms. What, they would ask, is prohibited by the commandment to do no work? By contrast, Jesus regards the Sabbath positively. The day of freedom from work is a gift for humanity’s good. “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”. The Sabbath affords opportunities to exercise compassion and love.

Jesus and the Pharisees often disagreed on what it meant to keep the Sabbath. When the disciples broke off some grains in a field on the Sabbath, the Pharisees considered this to be work – a clear violation of their interpretation of the Sabbath. But Jesus didn’t accept the Pharisaic view of things. “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath”. And what are these needs for which God made the Sabbath? Rest from regular work. Enjoyment of creation. Feasting with family and friends. Time for the renewing of primary relationships. Worship. Prayer. Spiritual, physical, emotional and relational refreshment. God set aside a day for rest so that people might enjoy God and the goodness of God’s creation.

The same point emerges in the second Sabbath controversy, when Jesus heals a man in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The key question that Jesus asks is, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” The silence of the Pharisees in the face of this question serves as a confirmation that the Sabbath is honored by doing good, by saving life.

From the perspective of the Pharisees, there was nothing wrong with Jesus’ actions; the problem was that they were done on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had formed an important council called the Great Synagogue about 200 years before Christ. This synagogue took the Ten Commandments and added interpretations, not by teaching the inner spirit of them, but by adding to them other commandments. Where the Ten Commandments say “You shall do no regular work”, the Great Synagogue translated that into 39 specific prohibitions called the Abhoth. Then they added the Toldoth which were the rules to help carry out the 39 prohibitions.

Of course, Christians no longer observe the Sabbath at all. The Sabbath is the last day of the week, which is Saturday. Christians observe the first day of the week, which is Sunday. But we attach the same significance to Sunday that our Hebrew brothers and sisters attached to Saturday. Since Jesus’ resurrection occurred on the first day of the week, the early Christians thought it only appropriate that they worship the Lord on his Resurrection Day. In that sense, every Sunday is an Easter Sunday.

So, how should we observe the Christian Sabbath? Should we mount a campaign against the stores for being open on Sunday? Should Christians refuse to go out to eat on Sunday because our convenience causes someone else to work? Should we refuse to participate in recreational activities on Sunday? Should we preach against members who miss church for family activities?

Some Christians would insist the answer to all those questions is an unqualified, “Yes!” But I think the meaning of the Sabbath principle lies deeper than this. In fact, Jesus was fighting against just this kind of legalism in our text from Mark today.

Honoring – observing – the Sabbath can help bring order to our spiritual life. We partially miss the point if we see Sabbath keeping as only a commandment. “For it is truly a gift”, says Judy Henderson Prather, author of ‘Seeking Sabbath’, “God knows that we need meaningful work, so we can make a positive difference in the world. But God also knows we must periodically pause to allow God to make a difference in us.” In Sabbath-keeping, we cease our labors and accept both our work and our rest as gifts.

How does this apply to our work today? The Sabbath principle is that we must consecrate a portion of our time and keep it free from the demands of work, allowing it to take a distinct character of worship. This is not to say that the Sabbath is the only time of worship, nor that work cannot be a form of worship itself. But the Sabbath principle allows us time to focus on God in a different way than the working week allows, and to enjoy God’s blessing in a distinctive way. Crucially, too, it gives us space to allow our worship of God to manifest itself in social compassion, care and love. Our worship on the Sabbath flavors our work during the week.

The Sabbath is not one day given to God while we are permitted to keep the six for ourselves. It is rather a peculiar sign and symbol of the deepest things in life. The Sabbath principle reminds us that there must be a time in our week when we stop and take note of God. It reminds us to not let our lives become so rushed, so full of busyness, that we fail to take care of two vital human needs – rest and worship.

As the early Christians knew, the particular day of the week is not the important point. You can rest and worship on Saturday, or you can rest and worship on Sunday. Some people have to work on Sundays, and their days off may be Tuesday or Saturday. They can still accomplish the Sabbath purpose whatever day of the week it is. The Sabbath reminds us to take time to rest and to take time to worship.

The word “Shabbat” comes from the Hebrew word for “rest”. As God rested on the seventh day, God provides a day for us to celebrate God’s creation. Humbly, we realize that creation is not primarily for us. It exists for God, and is the occasion for God’s care, pleasure, and delight. It is a Sabbath creation in which all the members of creation, including humanity, achieve their true end as they approximate God’s own tranquility and joy. We share in God’s rest when we affirm all creation, limit our

consumption, and tune our habits to rejoice in and care for those aspects of creation of which we are not a part. Just as divine rest crowns and colors all of God's creative activity, so our participation in God's rest should extend through all of our activities.

Norman Wirzba, professor of theology and ecology at Duke University, suggests that we think of Sabbath rest "as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation, and stop thinking of it primarily as the cessation of or temporary reprieve from our otherwise acceptable striving". To live in God's rest, confident in God's *shalom* and respecting the creation, we must believe that God is willing and able to provide enough for a good life.

The one thing Sunday offers in our society is a lot of choices. The week-ends have become the ideal time for travel away from home. Sundays make a great day for a mini-vacation or a family reunion. Sunday is the perfect day to take a nice leisurely drive to the beach, the peninsula or the mountains. Most of the major sporting events occur on Sunday. You can take in a Seahawks, Mariners, or Sounders game on Sunday. Amateur golf on Sunday afternoon has become a religion in itself. Boating and fishing are excellent choices for Sunday. And then there's shopping! Most of the major chain stores are open for shoppers' convenience on Sunday. The restaurants are packed. The movie theaters and the malls are all full. For many, they might go to church if there is nothing else to do. Every week we are confronted with that question, "What will you do on Sunday?"

How do you think about the Sabbath and its relevance for your life? Do you set aside time on a regular basis for rest? Have you ever thought about the possibility that God made the Sabbath for you?

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Shalom. Amen.