

IT'S YOUR SABBATH: HOW ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP IT?

2nd Sunday after Pentecost – B

June 3, 2018

Mark 2:23-3:6

Sabbath means different things to different people. In our Judeo-Christian culture, an obvious difference becomes apparent when asking: When is the Sabbath? For the Hebrew people of God, keeping Sabbath began at sundown at the end of the week, as the seventh day began. The scriptural formula of creation tells us: “And there was evening, and there was morning,” for each day, through the six days of creation. And God rested on the seventh day.

In the commandments, we are told to honor the sabbath day and keep it holy: God gave us six days for work and commanded the seventh day as a day of rest. If it was good enough for God, it was good enough for God’s creation.

Because the Christian scripture of the New Testament announced the resurrection of Jesus “early, on the first day of the week,” early Christians began to come together on the first day of the week, Gail Ramshaw writes: “To meet one another in the risen Christ....” [*Sundays and Seasons* 2018, p. 201]

Ramshaw traces the history of the Christian Sabbath, beginning with its first legislation under the Emperor Constantine for people in trade occupations. Continuing emphasis came from reformer John Calvin, and this spread into our American tradition of honoring Sunday as the day of rest. Dr. Ramshaw is quick to note: “For clergy and church musicians, Sunday is never a day of rest.”

Growing up most of us could remember the “blue laws” around Sunday, especially the prohibition of buying alcohol on Sunday, a tradition that is still around in many communities.

As a new pastor in a traditional, rural kind of community, I was advised by my council president that Sunday afternoon was *not* the time I should be mowing the lawn. It wasn’t productive, useful, or advisable for this preacher to suggest that riding around on a mower was relaxing and even meditative. Nor was it the time or place to argue against the general acceptance of people shopping at Walmart, going out to eat, or watching TV sports—occasions that required other people to work on the Christian Sabbath.

Of course, we can use Jesus’ own words in our defense: Was the Sabbath made for us, or were we made for the Sabbath? And his words were actually quite Jewish. First, he recalls the words from Deuteronomy that establish that the sabbath is a gift from God. Plus, the contemporary rabbinic tradition of Jesus’ day was ripe with advice regarding sabbath-keeping: “The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it” and “Profane one Sabbath for a person’s sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths.” [Matt Skinner at www.workingpreacher.org for June 3, 2018, citing the writing of both Joel Marcus and Amy-Jill Levine]

Sabbath keeping was a way of marking God’s people, giving them the opportunity not only to show their thanks to God, but to receive in this Sabbath gift, the promise of abundant life. Where some Christians might be tempted to treat law in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) as restrictive, Ron Hals, my Old Testament professor in seminary and author of a great little book: *Grace and Faith in the Old Testament* [Augsburg Fortress: 1980], proclaimed The Law as God’s gift to us, which makes it something redemptive for us. So the laws about Sabbath were meant to remind us that Sabbath is the gift of restorative time: time to relax, to re-fuel, to re-create, to renew.

That the Herodians joined up with the Pharisees (a marriage likened to a pairing of Mother Jones Magazine with The National Review)* should be telling. This was never really about how Jesus and his disciples observed the Sabbath as much as it was about Jesus—the upstart, “who-does-he-think-he-is?” teacher. “He taught, as one with authority” we read in Scripture. And that didn’t go over so well with those who *thought* they were in authority. All of which was compounded by the second act, where Jesus healed a man with a withered hand, *on the Sabbath*. They don’t question his ability to heal, but rather, are quite upset that people are starting to notice and even follow Jesus. That didn’t sit well with either the religious or the political authorities, especially when Jesus proclaims *the Son of Man* to be lord over the Sabbath.

What we quickly see in Mark’s gospel is conflict, jealousy, and fear that will ultimately lead to Jesus’ arrest and execution. Yet it all seems to break down so quickly—even though, at the heart of Jesus’ teaching everything comes down to one central point: the Gospel, the Good News of God’s love.

So where does all of this leave us in a world that is “on” 24/7, in a community where Sunday is about arrivals and changeovers and packed stores, lines at restaurants, and crowded highways? There are many whose work “on the Sabbath” is vital, not only to the economy, but to our health and wholeness, as well.

Of course, now that Memorial Day weekend is behind us, we begin to wonder if Sabbath is even possible here. It’s hard to find sabbath-time in the high season unless you “get off the island.” So we are left with the vision, the hope, the promise that when we do take the time, we find redemption. For each one of us, even in the midst of busyness, it’s important to make the time to rest, reflect, meditate, take care of ourselves, and give care to one another.

Because God is a god of relationship we find that people around us play supporting (and supportive) roles, reflecting and sharing love, caring for us as we care for them, and being the hands and feet of Jesus to one another. In community we become accountable, not just about how we treat others, but also about the very personal stewardship of self-care. After all, it’s hard to present yourself as a living sacrifice if you’re half dead: weary and burned out. As busy as Jesus is, within the pages of the story we find that even the Son of God has to take some time away, time apart, time to restore. He sets the example, so that even in sabbath time, he is teaching us.

God calls us to choose life, and to live it abundantly. And in a world created and redeemed through relationship, that means what we do to refuel, refresh, and renew ourselves is not simply done for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. Amen.

*David Lose, *In the Meantime*, at: www.davidlose.net, for June 3, 2018.