

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.3.18
Scripture:

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Mark 2:23-3:6

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The question to ask ourselves about the Sabbath is not, "Do we keep the Sabbath? Do you keep the Sabbath?" No, the question to ask is, "Are you *able* to keep the Sabbath?" That's the case this morning, at least. This morning, the Sabbath isn't a matter of piety but of justice.

As it happens, there are two presentations of the notion of the Sabbath in the Bible, there being two presentations of the Decalogue, of the Ten Commandments, and the keeping of the Sabbath being the concern of the 4th commandment. As it also happens, each of the two 4th commandments presents its own rationale for the commandment.

In Exodus, the earlier rendering of the Decalogue, the rationale is *imitatio dei*, the imitation of God. The commandment reads: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you

shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.” See, according to the Exodus version, remembering the Sabbath is a matter of imitating God, a matter of piety.

In Deuteronomy, though, the rationale is a little different. Less about the imitation of God, remembering the Sabbath is a matter of justice. Here the commandment begins nearly the same, reminiscent of the earlier version: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” See, according to Deuteronomy, observing the Sabbath is a matter of justice—justice for you, justice for those whose labor benefits you, justice for the created order and the animals and the fields, the soil and the earth itself that produces and produces and needs rest from producing.

Getting what rest you need, what restoration you need: it’s a matter of justice. And granting what rest, what restoration, others need: it’s a matter of justice.

When the Pharisees objected to Jesus’ behavior on the Sabbath, it seems to me they did so from the framework that you keep the Sabbath because of piety. His plucking grain on the Sabbath, his performing a healing on the Sabbath: in these he perhaps demonstrated a certain flippancy about the matter of being like God, honoring God. Jesus, though, seems to have behaved as if from the framework that keeping the Sabbath is about justice—and so doing justice on the Sabbath isn’t to violate it, but to fulfill it.

We’re back in Mark’s gospel. It’s been a while since we’ve been here. It’s been since late in the season of Lent and then on Easter morning. In the seven weeks since then, though, we’ve been mostly in John’s gospel and on one occasion in Luke’s. But now that we’re embarking into

Ordinary Time, with no holy days until the last Sunday of the church year in late November, we'll mostly follow Mark's rendering of the story of Jesus' life among us.

This will have us witnessing Jesus on the move, and having an effect merely by his presence. His arriving on a scene will result in what's unclean departing and taking flight. His contact with someone wounded or sullied will have a restoring or purging effect. And it will all happen with immediacy, this being one of Mark's favorite words: *euthys*. A presence of holiness (or unholiness, as in the case of this reading) that has no medium or mediator, is but sudden and real, as real as your own breath, as real as rain when it falls: Mark's understanding of who Christ is—his Christology, if you will—is an utter reality of Jesus' being, an urgency in his goodness and fealty to God. These are the matter Mark's trying to capture in words.

There's an inherent contradiction here, though. Do you see? Mark is using the medium of the written word to communicate something far more immediate than that. That's quite a trick. But what choice did he have? The years were passing, it being now about forty years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Worse, the existential threats that the earliest followers of the Way faced were growing more dire, Jerusalem now sacked, the Temple now destroyed, the people Israel falling to Roman violence against them in the hundreds, the thousands. Not that they could have known this, but they were at the beginning of a sixty-year war of Rome against the Jews and the early Church. And this might have had "Mark" imagining a leap from the oral tradition to the written tradition, his gospel narrative perhaps as a message in a bottle that he'd toss across a sea of time in case he himself didn't make it, and the members of the congregation for which he wrote didn't make it. The Romans could kill off the people; there was little the people could do about that. But Mark would do what he could to make sure the Romans didn't kill off the story.

By this point, in the second chapter of his narrative, Jesus had been baptized, had been driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil, had returned to civilization where he'd call disciples and send them out with authority akin to his, and had begun his itinerancy mostly in and around Galilee. He had also begun to stir up controversy, which we see in the note that I for one find surprising, that following the healing of the man with the withered hand, the Pharisees who'd confronted him for doing what is "unlawful on the Sabbath," went out and *immediately* conspired with the Herodians to destroy him. Surprising it was, after all, so

early in his work, and already he had people out to destroy him. Talk about having an immediate effect.

For what it's worth, the Herodians were members of a Jewish sect, though one loyal to the Jewish Herod who governed Judea at the empire's pleasure. These represented, then, the worst conspiring between the religious authorities and the imperial authorities, each Herodian a sort of proto-Uncle Tom, a Jew in the pocket of the Romans. Nevertheless, it's hard to imagine what about Jesus could have so quickly threatened the powers-that-be that they'd begin their plotting so soon after the start.

I admit I doubt it's that Jesus was treating the Sabbath as less a matter of piety than a matter of justice. That probably wasn't so threatening a thing to them then; that probably wasn't provocative or offensive to them then. After all, I don't *think* the Pharisees and the Herodians deified work as we do in our society. I don't *think* they held the same puritanical view of work that we do in our society, the more productive we are the better we are. I don't think so, but I could be wrong.

For us, though, it seems to be different. For us, for our society, work is a sort of punishing, ever-demanding presence, especially, it seems to me, as we regard the poor among us, especially lately. The poor: they just have to work harder because, you know, there's no free lunch.

I finally downloaded Uber onto my phone. Stuck in a web of flight delays, I would miss my ride of fellow rowers from the Knoxville airport to the hotel in Oak Ridge. Set to arrive over six hours late, at 2:30 in the morning, I would finally try "Uber." I'm a late-adopter of new technology in any case, but this technological "disrupter" seemed especially disruptive, especially exploitative. The "gig economy," I fear, is really not our friend.

It certainly didn't seem to be a friend of my Uber driver, though he had a knack for making misfortune sound manageable. Laid off from his job managing a Bennigan's restaurant, which followed him having managed an Outback Steakhouse restaurant, he decided to take up Ubering just to get him through this rough patch. A man in his late 50s, and an extrovert, a "people person," he had every hope that one of the many job applications he'd submitted all over eastern central Tennessee would turn into opportunity. Meanwhile, he'd circle the airport in the middle of the night in the hope of a big fare like mine--\$30 plus a 15% tip.

The people who aren't getting the Sabbath rest and restoration which justice demands are many. They're high-priced lawyers working 80 hours a week, medical interns getting 12 hours off for every 24 hours on. They're the new aristocracy, written of in *The Atlantic* this month, operating in a panicked fury about getting and staying ahead, raising their children as if everyone all the time is under the gun of achievement which will prove...what? They're also the hourly-wage workers who have three jobs at any and all hours. They're teachers and social workers who supplement their income with side gigs. Our economy has become so brutally demanding, even punishing, that we might even have convinced ourselves that this is somehow good or right or at least the only realistic way.

The scripture readings today suggest otherwise.

And that's really all I know about this—because the fact is I don't know how to dial back the fury or to introduce a sense of purpose and value to the labor market. I don't know how to make it so the lives of the poor aren't toilsome and degrading, not to mention terrifying.

I drove up behind someone with a flat tire the other day. On route seven, I drove up beside her and flagged her down. In the breakdown lane now, I got out of my car and approached hers, a woman about my age with an Hispanic accent and her hair held back from her face in a bandana. I pointed out the flat tire, and when she asked what she should do, would she make it to wherever she had to go, I told her to drive slowly with her hazard lights on. And as I drove away, I wondered whether she would be okay, or if this might amount to an unraveling for her. Then I wondered if I should have stayed with her. But I was racing off to somewhere myself. And, really, what could I do?

What can any of us do? Because we can't, of course, make it policy that everyone everywhere gets to keep the Sabbath. Making such a thing policy negates it of its restfulness, it then becoming a sort transactional purposefulness that drains it of its original intent. Plus it introduces the threat of policing, policies becoming things that need enforcement, policing. Just ask Jesus how that policy played out for him.)

An article in *The New York Times* recently spoke to the importance for people of all ages to have an activity in their lives that serves no purpose other than its own intrinsic pleasures, something that was once called a hobby. In fact, the article begins with the writer, Jaya Saxena,

telling of the time when she forgot the word for this—“hobby.” She forgot there *was* a word for this.

But studies show the importance of this, studies show how having a hobby can even increase productivity. So hip, high-tech offices have taken this into account, stocking their workplaces with skateboards and trampolines so people can increase their productivity by setting their mind in a more playful, associative state.

But this then turns relaxation and play into marketplace goods, which undermines the notion that people need sometimes not to be productive, and not just because *we* need downtime from work, but so does everything else—even the turtles trying to cross the streets while people in cars whizz by them, and too often over them; even the atmosphere that needs time to absorb the fumes of our productivity, time which we are not giving it.

Economists are getting creative. Universal basic income is one idea that has traction, and not just on the hippy, free-lunch left, but among serious thinkers of all stripes. Far outside my area of expertise, I think it’s a good idea, both in practical terms and in ethical ones. But it would be a hard sell. I think we’d be hard-pressed to embrace the notion that people get a subsistence-level income simply for being people in a society that has chosen to invest in its people in this way. If what people need is money to buy food, housing, and clothing for themselves, then let’s just cut out the factory-produced cheap-goods value-added middleman and give it directly while also reducing our pollution, waste, and need for self-storage units.

Meanwhile, let’s rest. Let’s allow ourselves restoration. Let’s make it so the answer to the question, “Do you get to keep the Sabbath?” is, for this moment at least, “Yes.”

Thanks be to God.