

2nd Sunday after Pentecost B 02 June 2024

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from our loving Father, lifted-up Son, and life-giving Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Then [Jesus] 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.' Let's pray: ... Amen.

A mother sings out to her son one Sunday morning and says, "Son, it's time to get up. It's Sunday morning and church begins in an hour and a half. I'm making your breakfast." The son just grunts, rolls over in bed, and goes back to sleep.

She calls him again, "Your breakfast is ready. It's an hour until church." He moans again, pulls the pillow around his head, and goes back to sleep. The mother speaks a third time saying, "Church starts in 45 minutes. It's time to get up. Your breakfast has gone cold."

Finally, she goes up to his room and says, "Son! It's time for you to get up. You have to get up now and get dressed to get to church on time."

He protests, "Why do I have to go to church? No-one likes me. The singing is terrible. The sermons are boring. I can't stand it!"

The mother says to her son, "You know why you have to go church. You're the pastor."

Once a week, we're all faced with deciding what we're going to do on the first day of the week. "What are we going to do this Sunday?" Will we shuffle off to church, or will we do something else?

In our society, Sundays offer a lot of choices. Sunday is the perfect day to take a leisurely drive to the Barossa, McLaren Vale, Adelaide Hills, or Victor Harbor. You can join the largest congregations in Australia and watch the footy on Sunday. Café culture has become a religion in itself. Boating, fishing, and going to the beach are popular choices. You can roam the shops along Rundle Mall, go to the cinema or play a round of golf. Oh, and we might even pop in to church to see who's still around, if there's nothing else to do. Every week we're confronted with that question, "What will we do on Sunday?"

Mark describes two dramatic events in Jesus' ministry that occurred on the sabbath, and both beg the question, "What is it lawful to do on the sabbath?" The disciples began to pick some heads of grain and Jesus healed a man with a shrivelled hand.

From the perspective of the Pharisees, there was nothing wrong with doing either of these things; except, they were done on the sabbath. About 200 years before Christ, the Pharisees had formed a council called the Great Synagogue. This council took the Ten Commandments and added interpretations by piling on extra laws, rather than teaching the inner spirit of the Commandments.

Where the Third Commandment says, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy"... "You shall do no regular work" (Exodus 20:8...10), the Great Synagogue expanded that into 39 specific prohibitions called the Abhoth. Then they added the Toldoth, which were the rules to help carry out the 39 prohibitions.

The Commandment says, "You shall do no regular work." The Abhoth says, "Reaping and threshing is work." The Toldoth says, "plucking the ears of corn is equal to reaping, and rubbing in the hands is equal to threshing." Thus, the disciples were seen to be breaking the Third Commandment.

Where Jesus is concerned; he reminds the Pharisees of an example in the Old Testament [1 Samuel 21:3-6], where the priest gives David and his men the bread of the Presence, or, holy bread to eat because that's all that is available. Jesus then says to the Pharisees, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." So, how are we to understand, sabbath?

Jewish people and Seventh Day Adventists observe the traditional sabbath which falls on the last day of the week which is Saturday. We don't, but we attach the same significance to Sunday, the first day of the week.

This was a significant change in early Christianity, introduced in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection which occurred on the first day of the week, Sunday. It seemed only proper to worship the Lord on the day of his resurrection. In this sense, every Sunday is an Easter Sunday.

So, what is the real meaning of the sabbath principle? The "sabbaton" in Greek, or "shabbath" in Hebrew literally means, "The seventh day" and is patterned on God's work in creation. But, the sabbath isn't to be seen as a trade-off of six days for ourselves and one day for God. The sabbath principle reminds us that there must be times in our week when we stop and spend time with God. We mustn't let our lives become so rushed, so full of busy-ness, 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 isn't the important point. You can rest and worship any day. You can rest and worship every day. There's time to work and there's time to rest and be intentionally present to God. The sabbath reminds us to take time to rest and to take time to worship; time to nourish our deepest needs. In this respect, sabbath is ultimately a gift. A gracious gift created by God, for us.

Now, some may accuse Christians of using this view of the sabbath as a cop-out. After all, religious Jews adhere rigidly to the traditional sabbath observance. But where does that leave faithful Jews who work in essential services? Many Muslims are rigid about their five daily prayers at mosque. But how do they expect the cursing prayer aimed at Christians and Jews to gain them favour with God? No, the Christian view of the sabbath isn't a cop-out because we're not called to a rigid observance of the law for the sake of the law. We're called to serve the inner spirit of the law which is to recognise and celebrate God's goodness to us in his saving love in Christ; good news for us and good news for our neighbours whom we're called to love.

There are many good and interesting expressions of how Christians view what sabbath means: “The sabbath is the day on which I hand my life back to God every week to remember that it is not my own.” The significance of this point is that before the advent of Christ, people worked toward the sabbath. Since Christ, Christians have acknowledged that their work grows out of the sabbath. Simply acknowledging that we belong to a generous God, changes how we live the other six days of our lives.

Another observes, “The sabbath isn’t a place, it’s a structure, a cathedral in time.” And I’ve read how a 2nd World War Royal Canadian Air Force pilot described the freedom and joy of soaring high above the clouds:

*And while, with silent lifting mind I’ve trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God. (‘High flight’, by John Gillespie Magee)*

Maybe you have an interesting way of describing what sabbath means to you.

I pray that you don’t see the sabbath as a rigid, legalistic, Sunday-only observance; rather, that you receive the gift of sabbath as God intended it to be from the very beginning. A time to rest and hand your lives over to God. A time to hear that God accepts you. A time to praise and thank God for saving you. A cathedral in time where you come to soar to the heavens and touch the hand of God. A time to receive God’s love for you as he serenades you with his Word and soothes you with his promises. A time to get intimate with Jesus as he feeds your hunger and heals your brokenness with bread and wine; his body and blood. A time to be recharged with faith and love as you worship God’s holiness. A time to hear those words that are sweeter than honey, “You are forgiven.”

Saints, the sabbath was made for you and Jesus is lord even of the sabbath that you may rest from your worldly weariness and receive his life sustaining love and ministration. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.