



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Sabbath Schooling

Mark 2:23-3:6

A sermon by William M. Klein

3 June 2018

²³One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He 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." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." ¹Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴Then 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. ⁵He 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. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (Mk. 2:23-3:6 NRSV)

1

In what sense is Sabbath a day of rest for you? Before you tell me Christians don't worship on the Sabbath, which is Saturday...let me say that what the Old Testament says about the 4th Commandment applies to the Christian Sabbath - which is Sunday. For our purposes, then, when I talk about Sabbath I'm talking about Sunday.

So, let me ask you again. In what sense is Sabbath a day of rest for you? When was the last time you interrupted the schedule that keeps you busy all week with a rest day? When was the last time you set what you were doing down in order that you may rest?

If your answer to these questions is, "it's been a while," then you have work to do - and I'm not talking about more of the work that drives what you do day in and day out throughout the workweek. I'm talking about the work that will help you realize you need to rest. I'm talking about doing what you need to do in order to reclaim a healthy perspective. You and I need to set aside whatever we think is so important in order that we may do what God knows we need to do - i.e., rest.

"My work is too important," you say. "My time is precious. I can't afford to give one day in seven to resting. Besides, I don't need rest."

We have all said these things, haven't we? "My work is too important. I can't give one day to resting. I don't need rest."

You are aware there are 10 Commandments...only 10. And one of those 10 Commandments reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, to 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."¹

Writer, teacher, and Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson wants us to think about what happens to us and in us when there is no Sabbath – no regular time of not working. He says what happens is that we soon become so totally absorbed in what **we** are doing and thinking and saying that God plays no role in our lives.² We make the work of our hands and minds the measure of all things. Resting on the Sabbath provides the pause that helps us remember, refocus, and renovate. Faithfully observing a day of rest every week reminds us we are not God...and that we actually need God. We have our part to play, which is why we work six days. We rest as a way of acknowledging and confessing, “This is our Father’s world.” We rest as a way of saying, “Yes, I really do need rest.”

William Willimon, United Methodist pastor and professor at Duke Divinity School, put it this way. He says, “Sabbath rest is a publicly enacted sign of our trust that God keeps the world – so we don’t have to.”³

Sabbath is a tool built into the rhythm of each week that helps us remember that God’s loving care comes in the form of rest. Sabbath rest helps us to have a more God-attentive, God-responsive life.

2

Sure, there are times when it feels like keeping the Sabbath is a burden. There are so many other things to get done that it sometimes feels as though taking time to rest is, if not a burden, then a waste of time and a pure nuisance.

In his book *Kaddish*, Leon Wiseltier reports on his decision, after his father died, to observe the practice of reciting the mourner’s *kaddish*, a psalm-like acclamation that is said every day for many months after the death of a loved one. The process involves going to a synagogue and wrapping phylacteries around one’s arms, leather bands with box-like chambers containing words of the Torah, and then reciting the *kaddish*. It is an arduous discipline, a lot like the observing Sabbath. But one morning, Wiseltier reports, “I am standing in my phylacteries at dawn, and suddenly they feel different. They do not bind me, they gird me.”⁴

There surely are days when Sabbath feels like a burden. But Sabbath is not meant to bind...it is meant to gird us...to strengthen, empower, and renew us. Sabbath rest is meant to help us remember, refocus, and renovate. We ignore a weekly day of rest at our peril. And the peril I’m talking about is not some sort of lightening bolt from heaven inflicted upon us for violating one of the 10 Commandments. I’m talking about what happens when we take ourselves, when we take our work, our ideas, our endeavors so seriously we don’t think we need time for what rest can do to us and for us...body, mind, and spirit. I’m talking about what Wiseltier found when he kept saying the prayer for his dead father...i.e., by observing weekly Sabbath rest, even when it feels like a waste of time, we may just realize how much we need it.

The great Jewish theologian of the last century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, found that Sabbath was so life-giving to him that he looked forward to it every day of the week. In fact, he saw each day of the week as a pilgrimage to the Sabbath.⁵

Jesus said in our lesson for today, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.” He was not throwing out the Sabbath...far from it. He wanted his listeners to realize the Sabbath was and is a gift of God for the people of God.⁶ He wanted his listeners to observe the Sabbath...just as he observed the Sabbath. But he

wanted them to realize the 4th Commandment was not meant to be a burden or a prohibition. It was about helping the people to regain perspective...to regain balance body, mind, and spirit.

3

With all of this as backdrop, let's look at the lesson we read a few minutes ago from Mark's Gospel. The passage has to do with the Sabbath...but not directly. I want to suggest the passage provides a sideways look at Sabbath. Here is what I mean.

As the story unfolds, it would seem that as Jesus and his disciples walked from town to town, a small group of Jewish leaders were following along. The text does not say they were following Jesus and his disciples...or why they were following them. But it soon becomes clear they were looking for a reason to pounce...to trap Jesus. They were looking for anything they could use to bring charges against Jesus to silence him.

We were not there that day...but we know those religious leaders, don't we...people who are only too ready to point out faults and failings...people who seem to take great delight in pointing out where others have fallen short. I hasten to say that too often we are those religious leaders. Too often we are guilty of sniffing out the faults and failings of others so we can point a self-righteous finger. Jesus didn't take kindly to fault-finding in his day and he would have us be rid of that nasty habit in our day, as well.

What the religious leaders hit upon happened to be a Sabbath regulation. You see, as the disciples walked through a grainfield they plucked heads of grain to eat. That amounted to work...a violation of the prohibition against working on the Sabbath. Ah ha! Here was something the small group of Jewish leaders could charge Jesus with...breaking one of the sacred commandments.

Later that day the story shifts to a synagogue. Jesus entered a synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. The religious leaders watched to see what Jesus would do. And sure enough, Jesus cured him.

As they saw it, they had the ammunition they needed to bring charges against Jesus. As they saw it, Jesus was making no secret he was a sinner because he didn't hide the fact he was violating the 4th Commandment that clearly stated, "You shall do no work on the Sabbath."

4

What are we to take away from this story? We've read enough of these sorts of Bible stories to know the religious leaders missed the point. But what point did they miss? What was it that Jesus wanted them to learn? And what is it that Jesus wants us to learn?

Keeping the Sabbath is important. Jesus was not saying they should ignore the Sabbath. He was not saying we don't need Sabbath rest. He knew Sabbath was a gift of God for the people of God. He knew how the discipline of Sabbath rest helps us regain perspective...how it helps us regain balance body, mind, and spirit. So Jesus was not telling his listeners, the religious leaders, or us that the Sabbath doesn't matter.

I think Jesus wanted the religious leaders to understand the 10 Commandments, and specifically, the 4th Commandment about Sabbath rest, were never meant to be used as an excuse to justify being heartless, uncaring, and indifferent to human need. The Sabbath exists to help us regain the sort of perspective that does not bind us but girds us... girds us with reverence, compassion, and perspective.

3

When Jesus was asked to summarize the 10 Commandments, remember what he said? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

This, I believe, is what Jesus wanted the religious leaders to learn that day when they were trying to trap him. And I believe that is what Jesus wants us to learn, too.

5

As you leave here today you have the rest of this Sabbath day ahead of you. My assignment is for you to go and do nothing...**except** delight in the reality that this is the day the Lord has made. Rest, rejoice, and be glad in it. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ See Exodus 20:8.

² Peterson, Eugene H. 2005. Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 117.

³ Peterson, 129.

⁴ Long, Tom. 2018. “A Sabbath Way of Life,” from *Christian Century* <newsletter@christiancentury.org>, June 3, 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B.

⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. 2005 ed. (original publication 1951) The Sabbath. NY: Noonday Press, E-Book edition, loc. 131.

⁶ See Exodus 20:1-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Why were the people not supposed to work on the Sabbath? Well, there were two reasons given. From the book of Exodus they were told that after laboring for six days God rested on the seventh day of creation. From the book of Deuteronomy the people of Israel were told to rest because back when they were slaves in Egypt they were not allowed to rest. Pharaoh did not allow them the freedom to rest, not even one day a week. And so, the people of Israel were to rest as a way of remembering and giving thanks for the freedom to rest.