

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 4
Year B

Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Psalm 81:1-10
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23 - 3:6

“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.” Thus states the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy. But, what is the sabbath and what are these restrictions against labor? What are we to do on the sabbath? These are all questions that have been asked since this element of the Law of Moses was revealed.

What is the sabbath? It is generally considered the day of worship for Jews. In modern times, as well as in the first century, Jews attend synagogue on Saturday to worship, pray, and study Scripture. It is a time set aside to pause from work and seek God. But, in addition to this time of worship, the sabbath is actually a time of rest. Very little activity is permitted in the home and life of practicing Jews. And, as clearly stated in many places, we all need rest. Therefore, a sabbath is a good practice for everyone.

In the explanation of this law, the Israelites were reminded that God rested after the six days of creation. Therefore, it is decreed that the Jewish people should also rest on the seventh day. But, there have to be some limits to what could, or could not, be done. This has filled many volumes over the past several millennia.

In the Gospel reading, we see Jesus push the boundaries of what might be permissible on the sabbath. In the first story, Jesus and His disciples are walking through a grain field and the disciples are plucking off ears of the grain to eat. In one aspect, this is allowed - when one is hungry, as was the case with David and his followers eating the Bread in the Tabernacle in the story Jesus quotes. However, it may be that the disciples were just idly plucking the heads as they walked along. One of my faults is to eat when I am bored and that may be what was happening here - at least in the eyes of the Pharisees. To them, this amounted to working on the sabbath.

The second incident also happened on a sabbath, in the synagogue in Capernaum. This was the healing of a person with a withered hand. Before any action took place, Jesus asked if it was acceptable to do good on the sabbath. It was widely agreed that one of the actions permitted on the sabbath was to render life-saving aid, either for a person or an animal. The question of limits boiled down to what was meant by “life-saving” acts. Could providing food and water to one’s animals be acceptable? Could healing a person so that they could live, or provide for their family, be OK? Where are the boundaries? In this case, Jesus was deliberately testing the limits to make His point. As was stated by the prophets of old, God requires mercy more than sacrifice. Following the spirit of the law was more important than following the letter of the law. If God

instituted the sabbath as a day of rest to allow the people to be restored physically, then healing on the sabbath was a way of restoring a person's health.

This brings us to the question of what we are to do on the sabbath. Many will remember the Sunday Blue Laws that were once enacted across this country. This was an attempt to legislate the idea of a day of rest, not on the sabbath but on the Lord's Day. If businesses were closed and there was a minimum of activities on Sunday, people would be able to go to church and then have the remainder of the day for rest. As with most attempts to legislate behavior, this failed miserably as people took advantage of the day off to do things other than worship. Now, we see all manner of activities scheduled on Sundays, including youth sports as well as professional sports.

To me, the day of the week for a sabbath is not as important as having a day of rest. With many of us not working a typical 9-5 Monday through Friday job, we can choose any day of the week for our sabbath rest. I try to set aside Monday as my day of rest. I attempt to limit my meetings and other activities on Mondays and spend the day quietly reading and relaxing. God intended the day to be one of rest - not necessarily a day of worship. By intentionally setting one day a week aside to truly rest, we are honoring the spirit and the letter of God's Law.

My challenge to all is to select a day for your sabbath and then to establish that day as a time of rest from all activities so that we might be able to reflect on all that God has given us. That is a true sabbath.