

Sermon, October 8, 2023

Exodus 31:12-17

“On the Seventh Day He Rested”

Most of us can remember a time when the Sabbath was quite different than it is now. Many people in the country went to church. In the town I lived in as a young child a small deli was the only business that was open. Families sat at the table together for Sunday dinner. Today, far less people attend church services. For many businesses it is the busiest day of the week, and families are spread out so far across the country that Sunday dinner seems a thing of the past.

Again, a much smaller portion of the population is coming together for worship, but, at least no one is being stoned to death for not showing up, or for breaking other Sabbath rules. This morning’s reading portrays a God far more brutal than we are accustomed to hearing of. There is another story in the Book of Numbers in which a man is discovered gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Moses is uncertain what to do about it, so he asks the Lord who tells him that the man is to be stoned to death, a very slow and excruciating form of execution.

Jump ahead to the Gospel of Matthew , and we find Jesus responding to violations of the Sabbath in a very different way. For example, in the 12th chapter of Matthew Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath , and the disciples, who were hungry, started to pluck heads of grain and eating them. Some Pharisees nearby saw what they were doing and said to Jesus, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath”. Well, Jesus points out to the Pharisees a passage from 1 Samuel, that they would have seen as authoritative , that once David and his companions, when hungry, entered the house of God and ate of the bread of the Presence , which only priests were allowed to eat, and that the priests break the Sabbath but are considered guiltless before the law. Jesus then ends by saying, “But if you had known what this means, ‘ I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”.

First, notice the focus on the law. The Pharisees are accusing the disciples of violating Mosaic law. But were they? They were not harvesting the grain, only plucking a few heads for nourishing themselves. So, the real problem here is that the Pharisees were guilty of a far too strict interpretation of the law. But more importantly, Jesus is pointing out that, in this case, there is something that greatly supersedes the law - that being, mercy! And seeing that mercy arises out of love, it therefore is a fulfillment of the law. When Jesus says, "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice', he was once again drawing their attention to a passage from the Book of Hosea, which, in our translation reads, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice".

Notice an evolution of an understanding of God, from one who demands execution for violations of the law, to one who desires love and mercy rather than sacrifice or punishment. So, when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man as Lord of the Sabbath, he is speaking of himself placing blessing on the day, and that our worship and relationship to God is based on love, mercy, and compassion.

The whole idea of Sabbath is, of course, based on God having rested on the seventh day of Creation, but it has more to do than just simple imitation of what God had done. When the Israelites were held in slavery in Egypt, they were not afforded a time of rest, so having reached the promised land they now were given the opportunity to rest. As Jesus says in the 2nd chapter of the Gospel of Mark, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath". In other words, the Sabbath was made for our benefit- a time for us to take a break from the daily grind of the rest of the week. This does not mean we have to refrain from that which a strict interpretation of the Mosaic law demands, but it does mean we should find ways to break away from the rat race we are often subjected to. I remember back in the 1950s, as new appliances were coming on the market, they were often advertised as 'time saving devices. But rather quickly we learned that we had to devote so much time to working like crazy to pay for and maintain our time saving devices!

We have worked very hard over the course of our lives, and we do need time for rest and recreation, things to divert our attention from the daily grind. But it is also important to keep the Sabbath holy, and we can do that by coming to church, worshiping the Lord, and, if not for anything else, to give thanks for having been given an opportunity to rest! Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of mercy, we are grateful for this day, and for the opportunity to gather in the name of your Son Jesus. May your Holy Spirit guide us today and through the week that we may live in ways that are pleasing to you. Our lives can be so busy and full of things we think we need to do, and we thank you that you call us together on this Sabbath day that we may hear your Word, and sing your praise, but that we may rest in you - to find renewal and all that we need for the week ahead. May this day remain holy in your sight.

We thank you for the gift of this congregation and pray for the unity and the renewal of the Church around the world. We also ask that you bless the annual gathering of the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ later this week. May it be a time of inspiration for all that are gathered there...Amen.