

“Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.” As recently as my childhood and youth, the Fourth Commandment still had force of law in the places where I lived. I can’t say that I have much memory regarding this from my early days in Florida, but I do remember all the shops being closed on Sunday in England, when we lived there. All but the “chemist,” what we would call “the drugstore.” I certainly remember all the stores in Missouri being closed on Sunday, except for the odd convenience store, so that you could buy milk if you absolutely had to. Sundays in those days were mostly given over to church, morning, evening and, once I was in the youth group, afternoons, too. Sometimes we’d drive the 30 miles down to Herculaneum to spend the afternoon with my dad’s extended family. My Uncle Tom and Aunt Nyla were rarely at those family gatherings. They took advantage of the differing laws of our neighbor state to go shopping in Illinois on Sundays. There was a mild air of scandal about such activities back then, probably exacerbated by the general air of wickedness that seemed attached to Illinois in those days by conservative Missourians. After all, in Illinois one could buy alcohol at 18 rather than at 21, as in Missouri and other “right-thinking” states, and then there were those clubs across the river from St. Louis that weren’t allowed in Missouri. Breaking the Sabbath with unnecessary shopping seemed much of a piece with drinking demon rum if somewhat less depraved than observing the gyrations of underclad females. “Blue laws” have been vanishing from the books in many places since then. England began allowing all Sunday shopping in 1994, although some of the most supposedly secular countries in Europe, such as France, still have Sunday restrictions. I don’t remember exactly when shopping laws changed in Missouri but change they did. And here in the “wild west” of Washington, we still see the remnants of these laws in our time as the state only recently began opening liquor stores on Sundays.

So we are still dealing in our society with the question of what is appropriate on Sunday, the Sabbath for most Christians. It is a question that has challenged Americans since the earliest colonial days when the laws of Massachusetts made church attendance mandatory. It is a question that stretches back across the combined history of Christianity and Judaism, as we’ve heard in our scriptures this morning. The question is, what can we learn about Sabbath keeping from those scriptures and how do we really apply it in our lives in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seattle? Are these two scriptures revelatory of a deep divide between the Old Covenant and the New or is there a unifying theme that will help us to understand what it means to “keep the Sabbath holy?” I believe that a focus on the love and creative energy of God can help us to resolve any perceived conflict between Isaiah and Jesus and guide our actions on the Sabbath days of our lives.

Isaiah 58 is, in the understanding of many scholars, part of the book which is addressed to the restored Judah, to those exiles who have returned from Babylon and are reestablishing their country as a province in the Persian Empire. One theme of these final ten chapters of the book is how to construct the new society to be in harmony with the will of God. In chapter 58, Isaiah speaks to the disconnect between the people’s surface observance of the rites of worship and their un-Godly behavior on either side of those rites (and sometimes during, as well). The people are proud of how well they observe the externals of their religion but God’s word through the prophet challenges them. (Is. 58:2-4) “Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. (They say,) “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel

and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” God tells this once-again proud people that they are getting it all wrong. “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.” Just as Amos, some 250 years prior, had spoken the Lord’s word against shallow and meaningless sacrifice at the Temple, so Isaiah now becomes God’s instrument for pointing out the futility of fasting with the body while the heart remains unbowed. True humility before God is to follow God’s will and that means treating the vulnerable around us as we would members of our own family.

Likewise, according to Isaiah, the Sabbath must be truly honored. Isaiah’s message is to remind God’s people just why the Sabbath had been instituted in the first place – to protect all men and women but especially slaves from overwork. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 says, “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.” The whole message of this 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is that God is not interested in religious ritual if it does not serve to help us remember to care for others. Fasting should remind us that we are dependent on others for our basic needs and that they are dependent on us as well. Sabbath should be a time for all to take the rest their bodies and spirits need and to thank God for all that God provides us.

With this understanding of the prophet’s message, it becomes clear that Jesus was not proposing something radical in his teachings on Sabbath but instead following in the prophetic tradition. Of course, there is always tension between the prophets who interpret the law and the scribes and priests who preserve it. In all the Gospels, but especially in Luke, Jesus seems to always be getting in trouble on the Sabbath day. Early in what is probably the oldest Gospel, in Mark 2, Jesus and his disciples are upbraided by the Pharisees because the hungry disciples picked some grain to eat as they walked through a field. Mark’s very next story is of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, to the predictable outrage of the Pharisees. Both Mark and Matthew write that this is the point at which the Pharisees begin to plot against Jesus’ life. John, too, relates that it was a Sabbath day healing that turned Jesus’ opponents murderous. Luke tells these stories as well but for Luke the connection between Jesus’ teachings on and about the Sabbath and threats against his life begin very early on indeed. In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, in which is laid so much groundwork for the rest of the story of Jesus, we find Jesus preaching in his hometown synagogue. You probably remember the words by now: “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was

his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”” By the time Jesus has finished speaking at the synagogue, as Luke tells it: “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Jesus’ message and actions across all of these incidents is consistent. What is always permitted on the Sabbath, indeed, what is encouraged, are actions that set people free – free to live normal lives, free to care for the lives God has given them, free to celebrate God’s graciousness. As Robert Stein writes in his commentary on Luke, “If it is right to perform God’s will on the first six days of the week, how much more should God’s will, mercy, and love be performed on the Sabbath.” At that first Sabbath sermon in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus proclaims that he has come to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, or the year of Jubilee. In the Jubilee year, which came as the seventh multiple of the Sabbath years (every seventh year), all slaves were to be set free from their domestic servitude. In his prophetic reinterpretation of Jubilee, the Sabbath year of Sabbath years, Jesus proclaims that God’s will is for humankind to be set free from all of the powers that enslave, whether it is societal neglect, mental or spiritual incapacity, or crippling pain or disease. For Jesus, Sabbath is not a day to turn away from the world’s troubles to focus on praising God, but to praise God by addressing the brokenness in God’s world.

That God is to be praised on the Sabbath, however, is not negotiable. Isaiah, attempting to reorient his society towards true worship in their new circumstances, brought this word from God: “If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” In addition to his scandalous healings and freeings on the Sabbath, Jesus continued to attend synagogue on the Sabbath day, hearing or preaching the scriptures, being in fellowship with the people of God. The result of the healing of the woman in today’s story is that “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” Jesus is advocating neither self-centered behavior on the Sabbath, nor good deeds for the sake of good deeds. The Sabbath is the time in which human beings are free to praise God, in study, in thanksgiving, in helping others. In his book, Provoking the Gospel of Luke, Richard Swanson explains how Jesus and his contemporaries would have understood Sabbath: “This scene comes out of a world that remembered that Sabbath is different. Sabbath is not just a day of rest. It is a day of promise....Sabbath is welcomed into the house as a queen would be welcomed. Sabbath provides a foretaste of the culmination of all things, a glimpse of God’s dominion, a little slice of the messianic age dropped into the midst of regular time. Sabbath offers a remembrance of God’s promise of peace and freedom for all of creation. It is a

good thing, a gift from God...Sabbath had become a symbol of the resistance God's people offered to tyrants of every sort and every time...Sabbath is a day that lifts people's eyes to God's promise in the midst of the most unpromising circumstances." Swanson's words are a remarkable description of a great day of freedom, one which we are all called to enjoy.

In a sermon on this Lukan passage, The Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Baltimore, writes, "In Jesus, we are set free from a legal observance of Sabbath, but what are we set free for?" It is not, he suggests, a freedom to try to cram just that little bit of extra work or responsibility into our week. Mary Hinkle Shore, that fine preacher and New Testament scholar at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, says that she sees in Jesus' freeing the woman from the power that kept her bent over a metaphor for a similar power that keeps us spiritually bent over. It is, she says, "the form of sin that says we must work seven days a week, that we cannot trust God to keep the world spinning and to keep the evil one at bay but must manage such things ourselves." If I am to be honest with you this morning, as I always try to be, I must confess that it is a sin I know too well. Pagano reminds his listeners that this sin of ours to drive ourselves and others past a reasonable measure has been an ongoing problem in our society. He cites the statement on Sabbath-keeping of the 1888 Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade meeting of bishops in the worldwide Anglican Communion: "The most careful regard should be had to the danger of any encroachment upon the rest which on this day is the right of servants as well as their masters, and of the working classes as well as their employers." In answer then to his own question, "what are we set free for?" Pagano writes, "We are free for rest. We need it. We all need it: adults and children, executives, bus drivers, students, teachers, nurses, homemakers. All. We are mortals, and resting reminds us that we are creatures with real bodily needs to stop, replenish, and rest. This rest is a justice issue because we need an economy in which people can make a living wage, so that no one needs to work every day of the week in order to make ends meet and provide for the needs of their households. We are free to remember our dependency on God. Sabbath reminds us that God is God and we can stop trying to be God. We can rest, worshipping the one God, and learning about the real God. We are free to worship, to immerse ourselves in God's eternity: in a place and time set aside; in an activity in which we produce nothing but praise; where we are valued, not because of what we make, do, earn, deserve, know, contribute, or achieve, but because we are created by God, loved by God."

So, what is the Sabbath for? Certainly it is for rest, a topic near and dear to my heart these days as I plunge into a schedule of hectic activity that will leave me with a rest deficit until about November 7<sup>th</sup> (that's the day after Election Day). Certainly it is for doing what we can to heal the hurts in this world and to move our world closer to the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. But perhaps most of all, it is for making that special connection with God in our worshipping community, the connection that reenergizes us, that makes us catch our breath as we recognize the presence of the Holy around us and in us. The Sabbath is a day of promise, a day, in the words of Bryan Findlayson, "when the garden is regained and all is well." The Sabbath is our sign of hope, every seven days, that the day is coming when the dwelling place of God shall be with us, God's people, and God will wipe away all tears from all eyes and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, and no more pain, for the former things shall all be passed away. And now, my brothers and sisters, hear the Good News. It is as Christ Jesus so often said. That day is coming and now is. In this Sabbath day, we realize and recognize that all the promises of God are being fulfilled, in us and for us. As we remember the Sabbath day, to

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keep it holy, as we take time ourselves to be holy, to be set aside for God, so the love of God flows through us and around us and so we have a glimpse of what it means to fulfill our calling and understand ourselves to be children of the Most High. Thanks be to God!