

“SABBATH-KEEPING”

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Remember 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.

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, is set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

I have long been fascinated by phrases we frequently use without a clue as to exactly what they refer to even though we may know what they mean. Why does it sometimes “rain cats and dogs”? Why not rats and frogs? Why should we “mind our p’s and q’s, but not necessarily our m’s and n’s”? Who was the real “Real McCoy”...the original? Why do some people get off “scot free” while others “pay through the nose” or “get taken to the cleaners”? And of course probably the most popular: “the whole nine yards.” We know what it means but is it referring to football, fabric, or front lawns. Some time ago I was intrigued by the phrase “a month of Sundays,” which usually means an interminably long, dreary stretch of time; someone suggested that it derives from strict keeping of the Lord’s Day: no games or other frivolous amusements tolerated. But to me, growing up after the era of rigid blue laws and fun-denying restrictions, a month of Sundays didn’t sound like a bad idea at all.

What is Sunday all about? It is our Sabbath...ever since the early Christians decided to break the 4th commandment and change the sabbath from the 7th day, the day of rest after 6 days of work, to the 1st day of the week, the day of Jesus’ resurrection. But what does our sabbath mean for us...how to observe it. Not many Christians cling to the rigid observances of several generations ago, though some may still feel a twinge of guilt if spotted in the supermarket buying milk or the liquor store picking up a bottle of wine for dinner.

Jesus was accused by the religious leaders of profaning the sabbath by curing a woman who had been crippled, bent over, and unable to stand up straight for 18 years...on a day when work, including the work of healing, was forbidden by those who rendered authoritative interpretations of the Law. The spirit of their response seems all-too-familiar to me; I think I've heard it in other contexts: "Why couldn't she play by the rules?; there are 6 days she could have shown up for healing, but she chose the one sacred day we reserve for holy rest, as the commandment requires." Jesus, of course, points to their hypocrisy in such a tight legalistic understanding of the law: "You untie your ox or donkey on the sabbath to lead it to water, right?" Why should this woman, precious daughter of Abraham, not be unbound as well on the sabbath from her 18 years of being crippled, bent over, and unable to stand up straight?" In another sabbath controversy, Jesus says that the sabbath was made for humans, not vice versa. In fact, the entire Jewish law was given for the benefit of God's people, not to satisfy the restrictive control needs of a neurotic God. There is here the perennial issue of a legalistic versus a liberal interpretation of the law, in this case the religious law. But there is more here than that. This story of the healing on the sabbath, the Lord's Day, catches up some of the essential meaning of sabbath as intended by God, which for us would be Sunday...and maybe another time set aside for spiritual renewal and reflection. We frequently today speak of "sabbath time," whether on Sunday or some other time devoted to our very deepest spiritual needs.

There were actually two sabbath traditions in the Hebrew faith. The one we are most familiar with is the sabbath connection with Creation in Exodus 20: Since God worked 6 days to create heaven and earth and then rested on the 7th, you too should observe a day when you stop...stop working, toiling, straining, running, racing, producing, exerting. Imitate the Lord, who worked hard but was no workaholic. For our benefit – we all need rest, though some try to outdo even the Lord. It is a "sabbath to the Lord" says the scripture, yet it is really for us, not for the Lord, who doesn't *need* us to rest.

But there is another ancient Hebrew tradition in relation to the sabbath, the one we read from Deuteronomy 5. It also speaks of the command for Sabbath rest, but relates it not to the 7th day of creation but to the day of deliverance from Egyptian slavery. The Lord's Day is about rest but it is also a celebration of freedom, liberation from bondage. "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." (Deut. 5:15). Jesus' healing on the sabbath, viewed within this tradition, could not have been more appropriate: freedom from bondage. "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" And the legalists were put to shame while crowd rejoiced at this true living out of the meaning of sabbath. (Luke 13:16-17).

What, then, could be more appropriate for the church than to change its sabbath from Saturday to the day of our ultimate freedom from bondage, the day Jesus broke the bonds of death to release us into the glorious freedom of eternal life beginning here and now.

So what does all this mean for us? Our sabbath...our Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection, and perhaps other times we set aside to stop working and begin being and reflecting? It's a time inviting us to "rest in the Lord," however we do that...to open our lives to renewal and refreshment (and that's at least some of what Sunday worship is meant to do). And Sunday is also a time to remember that our God is all about setting the captive free, loosing the bonds that dehumanize, releasing those who are crippled, bent over, and unable to stand up straight, spiritually or physically or both.

David Lose has commented in this vein:

“What if Sunday was about remembering how God has freed us, so that we might free others? What if Sunday is about calling to mind the mighty acts of God that we might be encouraged to dare mighty acts ourselves? And what if Sunday was a day to remember that God has freed us from death itself so that we don’t have to be afraid of anything...[and] might share our Christian courage with others?”ⁱ

Where are we feeling the bondage, what is bending us over and keeping us from standing up straight? Sunday is a testimony to the truth that God can heal us as Jesus cured the precious daughter of Abraham. Jesus means freedom. And where, as we look around our world...our family...our community...our nation and our world – where are those being held in bondage, physically or spiritually or both, who need to hear the good news of God’s releasing power or who need to know the justice that liberates from oppression, the crippling power of inequity and intolerance? Those who play by the rules....and those who are too desperate for that....who show up at inappropriate times and places?

May we think upon these things this Sunday and on every Lord’s Day, and may we let God’s sabbath infuse our life in every day and through every season. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, on the website Working Preacher (www.workingpreacher.org); commentary for the lectionary text for 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time.