

PSALM 139:1-6; 13-18 (p.505)

JUNE 6, 2021

MARK 2:23-3:6 (p. 813)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

You know us Lord, every part and piece, every thought and action. You know our hearts and our emotions, our dreams and our fears. And for this great gift of love, we give you thanks. Help us now to know you. We want to see you Lord, and understand you, and follow you daily. Open our eyes and our ears so that we might do just that. Enable us to know your Truth. And then, to live our lives accordingly. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

“SABBATH KEEPING”

Tell me, because I'm curious, did you rest last weekend? I mean it was a Holiday, right, a three-day weekend! So, did you take time to rest? I'm going to assume you took Memorial Day seriously, remembering Veterans and their families, and especially those who gave the Ultimate Sacrifice for our Freedom! Freedom isn't Free, is it? Some people gave it all, for the rest of us! We can't ever forget that! And never, ever take it for granted! But did you rest?

I'm going to also assume that you Worshipped! I pray, in fact that you Worshipped! That's not something you want to take for granted either! Or ever forget! Or forget how important it really is! But I'm still wondering, did you rest? I know some people did! Maybe? Or thought they did! But others did yardwork, right, lots of yardwork! Tended Gardens, or tended to Graduation Things! Some people had House Guests, with all the prep and planning that goes along with that! And other were House Guests themselves! All that packing and unpacking, laundry and such!

Some people went boating or fishing, golfing or camping! Some barbequed in their back yard! Others shared a Campfire with loved ones, or went to the beach! A lot happened last weekend! But did you rest? I'm asking, because our Gospel Lesson for today is all about Keeping the Sabbath! And this week's sermon, ended up being a self-critic for me! I'm guilty, and I know it! The Holy Spirit has been convicting me! The rest of you can follow along, if you like. Maybe you have Sabbath issues too? But I'm clear! God has gotten my attention! You see, I actually wrote part of this sermon on Tuesday, my Sabbath. And did research on Monday. That's not exactly a new occurrence, either! So, let's just say, for me, this lesson is "timely"!

Monday was a Holiday, right! Maybe you noticed? It was a Holiday that came right on the heels of a Sabbath! And that word, "Holiday", comes from the Old English "Halig-Daeg". It means "Holy Day"! Holidays, like Sabbaths, at least originally, were Consecrated Days of Rest! And as with any Sabbath, all work, in any form, must cease! So, did you rest?

I did a little homework. Again, when I should have been resting! Prior to about 950 A.D., Holidays were always a Religious Observance, a Day of Obligation, a Holy Day on which the Faithful tended to religious duties! That's not something we talk about these days, is it, "religious duty"! Then, between 950 and the early 1500's, things began to change. A "Holiday" was still considered a Festive Day, a Day of Rest and Relaxation. And still a Day of Religious Obligation. But now it was a day on which all "ordinary" work was suspended! Do you see the difference? It's subtle, yet there!

Instead of ceasing “all work”, now you just couldn’t go to the Office, or work on the Farm! You couldn’t wait tables at your Diner, or decorate your Classroom at School! You could work all you want too! Just not doing your “normal” work! You might call it a Sabbath Loophole!

And then, by the mid 1800’s, a “Holiday” had morphed even more. A Holiday might mean “a missed spot”, like when you painted something, or glazed pottery. Think “Mulligan” on the golf course! And in Europe, a Holiday came to mean a short-term prison sentence even! Which almost seems profound, doesn’t it? A “missed spot”! A “temporary prison stay”! “Refraining from rest”! A “missed opportunity”! Suddenly, there were lots of “Loopholes” in Sabbath Keeping! So, what do we do with that?

“One Sabbath”, writes Mark, Jesus and His Disciples were walking through a grain field. And without even thinking, apparently, some of them reached down and began picking heads of grain. I’ve done that, haven’t you? I’ve walked through a field of wheat, or soybeans, or simply tall grass, and just sort of scooped up a handful and started chewing on it, totally unaware of what I was doing! I would never even consider doing that in an Apple or Cherry Orchard, of course! That would just be wrong! But the Disciples seem almost nonchalant about it! I don’t think there is anything intentional in their actions! Not in the least! And they certainly aren’t “harvesting”, per se! They are just sort of walking along, not paying attention, casually reaching out and picking heads of grain. And let’s be clear! This is certainly not their “ordinary” line of work, is it! That is, if you even buy into the whole Loophole thing! No, most of these guys are Fisherman, right? So, what’s the problem here?

And then, on another Sabbath, right in the midst of the Synagogue no less, Jesus reaches out and heals a man! Can you believe it! That is His normal line of work, healing people! A fellow Worshipper's hand is shriveled, and Jesus restores it! That kind of miracle would cause quite the controversy, don't you think! Any time! But especially on a Sabbath! In fact, the Pharisees go absolutely nuts! They leave the Synagogue in a huff, and start plotting how to kill Jesus! And they do it with the Herodians! They become allies with people they don't even get along with, people who they consider to be Traitors! What, in the world is going on?

Well, the short answer is, Jesus! He is saying some pretty controversial things, and doing some pretty controversial things! And His Ministry is still pretty new at this stage, so people, of course, are wondering about Him. He claims to align Himself with the Truth! He puts God's Word above all the "Traditions" and "Religious Practices"! You can't really blame the Pharisees, can you? Their job is to "Keep the Faith", right! And some of these practices have been around for years, decades, centuries even!

Jesus is clearly breaking the rules! Number four in Moses' Top Ten, to be exact! "Remember the Sabbath by keeping it Holy"! "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns." It's pretty clear, actually, straight forward, obvious! And believe me, by this time in history, the Pharisees have gotten really good at detailing and defining what Keeping the Sabbath really means!

A Sabbath day's walk, for instance, in Jesus' day, could not be more than 2,000 cubits, about three thousand feet, a little over half a mile! You couldn't carry an object on the Sabbath that weighed more than a dried fig. Although if it weighed half that amount, you could carry it twice. You couldn't cook or clean on the Sabbath. In fact, you couldn't take a bath, because some water might spill on the floor, which would constitute "washing it".

You couldn't eat anything larger than an olive. Nothing could be bought or sold on the Sabbath. No work could be done, what-so-ever. Which, for instance, if you were a Tailor meant, you couldn't even carry a needle and thread on the Sabbath. The temptation to mend a torn garment was just too great! You couldn't even light a lamp on the Sabbath. Or actually, not less than a few minutes prior to the Sabbath. And if you forgot to plan ahead, then you simply had to sit in the dark until the evening of the next day!

Orthodox and Conservative Jews still practice strict Sabbath Laws today. As do many Conservative Muslims during Ramadan. When we went to Israel, I was actually shocked! You can't do any work! I get that! It's based on the whole Creation thing. But that includes pushing a baby carriage outside of the home! You can't prepare food. All that has to be done the day ahead. And cut into bite-sized pieces by-the-way! You can't plant anything, or water anything, or fertilize, or harvest, or rake, or mow, or even make furrows. In fact, you can't drag something heavy across the yard on the Sabbath, because even that might make a furrow!

You can't filter water or make juice. You can't pick strawberries or collect rocks. You can't even separate out the small bones of a fish! Which is where the whole Gefilte fish idea came from! Minced fish! You can't sift or sort, knead or bake. You can't cook or fry, weave, knit, or sew. You can't tie or untie. Think slip-on shoes. You can't set up a tent, or open or close an umbrella. You can't build anything! Or knock down anything! You can't light a fire, or even add more fuel to an existing one. In fact, you can't even extinguish a fire, even if great property damage will occur! That fire has to stay! Unless it is life-threatening, and then, you are required to put it out!

You can't pay bills on the Sabbath, which probably doesn't break anyone's heart. But you can't write either, or erase, or tear. You can't attach or un-attach anything in fact. Which means that if you don't separate the paper towels into individual sheets ahead of time, as well as the toilet paper, then you are in really big trouble!

You can't do anything that even resembles work, in any way, either for pay or profit, for honor or glory! Which, when you think about it, pretty much eliminates everything that we usually do on Holidays and Sabbaths. No cooking, so forget the grill. No planting or harvesting or watering, so forget the yardwork. No traveling, or riding in vehicles, so boating and swimming and shopping and picnics are all out. As are family reunions, graduation parties, and weddings and such. No work, either for pay or glory! So, forget about the office. But also, your golf game and your soccer practice, or your trophy fishing trip! No cooking or cleaning or laundry. No gardening or mowing the grass. You can't even turn on, or off, anything that uses electricity.

Now think about that! No radio or TV. No screen-time. No cell phone or I-Pad or Computer. No Face Time or Facebook or Twitter! No lights or alarm clocks even! Unless you set them the day before, and use a Time Clock that automatically turns them on and off! Houses, and even hotels in Israel all have Time Clocks installed! You just need to program them the day before! Most notable though, in all the public buildings, are the Sabbath Elevators. They all have motion sensors, and pre-programmed computer chips, that cause the elevator to stop on every floor! Simply pushing an elevator call button is considered “work”!

Don’t get me wrong! I’m not saying that all of these Sabbath rules apply, or even that they should! What I am saying is, a lot of God’s faithful followers, including the Pharisees, very much believe that this is what Yahweh wants from His people on the Sabbath! And there are certainly biblical mandates to support it! God did creative things for six days, and then rested, “ceased from doing creative things on the seventh day”! God provided daily manna for the Israelites to eat in the desert during the Exodus, remember? But on the sixth day, He provided twice as much, so that they wouldn’t have to do work by collecting it on the Sabbath! And that was before the Ten Commandments!

God has obviously built a rhythm into our lives, a healthy rhythm, work six, rest one. Every field of psychology and sociology today agrees! Every mental health study, every book on stress and healthy living agrees! We need “balance” in our lives! “Down-time”! In fact, I just saw a Smart Phone App the other day called “Calm”! What it does is periodically remind you to stop throughout your day, and do something like, be silent for thirty seconds!

My watch does that, by-the-way. It tells me to “stand” or “breath”. Only I’m not very good at listening to it! And fortunately, or unfortunately, there is a “dismiss button”! Besides, don’t even those watches and phones and computers and I-Pads need to be need “turned off” once in a while? Aren’t even those electronic wonders required to periodically “reboot”!

It’s almost as if God knows us, isn’t it? It’s as if He knows who we are, and what we need, just like it says in Psalm 139! God has indeed made us! Each one of us! He knows when we sit and when we rise! The Lord Jehovah created our inner-most being! He knitted each one of us together in our mother’s womb! He knows what we need and what we don’t, when we need it and when we don’t! But for some reason we have chosen not to listen! We simply press the “dismiss button”, don’t we! Only in the process, we lose all sense of Sacred Time!

There is an old story about European Missionaries serving in Africa a century or two ago. They had hired local villagers as Porters to help carry their supplies. The Porters started out at a slower pace than the Missionaries would have liked, however. So, after the first two days they pushed them to go faster. On day three of the trek, the group went twice as far as the day before. And around the campfire that night, the Missionaries congratulated themselves for their leadership abilities!

But on the morning of day four, the workers wouldn’t budge. “What’s wrong,” asked the Missionaries? “We cannot go any further today,” replied the village spokesman. “Why not? Everyone appears well!” “Yes,” said the Head Porter, “but we went so quickly yesterday, that we must wait here today for our spirits to catch up.”

So, here, I think, is the real Sabbath Keeping Question. In our world today—in our sense of sacred time and space, or lack thereof, in our orientation towards God, our Creator, the source of all Life—are we allowing Him, to quote another Psalm, to “restore our soul”? Do we actually lay down in the Green Pastures He provides? Do we stroll by the Still Waters that Almighty God leads us to? Are we even taking the time to listen for His guidance? I don’t think so! At least not most of us! Instead, by saying “yes” to all the other things, we are actually saying “no” to God?

My guess is, most of you are familiar with Murph’s Law. Maybe, you are even aware of Newton’s Law of Gravity. But how many of you have heard of Parkinson’s Law? It was set forth in 1955 by C. Northcote Parkinson. It states that “Work expands, so as to fill the time available for its completion”. I think that’s true, don’t you? And therefore, since the “work” is never going to be done, the only thing we can do is intentionally “cease from the work”, right? “Stop” for a given period of time! Sound familiar?

Think about that! We have an un-healthy sense of self-worth, don’t we, one based on what we achieve, or at least what we attempt to achieve! Most of us are running around like the Rabbit in “Alice in Wonderland”, always rushing this way and that, looking at our watches and muttering, “I’m Late! I’m Late!”. Every hour of every day is filled to the limit with things that need doing! And we never seem to have enough time to do them all! Which then, transforms us, slowly maybe, from “human beings” into “human doings”!

Again, this is a self-critic! And again, I believe God knows us better than we know ourselves! Which is the reason He created the Sabbath! It’s for us, right! Which is Jesus’ point entirely!

“The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The Pharisees, even us modern-day Pharisees, have gotten things turned around! There is a value in Keeping the Sabbath! A huge value! There is a value in everything that God Commands! But instead of listening to what He actually says, we go and create “Hobby Horse Theologies”, that pick and choose what biblical practices work for us! So, Jesus, early-on in His ministry, takes the time to straighten a few of these out. Because it’s all about the “why”, isn’t it, not the “how”!

“What is lawful on the Sabbath, asks the Lord, to do good, or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” Didn’t David, Israel’s greatest king, way back in 1 Samuel 21, eat the Consecrated Bread of the Temple in order to keep him and his men alive? You Pharisees are substituting the “practices” of Sabbath Keeping, for the “purpose” of Sabbath Keeping! In fact, you are so concerned with policing the behavior of others, with ensuring the demands and expectations, with the “rules”, that you don’t even actually “Worship” your selves!

Look at Exodus 20:8 again, the Fourth Commandment, but do so with fresh eyes. “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy”. It’s repeated in Deuteronomy 5, and there, it lists the reason why. Verse 15 says, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” Salvation comes from God! It is not by any work of your own hand that you have life, or any achievement on your part! We call it Grace! There is no such thing as “Works Righteousness”, as being okay with God because of what, or how much you do! Our job, our role is to remember that! And then to take the time and do the things that orient us in the Lord’s direction! And in that, to point others to Him!

We are called to remember, and reflect. Like on Memorial Day! Like on any Holiday! To Worship and to Witness! That is the very purpose of the Sabbath!

So, let me make it easy. Let me give you, and myself, a very simply “Sabbath Yardstick”. Ask yourself; Does what I do, or what I refrain from doing on a Sabbath Day, or on a Holiday, direct people to the God I claim to Worship? Am I choosing to honor the Lord with my life? My whole life? Jesus is clearly Lord of the Sabbath, right! He states that plainly! But is He the Lord of yours? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

You are the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus. So, we come to you on this Sabbath Day with hearts open to your Holy Spirit. Quicken us now, in this time of prayer, to live lives worthy of your Presence. And to point to you in all that we say and do. Awaken us to your Power Lord. Enable us through your Peace. Embolden us for the mission you have set before us.

Father, we stand before you, in the Presence of your Son, asking for your Grace and Forgiveness to be poured out upon us. Bless us Father, so that we might be a blessing to those around us. Heal us Lord, so that we might heal this troubled world, our loved-ones within it, and those whom we haven't even met yet. Send your Holy Spirit sweeping through this Church, and through our lives, through this County and into this world, so that every knee will bow before you!

We come on bended knee Father, even now. And we lift up together, before you, some of the things and the people we are concerned about. Please be with, and walk with, and heal.....

..... Please mend this divided Nation Father. Cause us to step out of our entrenched positions and reach out a hand of Love and Peace. Please help us to set aside our opinions, at least momentarily, and listen to those of others. Please help us to hear your Word, your Truth, your Compassion, and your Design—and then to faithfully walk in these ways.

It is not about us, Lord. It is only about you. So, for your Honor, and your Glory, and with the prayer that your Son taught us, we ask these things, saying “Our Father...”