

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 21, 2016
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Remember the Sabbath

The 4th Commandment might be the one least followed, least taken seriously. “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.” Sundays have changed dramatically in American culture over the last 40 years.

I can remember being in Seminary during the mid 1970’s and going to a parish to debate whether or not the state of Connecticut should change their “blue laws”. These were laws that banned stores from being open, or alcohol being sold or served on Sundays. 40 years ago we didn’t have youth sports on Sundays. 40 years ago, movie theatres weren’t open on Sundays. 40 years ago, professional football didn’t dominate Sundays the way the NFL does today.

The Sabbath, for Christians on Sunday, was a time for Church, for family, for rest. Sunday in our culture today is pretty much like any other day in the week, except many do not have to work like they do Monday through Friday.

Our sense of the Sabbath for centuries grew out of the Judeo Christian understanding of the 4th Commandment, a commandment given to ancient Israel during their Exodus experience before settling in the Promised Land.

The prophet Isaiah, writing in the early 6th century B.C. addresses the exiles returning from the Babylonian Captivity to Palestine. He reminds them of the necessity to keep the Sabbath day holy.

“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 way, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord...” (IS. 58:13-14)

Of course, by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had developed a completely legalistic interpretation of the faith. The Sabbath became a day to concentrate on the law as interpreted by Pharisaic tradition, rather than a day to give thanks for God’s love and mercy.

The Pharisees were extremely upset by the freedom Jesus brought to go beyond the law. Jesus knew the Sabbath was a day for love, not for law, so he healed, he ate, he celebrated, he helped others. He called the Pharisees “hypocrites”.

Jesus’ freedom, especially as he observed the Sabbath, drove the Pharisees into an angry rage. In their hatred and “fury” they took counsel to plan to “destroy” Jesus, silence and eliminate him. Luke tells us about this early in his Gospel, in chapter 6 (6:1-11 and see also Mark 2:23-3:6). Jesus tells the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

So what does Jesus want us to remember, to practice when it comes to the Sabbath?

1. We need time on a regular basis to give thanks to God, to praise God (as we hear in the opening verses of Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name...”). For many of us this time will be on Sunday mornings. If Sunday doesn’t work, we need to find other Sabbath time each week.
2. Jesus celebrates God’s love, mercy, healing on the Sabbath, we should also. Where in our lives, in our world, do we need this love and healing? How can we share God’s love with others? It starts on the Sabbath.
3. Sabbath time and celebrations of worship, prayer, the sacraments all remind us of our call to witness to God’s love, God’s freedom, God’s forgiveness and to help others. Isn’t this the combination of Isaiah’s teaching about the Sabbath as he begins “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light will rise in the darkness...” (58:9b-10)

Jesus summarized all the law by saying “Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” This is what we celebrate when we keep the Sabbath day holy. It starts on the Sabbath and leads us to each and every new day.

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Psalm 103:1-8
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17