



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

2nd Sunday after Pentecost: June 3, 2018

Sermon Title: "Sabbath"

Sermon Text: Mark 2:23 – 3:6

One minute Jesus was taking a leisurely walk through a Galilean wheat field, and a mere ten verses later the Pharisees and the Herodians – two factions who were usually at each other's throats – had formed an alliance to destroy Jesus. At issue, at least for the Pharisees, was their belief that Jesus and his disciples had blatantly and disrespectfully violated the sabbath laws. Even more scandalous to the Pharisees were Jesus's incredibly bold assertions about being on par with David – the greatest-ever King of Israel. Jesus further enraged them when he claimed to be "lord of the sabbath" – someone who, just like God, possessed the authority to *make* and *interpret* the rules.

This dispute over the sabbath escalated so quickly. But we don't talk much about the sabbath anymore, do we? Does that strike you as strange? After all, it *is* part of the Ten Commandments. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." Maybe it's true, as some say, that the Ten Commandments have turned into the Ten Suggestions.

In many ways, Sunday has become just another day of the week. And so I'm at least a little sympathetic to the fight the Pharisees are picking in today's Gospel. Now, I'm not exactly *ancient*, but even in *my lifetime* Sundays have radically changed. Do you remember the old Blue Laws? These were laws – often dating all the way back to colonial days – that restricted what you could do on Sundays and prohibited most businesses from being open that day. Most of those laws are now long-gone.

When I was a boy in Kane, Pennsylvania, Sundays unfolded in a very particular and pleasant way. It would begin with mom getting us up and moving for Sunday School and then church. After that, we'd drive a couple blocks up to Fraley Street, where the road was lined with businesses. All of them were closed except one, Archer's Newsstand, because that's where everyone went to purchase their Sunday newspaper from big cities like Buffalo and Pittsburgh. On a really good day, I'd talk mom into a pack of Topps baseball cards in addition to the newspaper, and then we'd head home for a big home cooked family dinner, followed by some TV - baseball or football, depending on the season. Sound familiar?

Now I'll admit to being warmly nostalgic about those days and the structure and predictability they provided to my Sundays. But I *do not* long for a return of the old Blue Law days. If the Church has to change the laws to get people to attend, then the Church deserves to go out of business. You can't legislate people into the Kingdom of God, because all that does is control people's *actions*, not attract their *hearts*. Jesus doesn't want us to become mindless

marionettes and puppets. Jesus wants us to fall in love with *him*, and then shower that same love on our *neighbors*.

This is why the Pharisees got things so very wrong in today's Gospel. The sabbath isn't merely about rigid do's and don'ts. The sabbath is a *gift* intended to heal us; to bring us wholeness; and to create the conditions for a relationship to form – a relationship in which we fall head over heels in love with Jesus. Because if we do, then you don't need a law to compel you to come to church or to sit quietly on a Sunday afternoon. You'll *want* to come to church. You'll *want* to express your love for God. And you'll *want* to find ways to love your neighbor too. That's why, in today's Gospel, Jesus says "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

Arguably the clearest and most helpful writing on the sabbath and what it all means comes from Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism. Luther recognizes that observing the sabbath *is* a commandment. It is *Law*. It is intended to shape our conduct. But he emphasizes that the sabbath is also *Gospel* – a *gift* of God intended not just to *regulate* but to *bless*, and something that draws us closer to Jesus.

Luther highlights two particular gifts of sabbath. *First, our bodies need a sabbath rest.* As Luther puts it, "Nature teaches and demands that... people... should... retire for a day to rest and be refreshed." We all know the wear and tear our bodies and souls accumulate if we don't occasionally have some downtime. Throughout the New Testament – particularly after times of conflict or stress – we read that *even Jesus* needed time away from the crowds, the questions, and the many people who wanted his attention so that he could gather himself, rest, pray, and be replenished. I often use the image of a large pitcher. If you're always pouring yourself out in service to others, a time *will come* when you need to be refilled. Otherwise, you'll be of no use to God or your neighbor.

Now some of us, like doctors, nurses, and pastors, have to work on Sundays. So find another time for sabbath, a time when you can be refreshed, renewed, and reinvigorated. For some of you, that'll come from sleeping in, resting on a beach, or having some alone time. In my case, I'm refreshed by learning and exploring. Surround me with books or put me in a museum or on an old battlefield and I'll be a new man by day's end. We're all different, so figure out what *you* need in order to best care for your body and mind. And then *do it*. Find sabbath time and be renewed and refreshed so that you can be of sustained service to God's Kingdom.

For Luther, the *second gift* the sabbath provides for us is intentional time to, as he puts it, "assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God." In other words, God's gift of the sabbath is more than just a vacation or a time to catch up on sleep. It is the opportunity to directly engage Jesus Christ through the preached Word and through the Holy Sacraments. Friends, here is where your relationship with Jesus is *formed* so that you can be *transformed*. It's not about just showing up so you get your golden ticket into heaven. There's only one person who has enough merit to afford that; his name is Jesus and he's already purchased that ticket for you. But if you want the richest experience of the Christian life, invest an hour of your time *here*, every Sunday, so you can be equipped to serve your neighbor and

experience your faith to its fullness the other 167 hours that God graciously gives you every week.

So, here we are. In church, on the sabbath. We're done, right? Well, not quite. Luther wrote that you don't do any favors to God, yourself, or anyone else if you just show up out of *habit* or *custom* or *for show*. Luther envisioned sabbath observance as an *active* undertaking that involves three things: *hearing* the Word; *learning* the Word; and *retaining* the Word. Why? Because, in Luther's words, "When we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit." As Jesus said, "the Sabbath was made for humankind." It is a pure gift of grace, but one we too often treat like a painful burden.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, near the Sea of Galilee, the sabbath day was ending. The Pharisees and the Herodians would remember it as the day Jesus crossed a line, the day they resolved to see him dead. But for a man who had experienced a miraculous healing, and for disciples who had enjoyed the remarkable privilege of spending time in the presence of their Lord, that sabbath day would be forever treasured. I hope that's how *you* will remember this day – a day spent hearing, learning, and retaining the Living Word of God, Jesus himself. "The Sabbath was made for humankind." What a gift. What a blessing. Amen.