

### ***Lord of the Sabbath***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The Evangelists Matthew, Luke, and John in their accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus all give a gentle lead in to the story. Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy and gives the birth account from the perspective of Joseph, what with the coming of the wise men and all. Luke has two birth accounts: that of John the Baptizer and then of our Lord told from Mary's perspective. John gives a theological essay about the Word becoming flesh and making his dwelling among us. Not St. Mark whose Gospel we will be following throughout this long post Pentecost season. No, Mark skips the warm up and throws us right into the action. Today's text is drawn from the end of only chapter two – still quite early in his account. But by the time we get here Jesus has already been baptized by John, had his 40-day temptation in the wilderness, launched his ministry, called his disciples, preached all throughout Galilee, driven out demons, and healed many people including a leper and the paralyzed man they brought to Jesus by lowering him through the roof.

And now we've got him crossing theological swords with the Pharisees over the issue of what we know as the Third Commandment, the one that deals with Sabbath. It was then and remains even today the least understood of the commands that God gave his people. And since to a large degree it is the keeping of this commandment that brings us here together each first day of the week, it's a good place for us to begin our twenty some odd Sunday journey through the Gospel of St. Mark.

The story itself is simple. Jesus and his disciples are walking along a path through some grain fields; presumably a path that divides fields belonging to different owners. As they walk along, some of his disciples are plucking off grain heads in order to munch on the still soft and green kernels. This is perfectly permissible. The Lord in his law required that the edges of fields *not* be harvested by the land owner. The grain that stood there was to be left specifically for travelers and for the poor.

The Pharisees object not because the disciples are helping themselves to grain that belongs to someone else, but because they are doing this on the Sabbath – a day on which the Law of God demands no work be done. And look: Jesus' disciples are working. They're harvesting. They're threshing. And they are grinding grain – all acts of labor and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath of rest. So, in the mind of the Pharisees, the disciples are clearly violators of God's holy Law. And Jesus is a terrible religious teacher because he allows them to do it and he fails to correct his wayward students and lead them in paths of righteousness; that is to say, in the way of the Pharisees.

I have to wonder about the whole situation, though. Why is anyone walking through grain fields on the Sabbath? I mean, according to the Pharisees, a person was only allowed to take a very short trip on the Sabbath; what was called a Sabbath day's journey. It was 2000 cubits, or a little more than half a mile. It was to allow you a walk to the Temple or the local synagogue and return home, along with a few trips to the outhouse. That's about it. More than that was considered work and therefore prohibited. And yet, if you are walking through grain fields, you are clearly outside of town where no one should be. But Jesus, his disciples, and the highly critical Pharisees are here. Indeed, the latter seem to have appointed themselves spiritual watchdogs on Jesus. They follow him wherever he goes. And they are performing their duty of criticizing his every action. Why doesn't that constitute work on the Sabbath? It seems rather hypocritical. And maybe that's part of the point.

The larger point, however, is that the Pharisees do not understand what the Sabbath is all about. They have taken this commandment that was meant as a gift and blessing to God's people and turned it into a long, burdensome list of no's, don'ts, and thou-shalt-nots. In Lutheran terms, we'd say that they have taken a commandment meant as Gospel: what God does for us, and turned it into Law: that which God requires of us.

I mean, what does the commandment actually say? What does it require? Answer: that you rest. Set the Sabbath day apart. On that day do no work; not you, your spouse, your children, your servants, your guests, or your animals. Rest. Relax. Take it easy. Abstain from the normal labors of life, those things you do to sustain your living.

Why? When the command was first given through Moses at Mt. Sinai, the Lord explains the reason. He says, "For in six days the Lord made the heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." In other words, the Sabbath was to be a recognition and celebration of God's completed work of creation. He did all the work. And he provided food for all his creatures. And he keeps doing it. He makes the sun come up, he makes the rain fall, he makes the plants and animals grow. He's taking care of us. And we can trust him to keep on doing it. So, we don't have to work seven days a week to survive. The Lord rested and we can too. We can sit back and enjoy *his* accomplished work.

Now, what's interesting is that the second time the Law was given, the Lord changed the reason behind the command – or maybe it's better to say that he added another reason. That's what we have in today's reading from Deuteronomy (which, by the way, means "second law" because it's the second time the commandments were given). The first part of the command is exactly the same: rest. But the reason given is this: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord 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."

Got that? You were slaves under cruel taskmasters. It was work, work, work long hours every day. You were driven by whips and rods, and beaten severely when you didn't make your assigned quotas. You never got a day off. And for all that work what did you get? Nothing. No pay. No freedom. No joy or satisfaction. Not even a word of thanks. The only thing you got in the end was a slave's grave in the desert sand. But the Lord brought you out of there. He saved you with his mighty arm. And he gave you the Sabbath day of rest to remember and celebrate his completed work of salvation for you.

The Sabbath was made for man, Jesus says, not man for the Sabbath. It's not a burden to bear; it's a gift to enjoy – like the heads of grain the Lord has graciously provided that the disciples are casually snacking on. They're not doing any more work than it would take to remove the wrapper from a candy bar. It's certainly not what the Lord had in mind when he said rest and don't work. The Pharisees don't get that. They were busy trying to out-holy everyone else by doing less and less, thinking that the less they did, the more righteous they became by so scrupulously keeping the commandment.

It must have been tough to be a kid growing up in a Pharisee's household. "Simon, it's the Sabbath. No running, walking, jumping, climbing, kicking a ball around, or participation in any other leisure time activity. Just sit there and sit still. Rest. There. What a good boy you are. The Lord is pleased with you."

No, the Lord would not be pleased. He would not be pleased that his gift of the Sabbath was being so abused. And he would be even less pleased with anyone thinking that they could

become somehow more righteous in his sight by striving so hard to keep one of his commands. He does the work that keeps us alive. We are dependent on him. And he does all the work that saves us. We are righteous in the sight of God only by trusting in his completed work of salvation for us.

But so many don't understand this even today. No, when most Christians hear the Sabbath command, they think it means "Go to church on Sunday." It's a task to perform to earn God's favor. It's a burden to bear that somehow pleases him. He feels slighted if we don't take the time to come sing his praises and tell him what a swell guy he is. And he gets even, you know. Why, if you work on Sunday you'll spend Monday fixing whatever it is he sabotaged. Sound familiar? All of this is thinking like a Pharisee.

Strictly speaking, we in the Christian Church no longer have a Sabbath Day. Luther in his Small Catechism gives this explanation for the Third Commandment: "We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." Notice what's missing? There's no mention of any day. The point is that Jesus is our Sabbath. We rest in him every day. We rest in knowing that he created us and will provide for our needs. And we rest even more securely in knowing that he did all the work of salvation for us when he suffered and died on the cross for our sins. He is our Sabbath. We rest in him. When? Not on any particular day of the week, but all of the time.

But wait, why then do we meet here on Sunday mornings? Aren't we keeping the Sabbath Command by doing that? The answer is yes and no. No if you think that there is a particular day of the week that the Lord demands an hour or two of your time and that you are pleasing him by giving it to him. Yes if you are holding God's Word sacred and gladly hearing and learning it.

We are not here to give God his due. We are here to receive, receive God's gifts of grace and mercy. We are here to have our knowledge increased by the proclamation of the Word' and have our faith strengthened by the work of God's Holy Spirit. We are here to be reassured of the forgiveness of our sins. We are here to receive the body and blood of the Savior. We are here to be equipped and empowered to live as the children of our heavenly Father. It's all for our good.

We need to stop thinking like Pharisees. We need to repent of it. And we need to come to Jesus who is the Lord of the Sabbath, for in him is our rest, now and forever. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***