

Sermon for June 2, 2024 – The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-28 EHV

Theme: Celebrate the Sabbath

- 1) Not as a Pharisee.
- 2) But as a disciple of Jesus.

<sup>23</sup>Once on a Sabbath day, Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick heads of grain as they walked along. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?”

<sup>25</sup>He replied to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the Bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone to eat, except for the priests. He also gave some to his companions.”

<sup>27</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup>So the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath.”

How do you view worship? Do you, like most people in the world, picture worship as following ceremonial rules, rites, and customs to merit favour with God? “No way, we’re Lutheran,” you might be thinking. And yet I would argue that all of us are guilty of acting in such a way at one time or another.

On the one hand, there is the temptation to view Sunday worship as something we must do - sort of like punching in at work to satisfy our boss so we can keep our jobs. On the other hand, we might be so focused on the trappings of worship that we miss out on the message. Is the altar cloth the right colour, are the candles lit, is it ok to have fake flowers on the altar or do they need to be real, do we need to follow a certain dress code to show respect, etc.? Now don’t misunderstand me: there is nothing wrong with being concerned about these things to Christ’s glory. The problem comes in when we focus so much on those outward trappings that they become “rules” we must follow and subtly lead our attention off Christ. Even worse, the devil will tempt us to judge others for not following “our rules” regarding worship.

What is worship all about? In a word, Jesus. Therefore, let us learn from him how to worship him with a proper heart, under the theme: **Celebrate the Sabbath** 1) Not as a Pharisee. 2) But as a disciple of Jesus.

Part One: Not as a Pharisee.

Our text begins: <sup>23</sup>Once on a Sabbath day, Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick heads of grain as they walked along.

We should not imagine Jesus and his disciples on a great journey in the middle of nowhere. No, they probably were just on a leisurely walk. The fact that Pharisees were observing them indicates

that they couldn't have been more than half a Sabbath's Walk (about a ¼ mile) from the place they chose to celebrate the Sabbath.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that the disciples became hungry. Even though they could have easily waited until they got back to eat, they decided to snack on some of the ripened grain standing in the field – something God's Old Testament law allowed.<sup>1</sup>

Oddly, some Pharisees were around to see that. Why was it odd? Because they wouldn't have wanted to break their sabbath laws by venturing too far away. So why were they there? Most likely to spy on Jesus, watching his every move to see if either he or his disciples would break the Sabbath. And when they saw the disciples plucking grain and eating it, the Pharisees thought: "Look, we got him! Jesus' disciples are "harvesting" grain on a Sabbath. Any real rabbi, let alone the Messiah, would have rebuked his disciples for this." Therefore, <sup>24</sup>*the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?"*

Were the disciples breaking the Sabbath? No, but the Pharisees were. How so? Because their added regulation and misinterpretations of God's law blinded them to the whole reason God commanded the Sabbath. Sabbath means rest and God instituted it so his people would have a day off work to relax and reflect on God's goodness. The Sabbath's purpose was to get his people looking forward to the spiritual rest the promised Saviour would bring.

With their added regulations, however, the Pharisees managed to turn God's gift of rest into a day of work they needed to perform to gain his favour. Think about it, God's command was essentially: "Stop working and let everyone take a day off to relax and reflect on all my blessings." But the Pharisees turned it into a day of worry. "Are you certain you didn't walk too far or accidentally do some work that would make God mad – like snacking on some food?" Their focus was completely off the LORD's gracious love and entirely on trying to justify themselves before God – showing how much they could do for him instead of reflecting on what the LORD was doing for them. In their blindness, they missed the fact that the one to whom the Sabbath pointed, the one who would bring all people peace and rest, was standing right before them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, don't be a Pharisee: don't focus so much on what you are doing for God's glory that you fail to see all the wonderful, gracious things God does for you in Christ. And don't be quick to say: "Don't worry about me, pastor: I won't fall." We all do. Our pride wants us to think better of ourselves than we ought. The devil easily twists our good desire to serve God into thinking that, by doing certain things in a certain way, we must please God more than other people. Remember the story of Mary and Martha. Everything Martha did was out of love for Jesus, but He told her that Mary chose what was better by simply listening to him. That is the worship God desires on the Sabbath: that we just stop and focus on his work for us.

Also, don't be a pharisee with how others celebrate the sabbath either. What do I mean by that? Don't be quick to criticize how others worship. Just because you might like traditional worship, don't criticize those who like a contemporary style, or vice versa. Don't think ill of people in your heart because they might participate more online than in person, rather encourage them to come by speaking about the benefits of physically gathering for worship. Instead of pharisaically looking at what others are doing during worship, keep your thoughts and heart focused on Jesus and the

forgiving love he expresses to you. Do all you can to encourage your brothers and sisters in that love.

## Part Two: As a disciple of Jesus

Jesus masterfully responded to the Pharisee's charge against his disciples with an Old Testament example that demonstrates that the intent of God's law is not slavish adherence to earn His favour, rather it is love, as the Bible says: *love is the fulfillment of the law.*<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>25</sup>He replied to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the Bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone to eat, except for the priests. He also gave some to his companions."

To understand Jesus' point, you must know that God's Old Testament ceremonial law required that the priests place 12 large loaves of bread before the LORD in the Tabernacle every morning. When those loaves were replaced, God's law commanded that only priests were permitted to eat them.<sup>iii</sup>

However, when David (who was not a priest) asked the high priest for food, Abiathar did not turn him away even though he could have insisted that God forbade it and that David should seek bread elsewhere. No, instead he "broke" one of God's ceremonial laws to help a fellow brother in need. Did the LORD condemn that action? No. Why not? Because love is the fulfillment of the law. One Lutheran commentator put it this way: "God cares more for the right spiritual condition of the heart than for the outward observance of his own ceremonial regulations."

Having made that point, <sup>27</sup>then Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. God instituted his day of rest to benefit people so that they might grow in knowledge, appreciation, and faith in the grace God shows us day after day in Jesus. God never intended the Sabbath regulations to become a means by which we merit God's favour, but to point us to the one who gives us true spiritual rest.

Therefore, Jesus says: <sup>28</sup>*So the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath.*"

I want to draw your attention to an important play on words that Jesus makes in what he tells the Pharisees. The Sabbath was made for man and Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. The term "Son of Man" here refers to a specific vision that the Old Testament prophet Daniel had concerning the coming Messiah, and how he would appear before "the Ancient of Days" (aka, God the Father) to receive Lordship over all.<sup>iv</sup> By using that term, Jesus was insinuating that He is the promised Messiah, true God and true man, who born of a woman, born under the law, would redeem all of us who are under the law.<sup>v</sup> The Sabbath was made for man, and Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath - not only in the sense that He is God and instituted the Sabbath, but in the sense that the Sabbath pointed to and is fulfilled in him, as our epistle reading indicated: [Ceremonial laws like the Sabbath day] *are a shadow of the things that were coming, but the body belongs to Christ.*

Sabbath means rest and, through repentance and faith in Jesus, we find the true rest our souls need from the oppressiveness of our sin, guilt, and shame. Jesus invites us: *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*<sup>vi</sup>

*So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.*<sup>vii</sup> What is it? A slavish adherence to rules and regulations regarding work on Saturday? No, the Sabbath rest that remains for God’s people is Jesus himself, to whom every aspect of the Old Testament Sabbath law pointed. In Him, we find everlasting forgiveness, peace, and rest for our souls.

But, if Christ himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, how then are we to celebrate it? That's simple: keep the Sabbath by keeping Christ. And how do we do that? By treasuring the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that connects us to Christ and all he has done for us. That is why Martin Luther explained the third commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy," in this way: "We should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it."

It is only through God’s Word and sacraments that the Holy Spirit promises to connect us to Christ so we might receive all the blessings he won for us through his cross. And that is precisely what being a disciple of Jesus is all about: sitting at his feet and learning how he saved us from our sins, not only so we can go to heaven when we die, but that we might live to his glory now by serving him and our neighbour in love. We keep the Sabbath by being disciples of Jesus, and we can only be his disciples if we listen to him speak to us through His Gospel.

Yes, keeping the Sabbath means much more than merely coming to church to fulfill certain customs and expectations. Keeping the Sabbath means listening to Jesus in faith, repenting of all sin and ever learning about his love and will for us. May the LORD lead us all to see the importance of our Sabbath Saviour and keep us gathering for worship, so we remain steadfast in his Word. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> cf. Deuteronomy 23:25

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Romans 13:10

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Leviticus 24:5-9

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Daniel 7:13-14

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Galatians 4:4-5

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 11:28, 29 EHV

<sup>vii</sup> Hebrews 4:9 EHV