

Proper 4

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-3:6

One of the most pleasant memories I have from childhood are the Sunday afternoon walks my father and I used to take through the wheat fields on the farm where we lived. We shared some things walking together in the same direction that we probably wouldn't have shared if we had been staring at each other face to face across a table. There were times, too, when we just walked and didn't talk. But once in a while we'd pluck the head off a wheat stalk and shuck the tiny grains of wheat and eat them. It wasn't that we were hungry. It was more a matter of doing something in passing. It was like a casual tasting of the wheat before it made its way into the bread it would eventually become.

I grew up in a home that was fairly Sabbatarian. On Sunday you didn't play cards or baseball or even loud music. You could play soft music or maybe fly a kite as long as you didn't run or yell. You could go for a drive if you drove slowly. But always you were quiet and reserved. I guess that's what made the Sunday afternoon walks through the wheatfields so special for me. It was a way of keeping the sabbath and not just sitting in the house doing nothing.

That's why I can really appreciate the times when Jesus and the disciples walked through grainfields. I can also appreciate their plucking occasional heads of grain and eating them as they walked. The only trouble was, there was more than just grain in those fields. There were Pharisees. It makes you wonder what *they* were doing there in the fields, if not hiding in order to spy on Jesus. Today's Gospel says that the Pharisees confronted Jesus with the technicality that plucking grain is work and work is forbidden on the sabbath, so why would Jesus let his disciples break one of the Ten Commandments, anyway?

It isn't much fun to be caught in some technicality. I don't know about you, but I could be apprehended for having violated a whole lot of legal technicalities. For example, this morning I was already out of my driveway before I remembered to fasten my seat belt. My wife and I have furniture in our house from which we have torn off the tags that say "Do Not Remove." For decades I have been serving an alcoholic beverage to minors on Sunday mornings during communion. The point is that if somebody's out to get you, he or she can do so on a wide array of technicalities. When that happens, it's embarrassing for you, as well as frustrating. It's also pretty hard to make a good reply without sounding defensive.

That's why I admire Jesus for the way he handled the situation with the Pharisees in the grainfield. Jesus began by pointing out that a thousand years earlier David had entered the house of God and had eaten the bread of the Presence that only priests were authorized to eat, and then he shared it with his companions. It has always been permissible to set aside the statutes that regulate the sabbath under exceptional circumstances.

But Jesus didn't stop at this point. He went on to refer to the story of creation where human beings were created on the sixth day, but the sabbath occurs on the seventh day. Thus, the sabbath was made for humankind. Humankind wasn't made for the sabbath.

Finally, Jesus points out that just as David was in charge of what he did in eating the holy bread in the house of God centuries earlier, so also now Jesus, the Son of Man, is in charge of what his disciples do on the sabbath.

In all of this Jesus showed a lot of restraint. Instead of lashing out at the Pharisees, he simply pointed out that in the kingdom of God people have higher priority than rules and regulations. And that priority was set by God from the beginning.

Much of this, however, is lost on people today. Our society has messed up work and sabbath so badly, even the church doesn't seem to know what to say about it. Most people today really do think they are above the law. They think laws and regulations don't apply to them. The trouble is, they think this out of a sense of egotism, not out of any sense of authorization from the God of all creation. That's why people today can take time off and still not feel rested and refreshed. That's why people become as compulsive about their play as they are about their work. Exercise has become a new law that has to be fulfilled. Once

again the rules prevail even though people won't admit they do. The true meaning of the sabbath has been lost for the overwhelming majority of people in our society.

So then, what is the meaning of the sabbath? How are we to keep the sabbath? What should our attitude toward it be?

First of all, the sabbath day is that one day a week when you are to let go of your work and simply appreciate the life God has given you. You work five days at your regular work. Then you work one day at home for yourself—cleaning, mowing, paying bills, or doing whatever you need to do. That's six days. But now comes the seventh day, the sabbath day. On that day you don't work. You don't work at your job. You don't work around the house. You simply stop and appreciate life. You sit on the patio and you look at the grass and you don't say, "I'd better cut the grass." Instead you say, "Just look at that long grass!" and you appreciate it. You look at the family pictures and you don't say, "I need to reframe those pictures." Instead you say, "We sure had some ups and downs in our life, didn't we?" You walk through the kitchen and as you reach for a cookie you don't say, "I really shouldn't eat this because it will mess up my diet." Instead you say, "Those are good cookies. I think maybe I'll have another one."

You see, the sabbath is not for doing. The sabbath is for appreciating. Six days a week you do. But this one day a week you appreciate. You go ahead and take a nap, if you want to. You talk with your friends and your family without working on them or on yourself. You just enjoy them, and you enjoy yourself exactly the way you are.

"But where does worship come in?" someone might ask. "I thought we were supposed to worship God on the sabbath to keep it holy." Well, of course you are! But what is appreciating life if it is not also appreciating the Author of life? We come together each week for worship, not to do some more work to please God. We come together, first and foremost, to acknowledge and express our appreciation to God for the life he has given us. We come together to remember our old enslavement to sin and to celebrate our deliverance into a new life through the forgiveness of sins. We come together to thank God for that gift he has given us through his son Jesus Christ and to appreciate it as the priceless gift it is.

The sabbath for us is not something we *have* to do, but something we *get* to do, something we are privileged to enjoy. That's the second point I want to make about observing the sabbath. The sabbath is not God staring at us sternly, pointing a finger, and saying, "Now you sit there and be quiet!" Rather, the sabbath is God smiling and saying, "Go ahead and rest. I'll wake you up when it's time to go back to work." The sabbath is that one day each week when the "oughts" and the "shoulds" and the "musts" from all the other days are suspended. The Pharisees may seem to rule the rest of the week, but the sabbath is God's day to let us know just how highly he values us quite apart from what we can produce. The sabbath is that open time and space in which we acknowledge the grace of God and appreciate it with overflowing hearts. The sabbath is God's gift to us, so that we might see and reflect on all the other gifts from God during the week past and the week ahead. The sabbath is not bondage, but gracious liberation.

Finally, this. The sabbath is fully authorized by God. That one day a week we take off from work is not a day we are stealing from others or from God. It is not an escape from life, goof-off time we grab while we can. We do not ever need to feel guilty for taking a sabbath. The sabbath is authorized by God himself. God wills that we care for ourselves by resting and reflecting on the gifts we have and on the gift which each one of us is.

You see, we are indeed earthen vessels, as St. Paul said, that are made valuable because of the treasure of God's grace which we bear. Carved on the stone tablets Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai is a commandment which is like a cosmic permission slip signed by God, which authorizes us to one sabbath day a week as long as we live—a day to remember the past, a day to appreciate the present, a day to rejoice in the future. We keep this day when we worship God together. We keep it when we honor and appreciate the world around us, which God has made. We keep it when we value our family and our friends. We keep it whether we sit on the patio or stroll through fields of grain.

In other words, we keep the sabbath day holy when we let it be for us what God intends it to be.

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