

Sermon for June 6, 2015 - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 5:12-15(NIV 84)

Theme: The Sabbath Holiday

- 1) *Why and how it was celebrated in the past.*
- 2) *Why and how we celebrate it today.*

¹² "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

When I meet members who haven't been in worship for a while, they almost inevitably tell me that they feel bad for not being in Church for such a long time and that they intend to come soon. When I hear them say these things I am, on the one hand, glad that they realize they should be in worship. On the other hand I am saddened that guilt seems to be motivating them more than the Gospel. Let me explain what I mean:

It is not our act of coming to Church that pleases God. No, He wants us to want to be here – rejoicing in who He is and all that He has done for us. He wants us to find rest from all our labors, forgiveness for all our sin and encouragement to live to His glory as His obedient children.

We do ourselves a huge disservice when we put other things ahead of gathering for worship. We miss out on the many blessings God offers us through his Word and sacrament. Worst of all, if we continually neglect the rest God offers us through the Gospel, we show ourselves to be hypocrites: people who claim to love God but actually don't – for if we did, there is no other place we would rather be than in His house, sitting at His feet listening to His Word! If we separate ourselves from the Gospel, we also separate ourselves from our salvation – for it is only through hearing and believing the Good News of Jesus that we are saved!

Knowing how necessary the Gospel is for our salvation, the LORD commanded us to observe **the Sabbath holiday**. Let us then take some time to review: 1) *why and how it was celebrated in the past* and 2) *why and how we celebrate it today*.

Part One: Why and how it was celebrated in the past.

Our sermon text is the third commandment: "*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.*"

The Ten commandments are recorded twice in Scripture: In Exodus 20, when God originally gave them to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, and in Deuteronomy 5, right before they crossed into Canaan, Moses reminded God's people of the covenant He made with them at Mount Sinai. Our sermon text is part of this reminder.

The word "Sabbath" means "rest", and the Sabbath day was originally the day God rested from His work

of creating the heavens and the earth, as we read in Exodus 20: *in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*ⁱ

To “make something holy” means to set it apart for a special purpose. And for what purpose did the LORD set aside the seventh day? For His people to find rest from their labor – just like He himself rested from his work at Creation – and to use that rest to reflect on the LORD, His Work and His promises.

This is why the LORD commands: ¹³ *Six days you shall labor and do all your work,* ¹⁴ *but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do.*

God knows that people are not machines. We all need physical rest! He also knows how greedy human nature is – trying to forgo all rest to achieve what it wants. Worse yet, this greedy, sinful nature will exploit others (like slaves and animals) to achieve its selfish desires. This is yet another reason God emphatically commanded the observance of the Sabbath: to get His people’s minds off worldly pursuits and on to Him who created all things and chose them to be His special people.

The whole point of the Sabbath, then, was two fold: to find rest both for the body and for the soul. It was to be a day of instruction in which they remembered that everything belongs to the LORD. He wanted them to seek him first in all they do – trusting that He will provide for their every need. Their thoughts should not be on the world, but on him, who chose them out from the world to be His people. He wanted them to remember how he saved them from their slavery, watched over them on their journey to the land He swore to give them, delivered them from every enemy and declared himself to be their God.

“Remember,” the LORD told the Israelites, *“that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.*

As you can see, the Sabbath was not meant to be a burden but a blessing. It was all about rest, renewal and refocusing the people’s attention to what is truly important: the LORD and his salvation. As they looked back and remembered the LORD’s past faithfulness, God wanted them to have confidence that He would keep his promises to continue to provide and protect. More importantly, He would keep his promise to send a Savior who would win eternal rest for them from all their guilt and sin. The Sabbath day foreshadowed the eternal peace the Messiah would win.

Sadly many Jews, over the course of time, began to view the Sabbath as a burden instead of a blessing. Idle slaves and animals meant a loss of income. Many Israelites thought: “We know all this stuff about the LORD, so why do we have to gather weekly to hear about it again?” Many Jews, therefore, began breaking the Sabbath to pursue their selfish goals – and, in so doing, forgot their LORD and lost their salvation.

Other Jews went to the other extreme: viewing the Sabbath regulation as a way to earn God’s favor. They thought that their outward performance of not working was what God really wanted. And so they came up with law after law stating things they could not do on the Sabbath. For example modern orthodox Jews go so far as saying flipping a light switch or pressing an elevator button is “breaking the Sabbath”.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: this is not the worship God desires! He wanted His people to find their rest in Him - meditating on how He created, preserved and saved them. He wanted them to look with confidence towards the future – to the coming Christ who would take away all their sin. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath. Let us now see how He remains both the how and why of our Sabbath today!

Part Two: Why and how we celebrate it today.

As you saw in our Epistle lesson for todayⁱⁱ, the outward observance of the Sabbath command was only meant for the Jews before Christ. It pointed them forward to the Messiah and the salvation He would win for them. Jesus is our Sabbath, as He himself says: “*The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,*”ⁱⁱⁱ and on another occasion, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*”^{iv} This is why Luther, when explaining the third commandment in His Small Catechism, does not say that we have to set apart a certain day for the LORD like the Jews did, but that *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.*

You see, then, that even though the specific Sabbath day does not apply to us, God still wants us to keep the Sabbath holiday in a spiritual sense: that we regularly take time to meditate on Him and His salvation. The Lord wants us to remember that we were once slaves to sin, death and the power of the devil, from which He saved us. How? By winning our righteousness through his perfect keeping of the law, and dying on the cross on our behalf. Our sins have been paid for in full. His resurrection proves it!

Jesus, then, is our rest from a burdened conscience. He is our rest from all the trials and tribulations in life. He points us forward to the eternal rest He is preparing for us, and gives us His Spirit to strengthen us for the days ahead so that we might always remain his dear children. The LORD does this for us through the means of grace: His Gospel in Word and Sacrament. These are the only means through which He promises to work divine peace in our hearts - keeping our eyes off the world, and on to Him and His promises.

Understand, then, that the LORD doesn't just merely suggest that we set apart time to meditate on the Gospel; He commands that we do it! And why? Because He knows our sinful nature easily works us into a frenzy – pursuing the things of this world instead of the Kingdom of God. We make our lives so busy that our sinful flesh begins to think: “I have too many things that I need to get done. People are depending on me. I need to work. I need to take my children to all these camps and events. I need to unwind from my labor. . . and coming to worship reduces the time I can accomplish these things. If God has laid all this responsibility on my plate, He will understand if I skip church every once in a while, right?” Sadly we don't realize what we are giving up in the process of skipping worship: true rest, renewal and refocusing on what is really important in life.

Martin Luther understood the importance of the Christian Sabbath – of always finding rest in Christ. He was a busy guy who accomplished an insane amount of work. Do you want to know his secret? He once said something to the effect: “I can't get anything done unless I spend at least 3 hours every day in prayer and meditation on God's Word.”

As contradictory as it seems, being in the Word to find rest in Christ does not use up time, it offers us time by redirecting our thoughts to what is truly important in life. Being in the Word moves us to confess our sins and liberates our burdened consciences from all guilt. Finding our Sabbath rest in Christ directs our lives, as we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness – knowing that we don't have to worry about anything, because God will provide. Finding our Sabbath rest in Christ moves us to learn more about our LORD - marveling and praising Him for His saving love. Keeping the Sabbath renews our hope in every trial – giving us something to smile about every day as we remember that we are His children through faith. It comforts us in every sorrow as we remember the promise of eternal glory that He is even now preparing for us.

The Sabbath is rest, and this rest is only found in the means of Grace: God's Word and Sacraments. And where do we find His Word and Sacraments? In God's house as we gather together with His people before His throne to hear His gospel and praise Him for His salvation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: If we neglect God's Word and Sacraments, we neglect Christ. And if we neglect Christ, we neglect our salvation. May the LORD keep us from such a fate!

Let us, rather, ask the LORD to help us **keep the Sabbath holiday** the way He desires us to keep it: setting aside time every week to gather with fellow believers in worship – not because you have to, but because you want to learn more about the love your LORD has for you. Let us also try to set aside a little time every day for personal devotions in God's Word. This way we can enjoy the benefits of the Sabbath every day as we find our needed forgiveness, peace hope and encouragement in Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 20:11 (NIV84)

ⁱⁱ Colossians 2:13-17

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 6:5 NIV84

^{iv} Matthew 11:28 (NIV84)