

Honoring God

Luke 13:10-17
August 26, 2007

I.

Today's Gospel tells a story about how Jesus healed a crippled woman, and I could preach a sermon on that. Miracles and healings make for happy and hopeful sermons.

But there is something more in this reading. The healing occurred on the Sabbath, and a dispute arose between Jesus and the Pharisees about whether it was lawful. The Pharisees said that healing was "work" and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. Jesus, however, said that the rules of the Sabbath did not prevent him from doing good things and helping other people.

Doesn't this raise some questions about the Sabbath today? Where is the Sabbath in our lives, and do we fully understand what it means? We heard that Jesus did not accept the strict Jewish view of the Sabbath when it would prevent him from helping others. But it also seems that modern culture treats the fourth commandment in an even more relaxed way.

Let's start with the language of fourth commandment. It says, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work (Ex. 20:8-10).

What about this? Many of us just substitute one type of work for another on Sundays. We paint the living room, or mow the yard, or fix the house. Kids participate soccer or baseball leagues on Sunday mornings, and we play golf or tennis, or do something else that interests us.

So, what does the Sabbath mean for us? Is attending church enough? Must it be on Sunday? What about people who have to work on Sunday? What is our obligation as Christians?

II.

Before I go any further with this sermon I'm going to give away the ending. In this way we can work backwards and hopefully understand why the ending comes out as it does.

As Christians we are called to observe a Sabbath rest. But the Jewish tradition of the Sabbath that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai does not apply to Christians today as it applied to Old Testament Jews. We celebrate the Christian Lord's Day rather than the Jewish Sabbath.

And Jesus Christ is the reason for that. The Old Testament Sabbath was the seventh day, which is Saturday. That has never changed. Before Christ's birth and even during his life the Sabbath only applied to the Jews. And Christ as a Jew recognized the seventh day as the Sabbath.

But the subsequent growth of Christianity after Jesus' death and resurrection launched a tradition of Sunday worship on the first day of the week that, for us, has supplanted the older Jewish practice of a Saturday Sabbath.

Some theologians explain this by asserting that Jesus Christ fulfilled, and therefore replaced, all Jewish law. They rely on St. Paul's explanation in Galatians (3:23-26) when he said, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law [but now] that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

This same idea was expressed in 2 Corinthians when Paul said that we are not governed by stone tablets, but by God's Spirit writing on the tablets of our hearts (3:3).

These theologians also point out that Jesus gave us two Great Commandments as a summary of all the law (Mt. 22:40). We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:37). They say these two new commandments encompass the Ten Commandments, and we observe the old commandments in the context of the new.

I understand Paul's belief that Jesus offered redemption from the inability of anyone to unfaithfully observe all the requirements of Jewish religious laws. But I do not interpret his words as an unconditional release from the requirements of the Ten Commandments.

Although we're not bound by old Jewish laws, we are not off the hook. We're not free to do whatever we want. We still must honor God through the Christian application of the Sabbath, which is as important now as was its Jewish counterpart in Old Testament times.

III.

How does this work? I just said the fourth commandment does not apply to Christians as it originally applied to Jews. Does that open the door? What about the other nine commandments? Do they apply differently too? The answer is "no," because the New Testament reaffirms the other nine commandments. Only the fourth commandment on the Sabbath seems to be treated differently.

For example, Jesus reaffirmed commandments on adultery, murder, stealing, false testimony, and honoring father and mother in the story of the rich young man (Lk. 18:20). Taking the Lord's name in vain is prohibited in the Sermon on the Mount (5:34-35). In Romans, the commandments on adultery, murder, stealing and coveting are inherent in the obligation to love our neighbor (13:9). Idolatry is proscribed in 1 Corinthians (10:14). These and other examples show how nine of the Ten Commandments are upheld in the New Testament for Jews and those who would be Christians.

The New Testament, however, does not appear to make the Jewish Sabbath applicable to Gentiles. References to the Sabbath in the New Testament are in the context of Jewish observances and customs (i.e., Mt. 24:20, Lk. 4:16, Lk 23:56, Acts 13:14). It is not extended as a requirement for others. And so our understanding of the Sabbath reflects a belief that we are not bound by ritual requirements of the Jewish Sabbath, even though the substantive notion of Sabbath rest remains.

This is supported, for example, by Article VII of the Articles of Religion at page 869 of the Book of Common Prayer. And while we no longer use those Articles in our liturgy, they were established by the General Convention in 1801 based on similar Articles adopted by the Church of England in 1571. They have not been revoked or amended, and an attempt in 1928 to exclude them from the Prayer Book failed. So what I am about to quote is not the product of modern liberal theology, but rather comes from the sixteenth century reformation of the church.

Article VII describes how the Old Testament still applies to us, and says, "Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind [humanity], no [person] whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral."

So, ritual parts of the Old Testament no longer apply, but moral parts still do. In which category is the Jewish Sabbath? According to Paul it is ritual, not moral. He said that Jesus, through the cross, freed us from these demands of the law. He continued, "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the reality belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

Examples of the ritualistic nature of the Sabbath also are evident in how early Jewish rabbis interpreted the meaning of the term "work" as used in the fourth commandment.

For example, one could not spit in the dirt because it might make a furrow, which would be plowing, but it was OK to spit on a rock. And because it was forbidden to carry burdens, one

could not carry a handkerchief from one place to another, but it was OK to tie it around one's neck and wear it to that place.

In a more modern context, a Jewish friend once told me that it was forbidden to turn on the television on Saturday to watch football. But if he programmed the TV on Friday to come on automatically at the right time and on the right channel on Saturday, and if he just happened to be walking past the TV set, it would be OK to sit down and watch.

IV.

These admittedly extreme examples do not challenge or minimize the traditions of our Jewish brothers and sisters, but rather call us to examine how the Jewish Sabbath given on Mt. Sinai has evolved into the Christian Lord's Day that we observe today.

During Old Testament times the Sabbath applied only to the people of Israel. It was intended by God to preserve Jewish identity and distinguish the nation of Israel from others. Sabbath observances made the point in the larger society that Jews were unique and separate. This means that the Jewish Sabbath never applied to Gentiles then, and it is fair to say that the coming of Christ does not make it apply to us now.

Centuries passed and Jesus had many confrontations with the Pharisees over his activities on the Sabbath. One is in today's Gospel. And although Jesus as a Jew observed synagogue worship on the Sabbath (Mk. 1:21, Lk. 4:16), he often questioned traditional Jewish understandings of the day (Mt. 12:11-12, Mk. 3:4, Lk. 13: 15-16, Jn. 7:23).

The early Christian church emerged shortly after the crucifixion, and the first day of the week, Sunday, rather than the seventh day, Saturday, was when people gathered for worship. This was described as "the first day of the week, when we met to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

Then in 321 AD, Emperor Constantine declared Sunday as the day of rest for the Christian Roman Empire. This was not intended to place the Emperor above God, but rather to make official what already had been practiced among Christians for almost three centuries.

As a result, early Christians did not feel bound by the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, and instead celebrated Sunday as the "Lord's Day" based on the resurrection. This, of course, did not prevent Jewish Christians from also following the Jewish Sabbath, but it was not a Christian requirement.

V.

As a result, the Christian Lord's Day replaces the Jewish Sabbath day for us. We celebrate the Lord's Day because of Christ, and are not bound by Old Testament legal strictures. But are we free to do whatever we want? Are there any instructions for celebrating the Lord's Day?

The answer is "yes." The Catechism of the Episcopal Church explains the fourth commandment at page 847 of the Book of Common Prayer. It says that we "are to set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and the study of God's ways."

Traditionally we do this on Sunday, and that tradition has become the standard for Christian practice. But those who cannot attend worship on Sunday are encouraged to do so on a different day. That's why many churches have services in the middle of the week, or on Saturday evening.

And this release from Old Testament rigidity because of our belief in Christ might be reassuring to some of us today. But there also is a danger. A wise man once said that one of the devil's most effective tools is not evil people, it's busy Christians. We can be so busy that our faith becomes submerged in our inner selves even if we outwardly appear to be fulfilling our Christian duties.

But our obligation to worship God goes beyond just attending church, and includes individual worship and prayer in private time with God. Study means reading the Bible during the week as well as hearing it read on Sunday. And we also should remember that our work in the world, and the examples we set, can be ways to witness and proclaim God's sovereignty in our lives.

So the importance of the Lord's Day is not only as one day on the calendar, but also as a way of life every day. And we are called to observe this Christian practice in truth and spirit. God is watching. God knows our hearts and he knows if we are sincere in our efforts to honor him and give him first priority in our lives.

I pray that we follow the Catechism and set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and study. Hopefully that will be Sunday, but if it cannot be Sunday then it should be at other regular times. I also pray that we follow the Great Commandment and love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that we intentionally set aside time to do so. Finally, I pray that we live our lives as witnesses to others. In these ways we will honor God and draw closer to him. *Amen.*