

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you”

The power of this commandment to keep the Sabbath was such that up until recently blue laws prohibited stores from being open, bars from opening until noon, and liquor stores from selling liquor on Sundays. No civic organization would have had events on Sunday morning, no sports, no dance recitals, no scouts, nothing to take people away from attending church and/or “resting” on Sunday.

Suppressing Sabbath activities has always been a challenge. One of the commentaries indicated that even in the time of the prophets merchants insisted on hawking their wares – only in the US were we able to effectively prohibit mercantile activity.

Times have changed and they have been changing for some time. It is not news that we live in a 24x7 world in which the old pacing of life has been overrun. But the question still remains, how do you keep holy the Sabbath?

This commandment exists in two places in the Old Testament: The commandment that we read today in Deuteronomy is in acknowledgment for and in celebration of the Exodus – the liberation of the Hebrew’s from slavery. The commandment for Sabbath in Exodus 20 is based on the fact that God rested after the creation.

As Christians we do both when we practice and celebrate the Sabbath: we honor our new Creation in Christ and the effects of the resurrection in which Christ liberates us from sin and death.

Our respect for the Sabbath has been eroded by 21st century social norms and that erosion has been going on for a while. It’s not surprising given that we celebrate “Memorial Day” the day to honor the members of our armed forces who have died in service to our country with the first barbecue of the season. So it is no wonder that we celebrate the Sabbath by binge-watching our favorite series on television. Ok granted not everyone does that but who doesn’t find an excuse to “veg” on Sunday afternoon.

Guilty as charged!

So neither of these particularly exalted activities is calculated to bring us closer to God, the God who loved us, the God who loved us so much that he gave his only Son ...and you know the rest of it from our Gospel last week.

On the other hand we have to listen to what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees in today’s Gospel when they accuse him of violating the Sabbath because his disciples ate some heads of grain while walking across some fields. This would have technically constituted work according to the interpretations of the Torah and so they were indeed guilty. And what does Jesus respond? He says “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

So what is that supposed to mean?

From the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel Jesus has been setting himself in opposition to the Pharisees and scribes. He has forgiven sins, he has partied with tax collectors and sinners, he and his disciples do not fast and to top it all off they violate the Sabbath by plucking grain and he himself performs a healing.

Jesus is neither saying nor demonstrating that the commandments are wrong or that they were made to be broken. Jesus himself was a devout Jew. He is saying that the commandments need to be applied expansively because they were meant to benefit humankind.

Sabbath means to cease from doing, to rest.

Obviously God did not need to rest after the creation but apparently did so to model good behavior for us to emulate, to provide rest and refreshment for all who labor in whatever capacity from our beasts of burden to our slaves...and masters. Now isn't that a commonsensical thing to do?

I saw something on the internet recently that said we are healthier when we have a regular schedule. Schedules help us to plan healthy meal time and sleep time, work time, and play time, so why not a regular time for God?

The idea is to set up a rhythm for our week life that is anchored in the Sabbath.

Daily prayer, daily reading of scripture whether following the Daily Office, Forward Day by Day, or some other program prepares us to celebrate the resurrection on Sunday when we participate in the holy meal.

God does not need to be worshipped but we need to worship God. Our Eucharist, the thanksgiving that expresses our gratitude to God for our salvation reframes our thinking. Practicing gratitude keeps us grounded and healthy.

The rest of the Sabbath flows into our recharged souls which have been nourished in the body and the blood of our savior Jesus Christ. We go out into the world again reminded to use the filter that we are with and God is with us in all things.

So what does Sabbath mean for you? I imagine it is something or some time that helps you to get lost in yourself, usually it's an avocation but it could be some kind of task or volunteer work that is as refreshing as it is engrossing. This is not to say that sometimes it spills over into toil and labor which is why the "rest part" of Sabbath is so important. The point being that you can find God in what you are doing ...or not doing that it is a conscious decision to spend time with God.

And by that I don't necessarily mean Sunday. Sunday works for many people because of its opportunity for corporate worship and reconnection with community life. But Sunday doesn't work for everyone. Sunday has its own busyness whether it is family, work, or volunteer obligations. So how do you find your Sabbath and make it holy?

Some of you may be familiar with Steven Covey the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of his models for time management is a matrix that divides our activities into 4 categories:

Important and not important, urgent and not urgent. I think our relationship with God is under that 4th category Important but Not Urgent, those things that we are supposed to pay attention to but somehow never quite manage to find the time to do but without proper attention we are adrift and distracted and easily shaken when something happens to challenge our everyday

existence. For organizations like churches it can mean taking the time to think and plan for the future, to plan for the resources required to appropriately leverage the gifts and charism of a given church community. So when I think about how God fits into this pattern I think about cultivating mindfulness, an awareness of God's present in all of my doings and thinking and dreaming. The advantage of doing so is that our awareness of God will begin to pervade and to shape everything that we do. Not that it's easy but we do benefit from setting aside time and space to be with God to hear what God is trying to tell us that there is comfort when we are stressed, reinforcement when we are afraid, power when we pursue justice, and peace when we need it most.

Sabbath time is one way we can cultivate this mindfulness - it's like changing the filters in the furnace, the oil in our car, getting our teeth cleaned, or balancing our checkbooks – trivial perhaps but most necessary for the health and management of our everyday lives.

One of those gifts of mindfulness is the sense of flow, that feeling that you are in the zone whether it is ruing or playing music, or writing, fishing, crocheting, gardening or painting the rooms of your house or any of myriad activities that helps you to lose yourself in the moment. That is what an experience of God feels like for some of us, that is when we are open and receptive to listening to God. You might not hear a voice, you might feel detached from your body or you might be acutely aware of your body but at some point another part of your mid will know that you have been with God. Some people are able to have this experience praying or meditating – although like everything else, it takes practice!

Whatever you choose to do for your Sabbath, just do it. After all the Sabbath was made for humankind...may you find your Sabbath and the rest and refreshment in God's presence it is meant to provide.

Amen