

2 June 2024
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“You Are Free in Christ”

Text: Mark 2:23-3:6; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

In the Name of Jesus. Amen

The Pharisees were very serious about keeping the Sabbath. You cannot hear the Holy Gospel we heard this morning without learning that or being reminded of that. They were keepers of the Sabbath, and wanted everyone else to be, too.

The question is: What does that mean? What does it mean to observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, and to do no work on it?

Well, to observe a day means to set it aside as special. We observe, for example, birthdays and holidays - we set those days aside as different, as special. We circle those boxes on our calendar. Sometimes we count down the days until those special days arrive. Because they're not like all the other days, and we don't want them to be. We have special food, we do special things, to mark those days. We celebrate on those kinds of days, and they give us joy. That's the easy question to answer. The Sabbath was to be set aside as a special day.

The little harder question is: *What does it mean to do no work on the Sabbath?* What is work? What constitutes work? Is work just what you do for a living, or more than that? And if more, how much more? To Pharisees very serious about keeping the Sabbath, these were important questions. So, for example, if you're walking, how far can you walk before a comfortable stroll becomes work? If you're lifting something up, what's the difference between lifting a coffee cup and lifting a sack of cement? And these kinds of questions weren't just important to the Pharisees, but also to the people who listened to the Pharisees and wanted to do the right thing. They wanted to know: What can we do? What can we not do? Be specific. Give us a list.

So the Pharisees created such a list. A list of a whole bunch of specifics that became, in effect, new laws for the people to keep. And one of those was about ***plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath***. That was considered *harvesting*. And harvesting is work, isn't it? Harvesting is a job. Harvesting is how some people make a living. So you cannot do that on the Sabbath. So when the Pharisees see Jesus and His disciples doing that - even if it was simply to eat, because they were hungry - they take issue with that. Point it out. They're working! They're harvesting. They're *breaking the commandment*.

Notice what has happened here! The reason for this commandment that we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy was that *you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm*. The people were to remember that they were slaves, but now they were not slaves, because of what the Lord had done for them. Something that *should* give them joy.

But with this another question arises: *What does it mean to remember?* If you've been in my catechesis or my Bible Classes, you've heard me say that in Bible times, to remember was not just a mental thing. That's what it is for us; that's how we think of it. Either something comes to mind (we remember), or we forget. But back in Bible times, it was more than that - *it was an action word*. To remember meant to call to mind AND to do something. And my favorite example of that is when the thief on the cross next to Jesus asked Jesus as he was dying: *remember me when you come into your kingdom* (Luke 23:42). He wasn't asking for Jesus to just think nice thoughts of him! He wanted Jesus to remember him by doing something for him - take him there, too!

So how would one *remember* that you were a slave in Egypt? What *doing* would that remembering entail? Well, what you would do is **go** to church, **hear** the Word of the Lord that spoke of that rescue, all that the Lord had done, and **rejoice** in Him by thanking and praising Him. You would thank and praise Him that you were no longer a slave, that you were not enslaved to your work, but since you were set free, you could take this day to not work, to set aside your work and set aside this day as different, and hear of all that God had done for you, and was still doing for you. And so it would be a day of joy. Or that was how it was meant to be . . .

But notice what had happened. With all their rules and laws, the Pharisees and those who followed them and thought like them were not slaves to their work - **they became slaves to their not working!** Instead of the Sabbath being a day of freedom, they were slaves to the Sabbath laws. And instead of it being a day of joy, it became a day of fear - fear of breaking one of their laws. What happened was that instead of freedom, **they had traded one slavery for another.**

That's why when Jesus asks them a "freedom question" about the Sabbath, a question they didn't have a rule for, whether it was lawful to heal a man and set him free from his malady on the Sabbath, they had no answer. It confused them! They couldn't think this way. Truth is, this is exactly what the Sabbath was for! **To remember the freeing work of the Lord and in Jesus, to see it happening again.**

But that's not our problem today. For us, for our society, the problem is not taking the Sabbath too seriously, but not taking it seriously enough. Not *how* to observe the Sabbath, but *whether* we will, or not.

Now, it is true that we do not have to gather for church on the seventh day, as in Old Testament times. That part of the Law, the ceremonial Law, has been fulfilled for us by Jesus. But there is still to be for us a time to *remember* - to **go** to church and gather together, to **hear** of all that God has done for us in Jesus to set us free from our slavery to sin, to **rejoice** by thanking and praising Him, and to see and hear it still happening today. And while we may have some disagreement about how this is to be done, the bigger problem, I think, is that this time to go to church is no longer set aside as special. Sunday, the usual day, has become just like any other day. Or, if it is set aside, it is set aside for other reasons.

And I wonder . . . *have we made the same mistake as the Pharisees?* Have we simply traded one slavery for another? The Pharisees had become slaves to their not working - what have we become slaves to? Things that probably are not bad in and of themselves, but which have enslaved us, taken control of our lives and what we think, desire, and do? To the point of even getting in the way of God and His Word and our joy in Him. What are Sundays often used for today? For some it is sleep, for others sports, or travel, or cooking, or work, or family - what else? What would Jesus say to us today, about our observance of a Sabbath? A day that we, in freedom, can set aside for Him, to listen to Him and continue to receive His freeing work for us? How we doing with that?

Well, Jesus does not want us to be slaves *in either way* - slaves to the Sabbath, that we *have to* be here! Or slaves of any of those other things that come before being here. Jesus does not want us to be slaves, He has come to set us free! He has come to make us children, not slaves. Children who love and want to be with Him. Children who want to listen to Him and hear the old stories.

Like this . . . I remember growing up, my father would often tell a story about a fox on his way to a place called Squintums. It was an old folktale and I loved to listen to him tell it and the way he told it, and I would ask him to tell it over and over again. I never got tired of listening to it. Isn't that what church is to be for us - children hearing the old stories of all God has done for us? Hearing over and over again! And hearing that what He has done, *He is still doing!* Promises then, promises now. Forgiveness then, forgiveness now. Freedom then, freedom now. Feeding then, feeding now. Being in church is not a law for us to keep, but a place where we go because we have been **set free** from the tentacles of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature which keep trying to enslave us again. And when they do wrap around us, we come for Jesus to cut them off and set us free again. For like that man with a withered hand that we heard about today, that's what the Sabbath, or for us, church, is all about! The restoring, freeing work of Jesus for us.

So this day is special. We often count down the days until the weekend, lumping Saturday and Sunday together - but maybe we shouldn't. Maybe that's a mistake. Maybe we should count down the days until Sunday instead, and instead of dreading Sunday

because we have to go back to work tomorrow, rejoice that we get to be with our Saviour today. We get to hear the old stories again. Maybe we've heard them before, but that's okay. They're still good, and they teach us what Jesus is still doing for us today. And like birthdays and holidays, we get to have special food and drink today (well, not today, but most Sundays!) - and not food that is fattening or drink that might give us a headache tomorrow! But the very Body and Blood of our Saviour, that lightens our load of sin and strengthens us for the week.

But most of all, we're not here because we're slaves, we're here because we're *not*. I don't have to do what the world is telling me to do. I don't have to be what the world is telling me to be. I don't have to fit in with a world that is telling me to be like them. I don't have to measure up to their standards, think like them, or live like them. Jesus has set us free from all that!

Now, maybe the world will get mad at you for that, like many were furious with Jesus. That you don't fit in. That you're different. That won't be easy. But think: What is worse? The anger of the world, or to be enslaved again to the world and what it thinks and does and wants? Is peace with the world worth giving up your freedom in Christ? No way! You have something far more valuable and precious than the love and approval and life of the world - the love and approval and life of your heavenly Father. And that's a love, approval, and life that won't come and go, or be here one day and gone the next, but that lasts forever.

So be like the Pharisees! And be serious about church. But *don't* be like the Pharisees and make it all about the Law! Be serious about your freedom - not freedom from church, but for church. For Jesus. For He does His best work, here, *for you*.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.