

Sermon August 21, 2022  
Redeemer, Ramsey  
Pastor M Linderman

(READ BY Sharon Vogel, Church Council Social Ministry Chairperson)

Dear members and friends of Redeemer,

Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once again, I am very grateful for the opportunity to take this Sunday of vacation. And many thanks to council member Sharon Vogel for reading this message to you, and for helping lead worship, and to Bruce Whitaker for serving as Worship Assistant. All of Redeemer's worship volunteers do a very good job and I am very grateful for their assistance.

Summer is ripening and we are all looking at the beginning of our fall season in September. We know we have work to do to get ready for the fall, but perhaps for this and the next few weeks, we can still bask in the glow of summer and temper the temptation to worry and stress. Inspired by today's readings from scripture, we are invited to reconsider the sabbath. Like finding a good spot on the sand and leaning back into that favorite beach chair, the sabbath can be for us that weekly break in the rat race that helps restore and refresh us.

That's what the biblical understanding of the sabbath emphasizes...rest and refreshment. The sabbath is instituted by God in the 10 commandments, as recorded in the Book of Exodus, and is based on God's rest from the work of creation taken on the seventh day, as imagined in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis. We are to remember that just as God rested from his labor on the seventh day, so should we who are called to honor God intentionally rest as well.

The third commandment also emphasizes that the sabbath is to be kept holy, and by keeping it holy, we thereby honor God. For the Jewish people, this has meant a literal refrain from work or other worldly concerns from sundown, Friday, through sundown Saturday. Different Jewish individuals and communities will observe greater or lesser strictness, but the idea is the same; to turn away from striving for one day and relax into godly trust and gratitude.

For the early Christians, who experienced the Resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday, the day after the sabbath, and who understood the resurrection as the beginning of a new creation, the spirit of the sabbath was shifted to Sunday. On that day, Christians carried out their weekly gatherings to honor God by worshipping Jesus Christ and celebrating his life-giving death and resurrection. Indeed, as you've heard me say before, Sunday worship is always a celebration of Easter Sunday, no matter the season of the year.

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explained the Christian understanding of "Keeping the Sabbath and making it holy," by saying that "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not

despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it." Luther's emphasis is on attending worship, which is the oldest and most basic way Christians have understood the commandment. And gathering for worship is the primary work of the church.

But this emphasis raises a problem that all the children of Abraham, both Jewish and Christian, must deal with, and that is the temptation to see ourselves as righteous just because of our observance of the sabbath commandment. Although this is a universal phenomenon, I'll point it out from our side. For a long time in our Lutheran culture, both in our medieval European past, and our global Lutheran present, attending church has functioned as a signal of upstanding rectitude and virtue. I have seen this at play in all the Lutheran churches I've been a part of, from East Africa to India to the US. And to be honest, I've played that game myself. During my time working in Tanzania, I regularly endured 3-hour Sunday services in our village church in order to avoid the needling questions of my pious village elders who doubted my Christian commitment. So I speak from experience when I confess that church attendance can easily be used to augment our standing in the local community.

And it remains true in our culture today, that church attendance is not an option if you have political or business ambitions in the local community. Although less strong than a generation or two ago, we still find the temptation to join and attend a church to cement our reputation, associate with a certain social group, or widen the scope of our network of contacts. And of course, the same temptation holds for pastors as well, to use our connection to the local church as leverage or clout.

But we know from the critical prophetic voice within the tradition that God sees through all our selfish motivations for observing the sabbath and chastens us to repent and return to worship in good faith and with a clean heart. Listen to the words of Isaiah in our first lesson today:

"If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth...."

And what are the ways in which one might honor the sabbath instead of trampling it? It's clear from the first verses of Isaiah's reading:

<sup>9b</sup>If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted," ...

...then, the prophet says, you will enjoy the blessings of the Lord according to the promises of God. The simplest understanding of this teaching is that we should avoid hypocrisy and honor God with a pure heart. It means putting your money where your mouth is. It means walking the

walk, and not just talking the talk. If you want to be seen by others to honor God on Sunday mornings, be sure to honor God the rest of the week by your actions.

Jesus calls out the same hypocritical temptation in our Gospel lesson this morning. When the leader of the synagogue became angry because Jesus healed a crippled woman on the sabbath day, he scolded Jesus and the woman that she should come on another day of the week to be healed. But Jesus called out his hypocrisy by asserting the obvious, that even the most pious members of the synagogue community work on the sabbath day to help their livestock eat and drink. So why can't a sick person be healed on the sabbath?

And furthermore, if the sabbath day was truly created to enable us to honor God, how is such pettiness in any way honoring God? The final cut of Jesus' rebuke is only something that the person of faith can see... the fact that the amazing healing is being done by the Messiah standing in their midst. In other words, if you had the eyes of faith to see whose presence you are in, you would immediately drop all pretensions to following commandments and run to Jesus, begging for the same healing that she got.

When we weigh observing God's commandments to the letter of the law versus God's miraculous healing for all that ails us, God intends for us not to hesitate in choosing the latter. Whenever we honor God's gracious action in the world, we honor God. Honoring the sabbath means honoring God, but honoring God's work in the person of Jesus Christ honors God most of all.

In our day-to-day Christian practice, we are called to recognize that there are always two levels to our practice, the surface, which others see, and the essence, which God sees. And we are called by the prophets and Jesus to continually work to reconcile the two. As a pastor, I find that my job is often to call people's attention to this fact. Whether it is teaching couples about the essence of Christian marriage versus the surface image of their relationship, or teaching parents about the essence of Christian parenting versus what the public sees, or teaching confirmands about the essence of discipleship versus the pious posing of the adults around them, the point is that we don't honor God most by checking the boxes of God's law. We honor God most by showing compassion to those who are victims, by showing solidarity with those who are oppressed, and by loving those who may be unlovable at the moment. The reason is that when we do so, we must risk something in our relationships with others, and risking something demands our trust in God. And trust in God honors God the most. Apply that logic to our other moral stances, clothed in religious justification, that we are "pro-Life," or "welcoming of the stranger," or "accepting of other lifestyles." If we aren't "satisfying their needs" in concrete ways and showing that we mean what those phrases imply, then we risk nothing and our religious justifications ring hollow. That's why Jesus agrees with Isaiah's formula: satisfy the needs of the afflicted and you will honor God without even having to think about it.

And anyway, if we are going to honestly discuss satisfying the needs of the afflicted, isn't that what God has done for you, afflicted as you are by sin and the failures of your mixed-up motivations? In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has stooped down and

rescued you from the bondage of your sin and forgiven you for it all. No longer do you need to worry about whether you are attending church often enough. Satisfy the needs of the afflicted, and as Isaiah proclaims,

“your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places. You shall raise up the foundations of many generations, and be called the repairer of the breach.”

God’s promises are being made crystal clear here. The question is whether we trust them. When you live according to them, you, and all who do likewise, honor most the God who made us for his own and called us into his service. May you find grace and joy in following Jesus, and may the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.