

June 2, 2024 – Deuteronomy 5:12-15 & Mark 2:23-3:6

What is your perfect vacation? Have you ever thought about that? If money were no object. If you had all the time in the world. If there was nothing stopping you. What would be your perfect vacation? Would it be a big trip to a far off land? For my wife or in-laws, I'm quite certain it would involve a Disney property of some sort. Maybe you like something more rustic: camping, fishing, or hiking. For me, honestly, I enjoy just being a couch potato, some place really, really comfortable.

We're entering into vacation season right now. Last weekend was Memorial Day. The school year is over. Our pews are a little emptier with people off searching for their perfect vacations. Searching for a time of rest with their families. Each one a little bit different. Because our bodies need physical rest. And God has given us a world filled with all sorts of different ways to give our bodies rest.

Which is a key thing to remember when we read our scripture lessons today. Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons are both about the Sabbath. And "Sabbath," if you didn't know, is just a Hebrew word that means "rest." The Sabbath day is literally the day of rest.

Deuteronomy 5 says, *"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work."*

Seems pretty clear cut. We work at our jobs – at our vocations – for six days every week. Doing what we're hired to do to provide for ourselves and our family. Doing whatever we're called to do to be obedient, responsible, loving spouses and neighbors, parents and children.

But one day a week, we stop our work. One day a week we set apart as holy. As a day belonging to the Lord. And on that day, we rest. As God has commanded us. As God has commanded us from the very beginning of the world. The very first week of creation had a Sabbath day set apart as holy.

The Sabbath day was built into the very fabric of creation. It was included in the core 10 Commandments of the Law. It was reiterated in Scripture over and over again. It's important. It's essential.

And it's so easy to misunderstand. Because what is "rest"? Is rest simply about not working? Is it about taking a vacation? Is being a couch potato the only kind of rest that we should pursue on the Sabbath? Or is there another kind of rest that we should seek after?

That's the question that Jesus tackles in our Gospel reading. Because at the time of Jesus, the Jews had compiled a vast volume of rules and regulations regarding the Sabbath. There were, in fact, a total of 39 different activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath. And a whole library of professional opinions on each one, determining what did and did not fall into the category of "work."

Traveling, for instance, was forbidden. But of course everybody has to walk a little bit to get out of bed and go to the synagogue for prayers, which was expected on the Sabbath. And so some rabbi at some point had decided that you couldn't walk more than two-thirds of a mile on the Sabbath, a distance that became known as a Sabbath day's walk.

We don't know how far Jesus and his disciples had walked on this particular Sabbath day. But as they were walking, they came across some fields of grain. And, being hungry, they decided to pick a few heads of wheat, which was a common way of having a snack.

The Pharisees see them doing this and accuse them of harvesting grain, which was another of the 39 activities forbidden on the Sabbath. They are forgetting, of course, that Deuteronomy 23 specifically says that plucking grain by hand should not be considered harvesting. But Jesus doesn't go there. He's not just a teacher of the Law citing other teachers of the Law, like they are.

No, instead he goes somewhere rather unusual. He goes to the story of David, while he was on the run from King Saul. And David did something then that was unthinkable: he ate the consecrated bread from the Tabernacle. The bread set aside to remind everyone who entered of the manna God had provided in the desert. And this bread of the presence was supposed to be something that only the priests could eat.

Why was David allowed to eat this bread? Was it because God lets us bend the rules when it's convenient for us? No. Was it because David was a special case, just like Jesus was a special case, and it wouldn't have applied to anyone else? No, not really.

Simply put, David and his companions were allowed to eat the consecrated bread because they were hungry and bread is meant to eaten. That bread was meant to remind those who entered the Tabernacle that God had provided manna in the desert when the Israelites were hungry after fleeing from Egypt. And at that moment, David was hungry after fleeing from King Saul and he needed God to provide manna to him. And so God provided it in the form of this consecrated bread.

The bread from heaven that God made in the desert was made for Israel's benefit. Israel was not made for the bread's benefit. The Bread of the Presence that David ate in the Tabernacle was made for David's benefit. David was not made for the bread's benefit. And the Sabbath was made for the benefit of man, not man for the benefit of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day for God to give us something. Not for him to take it away. The Sabbath was made for us. For our benefit.

And when God talks about the Sabbath, he always emphasizes that fact. Back in Genesis, it says, *“So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”* The Sabbath was made to remember this wonderful, perfect creation that God has given to us as a home with everything we need.

Back in Deuteronomy 5 it says, *“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. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”* The Sabbath was made to remember God's great work in rescuing his people from Egypt and giving them the Promised Land. A good land, flowing with milk and honey.

And then, in Mark 2 it says, *“So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”* Jesus is Lord of our rest. He is Lord of all the good things God gives us. He is Lord of our home and our jobs and our vacations. But most of all, He is Lord of the greatest gift God has ever given to us: eternal life.

You see, that's what the Pharisees completely missed in their understanding of the Sabbath. They thought the Sabbath was about not working. But in the process, they were working harder than ever. Not at their jobs or in their homes. But they were still working.

Because they were working for God's salvation. They were working as hard they possibly could to keep God's Law. There was nothing restful about their Sabbath. It was a day of work and of sorrow, in the hope that if they suffered enough to keep God's Laws, maybe he would let them into heaven.

It's honestly not that much different than how many Christians today treat God's Law. If I just do enough. If I just give up enough. If I just work hard enough. Then maybe God will let me into his kingdom.

But we don't worship the Lord of the Law. We worship the Lord of the Sabbath. The Lord of rest. The Lord who gives us every good thing. The Lord who bought eternal life for us on the cross.

And so it is good, right, and fitting that on this day of rest and gladness we neither work at our jobs, nor sit on our couches. But instead we gather together to receive God's good gifts. Receive from him his Word of grace and forgiveness. Receive from him his own Body and Blood given and shed for our salvation.

Receive from him the consecrated bread from heaven, come down from above to show us God's love. And to remind us that we do indeed have rest from our labors. We have rest in this life at the table of our Lord. And we have rest in the next at the banquet of heaven.

For he is indeed Lord of the Sabbath. And like that man he healed on the Sabbath, so also, it is his good pleasure to restore the withered and give life to us this day. Amen.