

REST IN JESUS

Mark 2:23-3:6

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

June 2, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, beginning at chapter 2, verse 23, and reading through chapter 3, verse 6. In this gospel lesson, Jesus gives us a glimpse of what it means to rest. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 2, beginning at verse 23, we read in Jesus' name.

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

^{3:1} Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." ⁴ And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

God created us for rest. This, for many of us, might be a very appealing message. At a certain age, rest becomes one of the greatest desires of a human being. It may not be for children, at least not all the time. A child wants to run and play. And when a parent tells them to rest, they may not like that instruction. Yet, even for a child, there comes a time when rest is desirable. After a long day of playing outside and running in the sprinkler, you cuddle up next to mom or dad and read a story. That's nice. And as we age, our craving for rest only increases. And at a certain age, rest becomes one of, or even our single greatest desire.

Part of it is that our energy level decreases. But that's only part of it. We also look back on our lives and realize that the ambitions of our youth are rarely ever realized. When we were young, we gladly exerted energy, with great expectations of what that exertion would accomplish. But it rarely yielded the fruit we dreamed of. And we find that much of our energy is spent, not on progress, but merely on maintenance. Like King Solomon in the book of

Ecclesiastes, we reflect on all of our striving and lament the vanity of it. And if we gain any wisdom, we learn that the greatest thing is to be at rest in the care of our Triune God.

The Sabbath is all about rest. That's what the word means. The Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (*Shabbat*) literally means "rest." So the Third Commandment could also be translated, "Remember," or, "Observe the day of rest" (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12). And the Sabbath is especially about resting in the fruits of God's work. We come to church on the Sabbath to find rest for our souls. The sins that weigh our hearts down, we confess them and receive Jesus' forgiveness. We look back to creation and recognize that God made the heavens and the earth. Therefore, we can take a rest from our labors and trust our Father to still provide our daily bread. And we look forward to the new creation, where we will experience perfect and eternal Sabbath.

When we think about the Sabbath, our minds often go to questions of what we can or cannot do on the Sabbath. But that's really missing the point. Now, it's fine to ask those questions of what we should or should not do. Just on a practical level, we have to. But if we see the Sabbath as restrictive, we're completely missing the point. Jesus said, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (2:27).

But that does not mean, "Just do whatever you want." If that's what it meant, then there wouldn't be any command about it. God commands us to rest so that we will actually stop and receive this gift. So we might ask, "Is it okay to mow the lawn on Sunday, or clean the house, or pack up and drive a long distance for a camping trip?" The answer is usually, "It depends." When I was in Bible College, I was scolded by a dorm assistant for doing laundry on a Sunday night. I don't remember if that was actually a rule of the college or if that dorm assistant just didn't think I should be doing that. If it was a rule, it wasn't the sort of thing they would actually discipline you for. I was a bit of a rule follower, or at least I pretended to be, so I left my laundry and went back to my room. A friend of mine was a little more snarky, so when he got scolded for the same thing he said, "In the Old Testament, the Sabbath was on Saturday, and it ended at sundown. So if you're going to be a legalist, you should at least do it right." In most circumstances, doing some basic chores is fine on the Sabbath day.

During the Exodus, God commanded the Israelites not to work on the Sabbath day, but he didn't define what, exactly, counted as work. So the Jews, especially during the time of Jesus, developed strict guidelines about what was or was not permissible on the Sabbath. You couldn't make a fire, you couldn't walk more than a certain distance. They even debated whether or not you could spit in a field, because that could be considered irrigating your crops. Their application of Sabbath became more of a burden than a rest. They were missing the point.

They really misunderstood the whole point of the Law. The Pharisees, especially, saw the Law of God as a test. They even thanked God for giving them the Law, so that, by keeping it, they would have an opportunity to obtain righteousness. The big problem was that they overestimated our capacity for righteousness, not recognizing how inherently sinful we are. But they also missed the purpose of the Law. Since the fall into sin, the Law has revealed to us our sin. That's one of the chief functions of the Law. But before the fall into sin, the Law was simply God's good and gracious will for how his creation should function. So the commandments, by nature, are not a burden to us. Rather, they reveal what is the best way to live in God's creation. Whenever I teach the Ten Commandments, I try to impress upon you that the commandments are good for us. They teach us the best way to live. We are better off if we have no other gods. We are better off if we use the true God's Name rightly. We are better off if we honor our parents. We are better off if we don't murder people, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. And we are

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better off if we take the Sabbath as a day of rest. It's just good for us. And this means that the Sabbath is not a burden. If it feels like a burden, we're doing it wrong.

So you can wash your dishes on the Sabbath. If there's some good work of love for your neighbor, it is permissible to do good works on the Sabbath. It's probably okay to mow your lawn, especially if you find that relaxing. If you work a desk job, you might find it restful to build something with your hands or go for a bike ride. Give your brain a rest on the Sabbath. If you spend the week doing physical labor, it's probably better to not be very physical on the Sabbath. Maybe read a book. Whatever you do during the rest of the week, especially if you do it for a living, take a break from those things. That's the gift of the Sabbath. If you must work on the Sabbath, still go to church, then do your work, but take a different day of the week to just rest.

Part of the purpose of resting on the Sabbath is to trust that God will still provide for us, even when we stop working. As human beings, and especially as Americans, we pride ourselves on self-sufficiency. So we might think that, in order to survive, and especially if we want to thrive, we have to keep working. But we trust God to provide for our needs when we stop for a day, and we let him prove to us that everything is going to be okay.

During the Exodus, God commanded the people not to work on the Sabbath day. Now remember, during those forty years, the people of Israel lived on manna. It was a wafer-like bread that just appeared on the ground every morning. But on the day before the Sabbath, the LORD gave them a double portion of manna, so that they wouldn't have to go out on the Sabbath to collect it. Every other day of the week, if they tried to keep manna overnight, it would breed worms. But on the night before the Sabbath, it did not. God did this to teach them that he provided for them. And he could even give them one day a week when they didn't have to work, and he would still provide for them. So the Sabbath isn't just an extra rule we have to follow. It's a gift.

In this gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples commit what the Pharisees considered to be two Sabbath violations. First, as they were passing through some grain fields, the disciples plucked some heads of grain to eat. This was not stealing. Old Testament law made a provision that farmers should leave some grain on the edges of their fields for the poor and for travelers to eat (Lev. 19:9; 23:22). And it was permissible to pluck with your hand from your neighbor's field, just not to put a sickle to it (Deut 23:25). So they weren't stealing, but the Pharisees took issue with them doing this on the Sabbath day. They classified this as harvesting grain. To them, the amount wasn't important, but they considered any little bit of work to be a violation of the Sabbath. Jesus corrected them by saying, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."** If your Sabbath regulations make life more difficult, you're missing the point. So with this first supposed violation, the Pharisees come across as really nitpicky.

But the second one is just ridiculous. Jesus entered a synagogue. And this seems to be on the same day, but we can't be sure of that. Anyway, there was a man with a withered hand. And it's so funny. The Pharisees were watching Jesus, because they knew that he had the power to heal him, and they figured he probably wanted to. But instead of respecting his power, and acknowledging that Jesus had come from God, they just wanted to accuse him of being a sinner. And I find this to be so significant. Jesus' opponents never disputed his miracles. They couldn't. Everyone knew about them. So they looked for other ways to discredit him. Here they wanted Jesus to heal this man so they could accuse him of being a sinner. But Jesus did not sin at all. There is no command that says, "Thou shalt not heal on the Sabbath day."

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Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he asked, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?**” (3:4). They didn’t answer him, but Jesus already knew the right answer, so he healed the man. And then the Pharisees immediately went out and plotted how to destroy Jesus. And that doesn’t simply mean that they wanted to discredit him. More specifically, they wanted to kill him. And Jesus knows that. That’s why he says, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath ... to save life or to kill?**” He knows what their intention is. He knows how they will respond to this healing. These guys are like, “It’s not lawful to heal on the Sabbath.” Well, is it lawful to plot a murder on the Sabbath? It’s so ironic that it’s just hilarious.

When we understand the true meaning of the Sabbath, we will see that Jesus’ actions were very much in keeping with the Sabbath. Jesus gave rest to the man with a withered hand. We don’t know if he was born this way, or if he injured his arm at some point. But from whatever point his arm was injured, until Jesus healed him, that man did not have rest in his arm. Jesus gave him rest on the Sabbath.

So I want to think a little bit about rest. What is it? Sometimes it’s helpful to define things by identifying their opposites. So what is the opposite of rest? It’s not work. That might be the first thing we think of, but rest and work are not opposites. The opposite of work is idleness, but idleness is not the same thing as rest. What is the opposite of rest? I’ve taught this before, so I’m curious how many of you remember. If you do, let me know. The opposite of rest is chaos. Chaos and rest are opposites. So the relationship between work and rest is that work is the path from chaos to rest.

I’ll give you an example. Suppose you’re trying to have a restful Sunday afternoon. But your living room is a mess, and it’s bothering you. Or your kids are hungry and complaining. You could lay on the couch in idleness. Or you could get up and either clean the room or feed your kids. You work to remove the chaos, and then you have rest.

Here’s a better example: consider the creation. From Genesis 1, do you remember the state of the earth before God created? It was formless and void. Another way to say that is that it was chaotic and empty. There was nothing there, and the nothingness was chaos. Then God worked. In six days he created everything. And what was the result of it? Rest. God rested on the seventh day. He also set Adam and Eve at rest in the garden he had planted. And that rest was intended to be permanent. It wasn’t like the Sabbath ended and God recreated the whole thing again. Every day was intended to be another Sabbath. Now this was not without work. God called the man and the woman to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). And he set them in the garden to work it and keep it (Gen. 2:15). But this was not burdensome. We can say that it was work, but not labor. After the fall into sin is when work became laborious. That’s when God said to Adam,

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field” (Gen. 3:17-18).

That is, not the plants of the garden. And God continued,

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread” (Gen. 3:19).

Before the fall into sin, there was work, but it was not labor. So Adam and Eve had work and rest at the same time, and they did not interfere.

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And now we're finally getting closer to the true meaning of the Sabbath. The purpose of the Sabbath is not merely to stop working, but it is to cease from our labor and rest in the fruits of God's labor. That's why you can't have Sabbath without church. You can stop working. You can enjoy the fruits of your work. But the rest man creates never lasts. Everything descends into chaos again. To truly keep the Sabbath means to rest in the fruits of God's work. We rest in God's work when we gather together to hear his Word. That's when we have rest from the lies of the devil, the world, and our own flesh. We rest in God's work when we stop trying to obtain our own righteousness, but instead confess our sins and receive absolution. That's rest in the blood of Jesus.

So the purpose of the Sabbath is to look back to creation and recognize that everything we have comes from God. He is truly the one who provides for all of our needs. But, even more so, instead of looking back, it's looking forward to the new creation, where God will perfectly restore his unending rest. There will be a new eternal Sabbath. So we remember that what once was will be again.

Just as the first Sabbath came about through God's work, so the new eternal Sabbath also comes through God's work. It comes through the work of Jesus. His incarnation was him coming down into our chaos, the chaos of sin and death. His redeeming work was to suffer and die to still the chaos of sin and death. In his resurrection, we see the Sabbath rest perfectly restored in him. And the promise of his return is that he will bring us into that perfect and eternal Sabbath rest. It's not idleness or laziness. It's order. It's everything in our bodies, in our spirits, and in the new creation being set perfectly right. It's the perfect order of God's good and gracious will.

So we rest. We rest our bodies, trusting that God will still provide our daily bread. We rest our spirits, knowing that our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. And we look forward to our perfect and eternal rest in the new creation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.