

KEEPING THE SABBATH

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, AUGUST 25, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 13:10-17

About twenty years ago, a fellow I'd known ever since I'd moved to Arcadia, who had visited the Presbyterian church on a number of occasions, but had remained a staunch member of the church in which he was raised met me at the door one Sunday.

He told me, "I've decided it's time I become a Presbyterian." Well, I made arrangements to have lunch with him on Monday, and as we sat together over a sandwich, I asked, "Why the change, and why now?"

He told me that he'd been at his soon to be former church the last Sunday, and the preacher had preached on keeping the Sabbath. As a part of that sermon, he had chastised those who worked on Sunday, and made the statement that if you were in a job where you had to work on Sunday, you should quit it and find another one.

My friend said, "My mother has worked more Sundays than not in her life, first as a waitress and then as a nurse. So what he said bothered me. But it wasn't until I was sitting in the restaurant after church, and he and his whole family and the church staff came in and took a big table that I made up my mind to leave that church. The hypocrisy of preaching against working on the Sabbath and then benefitting from the labors of those who have to is just too much for me to stand!"

He went on to say, "Several times when I've worshipped here, I've heard you pray for those who have to work on Sunday, and I never realized how much that means."

That man later served as a deacon in the Presbyterian Church, and when he moved to Indiana found a home there in the local Presbyterian congregation.

I've got another friend, Dave the Locksmith. Dave is a Seventh Day Adventist. He'll come open your locked car on Sunday afternoon after church, but don't ask him to do it between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday. He keeps a strict Sabbath day, and in the years I've known him must have given me a dozen tracts and books demonstrating that those of us who worship on Sunday have got it wrong.

The Seventh Day Baptist Church holds fast to the same tradition as the Seventh Day Adventists. Their denominational College, Salem, in West Virginia, once forfeited a conference championship game rather than play at 4 P.M. on a Saturday. They loosened up a little in the mid-eighties when Terry Bowden was coaching football there, but after he left, they dropped football so they wouldn't be tempted to break the commandment to remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it Holy.

One of the few things that Jews and Moslems have in common is a strict observance of the Sabbath, and the more Orthodox they are, the stricter their Sabbath observance. Faye Kellerman writes about a contemporary Orthodox Jewish family in her mystery novels, and their struggles to keep the ancient code in a modern world.

Now there are two issues here: the first is the oldest: what day shall we worship God? The second is more complex: what shall we do on that day set aside to worship and honor God?

The first is probably easiest to resolve, though there is no scripture to prove it: the early Christian church gathered together to worship God, to celebrate the Resurrection, on the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. By the time the gospels were written, and by the time Paul's letters were collected, the custom, the tradition, of worshipping on Sunday was so firmly established that it was not an issue.

The more orthodox first century Christians observed the Jewish Sabbath as well, but the shift to Sunday morning worship came quickly with the shift from honoring the law to honoring the Risen Lord.

Indeed Jesus addressed the issue of Sabbath observance early in his ministry as recorded in Mark's gospel. In the closing verses of Mark 2, the disciples are walking through grain fields on a Sabbath day, and as they walk, they pluck some of the ripe grain and eat it. The Pharisees are quick to criticize them for breaking the Sabbath code, and in response Jesus reminds them of a time when King David and his men did a whole lot worse, and then he utters the ultimate teaching about Sabbath observance: "the Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath, and the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

How then shall we as 21st century Christians observe the Sabbath?

First, let me tell you that I believe that we are living in a post-Christian age. And that we have been for more than half a century.

I witnessed the demise of the "blue laws", the Sunday closing laws, in three states: Tennessee when I was in college, Kentucky when I was in seminary, and Mississippi when I was in my first pastorate.

But my parents, who had been in the restaurant business and in law enforcement and health care, had had to work Sundays for most of my growing up years.

The time when everything shut down on Sunday except for the so-called works of necessity is long gone.

I remember hearing some of the older folks in my first pastorates tell about what it was like when they were children, and their strict Presbyterian parents enforced a rigid Sabbath observance. Everyone got up, ate breakfast, put on their Sunday best, and the family walked to church in time for Sunday School. The worship service lasted almost two hours, with the majority of that being preaching. The big Sunday dinner was cooked by a paid cook, who either had been to church on Saturday evening or was going on Sunday evening, or both. The Sunday paper wasn't read until after sundown, when they returned home from Sunday evening service. Children wore their good clothes all day, and were not allowed to play outside lest they get dirty. They were allowed to read, but only books of an inspirational nature. The evening meal was left-overs from the big dinner, and everyone went to bed with a prayer led by the head of the household.

Obviously, there was no trip to the beach, or the lake, or a ball game, or a round of golf in that Southern Presbyterian family of over a hundred years ago.

We have transformed the day of rest into a day of recreation. And some of that recreation is spectator sports.

I suspect that there will be more folks at the Speedway in Bristol for the NASCAR race this weekend than in the churches of the tri-cities area of Tennessee and Virginia.

Major league baseball stadiums will have good crowds, I suspect, and in just a few weeks, the NFL will see record crowds for professional football. And many folks will not be in church in a few weeks, because they are following their college football teams.

The rest of us will be watching on television in the comfort of our homes!

We still make passing reference to the Old Testament concept of a tithe, giving a tenth of one's increase, one's income, to the Lord's Work. But the concept of a Sabbath, giving a day a week to the Lord, one seventh, a larger share, is seldom mentioned.

In our busy world, with its distractions, with all the things we have to do, with all the opportunities we have for recreation and entertainment, if we find an hour or two for the worship of God, it is a precious time.

And that is why, in days to come, this church will be offering new opportunities, new times, different times, for worship and Christian Education. We are keeping the Sabbath, we are honoring God, we are worshipping we are learning, in the time that is available.

The early worship service, starting on September 15, will give some of those folks on the way to the beach, the lake, the golf course, the trail ride, the rodeo, a time to come and worship and honor God. It takes nothing away from the eleven o'clock service, but adds an opportunity for those who can't make it at eleven to be there at 8:30.

The Wild Wonderful Wednesday after school program offers Christian Education for our children in a different setting and at a different time from the traditional Sunday morning Sunday School hour.

We had better than two dozen youngsters every day for vacation Bible school. When was the last time we had two dozen for Sunday School? I'm setting a goal for the Wild Wonderful Wednesday of 30! And we'll make it sometime over this next year.

Joseph McClelland, one of my favorite Christian authors wrote a book forty or so years ago entitled "The Other Six Days". In it, Joe talked about how important it is not just to be a Christian on Sunday, but to be a Christian the other six days.

Dear hearts, for too many years, the spirit of hypocrisy that was that of the Pharisees was kept alive by Christians who thought that if they went to church on Sunday, they didn't have to live according to the teachings of Christ for the other six days.

I would far rather see someone living the Christian life on the other six days than see that person in church on Sunday. Of course, what I'd really like best of all is to see everyone in church on Sunday, and living the Christian life the other six days, too.

And that's the goal, that's the plan, that's the hope: that we can live every day under the Lordship of the One who is Lord even of the Sabbath.

And to Him be the power, the glory, the dominion, and the praise, in the church and in the world,
now and forever more. Amen.