

Sermon – Mark 2:23-3:6
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Grace Lutheran Church
2 Pentecost – Year B
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“The Sabbath, Wholly”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I was saying prayers with our boys last night and, as is our family tradition, I asked each of them to share those things for which they were thankful. Anders went through a fairly normal litany, naming each person in our family, thanking God for victory on the t-ball field of battle, and expressing gratitude for what was pretty much just a good day. But halfway through Torsten’s turn, Anders blurted out: “Wait! Dad! One more thing! I’m thankful that I don’t have to go to school on Monday!” Yes, summer vacation is upon us. I wish I could share Anders’ unbridled enthusiasm but alas, it turns out I have to come in tomorrow morning. Still, I have visions of what the next few months might look like, and like Anders, I’m thankful: thankful that life will slow down. We’re wired for that, after all; made to take a break now and then. So I’m looking forward to a few getaways, seeing family, catching up on my reading, and heading out to a baseball game now and again. Sabbath rest – whether it’s one day each week or a summer-long season – well, sign me up. *Nothing* is one of the things I do best.
2. So it is that the retelling of the commandment in the book of Deuteronomy strikes a happy chord with me. One day a week, and you shall not do any work? *Done*. I’m in. If you’d like, I’ll give you two of three days. This gracious commandment, this invitation to imitate the divine rest at the close of the creative week, shapes the peoples’ identity over the centuries. But many generations later, with the nation and the peoples’ identity under attack, a

band of heroic figures gathers together in defense of this wonderful doing of nothing: the Pharisees! All they want to do is help the people keep the law in the hopes that in so doing, they will help Israel once again become a holy, chosen kingdom. They want the people to rest when the law says rest. And so I have to ask: Am I agreeing with the Pharisees? After all, did Jesus' disciples *need* to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath? Well, maybe; after all, Chick-fil-A wouldn't have been open. And did Jesus *have to* cure that man's withered hand? It's not like he was dying right then and there. Jesus could have arranged to come back at sundown and healed him then. No fuss, no muss. The Pharisees probably would have hailed him as their Messiah right then and there.

3. But that's not how things go down. Jesus sticks up for his grain-plucking friends. Jesus heals the man's withered hand. Jesus knows full well what he is doing; he knows that he is unnecessarily flouting the rules of Sabbath. The Pharisees, even if they are a wee bit self-righteous, aren't wrong here. The Pharisees are not so much *looking for* offense as Jesus is going *on the offensive*. It's not the law, the commandment, itself that he's going after; he's asserting his lordship over the law and over the people that the law was meant to bless. Jesus has come to bring the people, God, and law back into proper relationship. And here, the lines of confrontation are drawn: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." To quote the immortal – if also the fictional and ridiculous – Ron Burgundy of *Anchorman*: "Boy, that escalated quickly." Indeed. Here, near the beginning of Mark's breakneck-paced, not-very-restful narrative, Jesus has already provoked various parties to the point where they want him dead. *Dead*. For plucking grain and healing a hand? No, for insisting that holiness won't be found through our own efforts. He has crossed so many boundaries that he's bringing together groups that should be vehemently opposed to each other: Pharisees and Herodians. On the one hand, you have the Pharisees, the self-righteously legalistic folks who are

always eager to point out the wrong done by others. And then you have the Herodians. They don't give a whit about God's law, but they believe in the brand name of a certain political family. Smug pietists and power-grabbing politicians finding common cause with one another. And what brings them together? Jesus. Jesus, who threatens everything about their various programs – not because of the finer points of legal debate– but because of what it means to live the Sabbath, wholly and in holiness.

4. Sabbath is not, finally, about what it means to rest on this or that day; it's not about when to do this but not that. Sabbath is about what it means to live as the people of God, and that begins by breaking out of living as people who live for ourselves. Sabbath begins by stopping. As I mentioned earlier, this summer will include getaways and time with family. In concrete terms, this means we'll be going to a water park with my brother and his family. I'm excited, because I love my family. Getting together is good. And I know the kids will have a blast. But from a personal perspective, I might have chosen a different venue. A water park? It sounds so...fun. And as my wife will happily confirm, there's nothing I enjoy less than having fun. I'd rather have a bland old time with a stack of books. It'll end up being awesome. Thinking about waterslides helps me think about our need for Sabbath. Once you climb the ladder and hop into an enclosed waterslide, well, that's it. You're going until you're not; until you stop; until you fall into the water and come to a full stop. *This is why we need Sabbath.* It's not because we need rest, although that's certainly true. It's because we've climbed up the ladder and have hopped into the current of sinful selfishness, of trying to prove ourselves by keeping the law or keeping up our good names, of propping up our self-worth through things that we know don't really matter all that much. It's because the momentum of our lives has gotten away from us and we can't do anything about it. We've hopped onto that slide and we can't get out; not until we fall smack dab into the still, restful waters of baptism. The waters of Christ's dying and rising.

5. You see, the Pharisees and the Herodians aren't wrong. This is a matter of life and death. It's either their way of religiosity and politicking or it's Jesus' way. Jesus knows that we need to be brought to a full stop. This, finally, will not be found on a beach towel or a bleacher or even a bookstore. It will be found on the cross of Christ, where our careening, out-of-control lives sink in spite of themselves into the gracious waters of new life – just as we celebrate today for Eli, Mark, and Luke. We need rest, and the only way we will find it is to see in the cross of Christ the end of our old lives, put to rest once and for all. Only then will we let go of our need to do, to work, to prove, to achieve – to keep the perpetual motions machines of our lives moving. In the cross, we are stopped dead in our tracks, and we discover Sabbath rest.

6. Sabbath, finally, is about finding the reboot button for our lives. Jesus' – in the grain fields and in the synagogue – is finally not concerned about doing or not doing; he is concerned about not doing for self and about instead doing for God and others. Our lives, in sin, are built for ourselves. But not on the Sabbath. In Sabbath living, our lives are brought to a halt over and again. We don't simply find rest; we find Sabbath recreated by Christ into a pattern of death and resurrection that shapes our lives. We need to stop, to die with Christ, and see the God who does the best work through inert, unmoving, materials. Even broken clay jars like you and me.

7. So friends, happy summer. Take a break. And look to the One who has been broken for you. In him, see your old life put to rest. In him, see the needs of your neighbor and respond, no matter what day of the week it is. There is hunger to be met, healing to provide. In the name of the Lord of the Sabbath, go forth and keep this this day wholly and holy. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.