

"What Sundays Are For"

Luke 13:10-17

March 24, 2019

I'm glad to see you here today! I would have missed you had you been elsewhere! I have to admit, when I woke up this morning, the thought crossed my mind to just roll back over and go back to sleep. It's Sunday and I need my rest, MY time off. It's only fair. But then I thought about my church and about all of you and all of what we do here on Sunday mornings, and I just HAD to get up, get dressed, get some breakfast and GO! Go to church. My sabbath place. My home with God.

Today's reading comes from Luke's Gospel, the 13th Chapter, beginning with the 10th verse. Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church today.

Jesus was teaching in one of the meeting places on the Sabbath. There was a woman present, so twisted and bent over with arthritis that she couldn't even look up. She had been afflicted with this for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her, he called her over. "Woman, you're free!" He laid hands on her and suddenly she was standing straight and tall, giving glory to God.

The meeting-place president, furious because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the congregation, "Six days have been defined as work days. Come on one of the six if you want to be healed, but not on the seventh, the Sabbath."

But Jesus shot back, "You frauds! Each Sabbath every one of you regularly unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So why isn't it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years?"

When he put it that way, his critics were left looking quite silly and red-faced. The congregation was delighted and cheered him on.

Here ends the lesson. May God add a blessing to these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

I am a child of the 1950s. In my growing up years, Sundays were reserved in our family's life for two priorities: Church and Grandparents, in that order. There was no sleeping in, no faking illness to get out of a Sunday bath and dress-up day, no skipping the church service because any of us were tired from a busy school or work week. Amateur sports were not scheduled for Sundays. Professional sports did not have games until the afternoon, if on Sunday at all.

In Denver, there were "blue laws," meaning on Sundays you couldn't purchase a car or a television or a refrigerator. Movie theatres and groceries were closed, too. White collar businesses and most other enterprises took Sundays off. All of society was geared toward Sunday being a Sabbath Day.

According to Vail attorney Rohn Robbins, who has researched the origins of blue laws, there are at least two theories as to how they got started:

One goes like this: The name may derive from Samuel A. Peters' "General History of Connecticut" (1781), which purported to list the rigid Sabbath regulations at New Haven. The work was printed on blue paper. Perhaps more plausibly, the term derives from an 18th century usage of the word "blue" meaning in a disparaging sense, "rigidly moral." Some believe that those who adhered to a moral

rigid code were supporters of Oliver Cromwell in the British parliament of 1653 who, apparently, wore blue stockings.

There were court challenges to blue laws from time to time:

In 1961, the Supreme Court resolved the constitutionality of blue laws in *McGowan v. Maryland*. At issue was a state of Maryland law mandating that many businesses must be closed on Sunday. Occupations of necessity or charity (including hospitals) were exempt. Department stores could open on Sunday, but only certain retail items could be sold on the Sabbath (including, oddly, tobacco). Maryland fined the employees of a department store for selling items that included a notebook, a can of floor wax, a stapler and staples, and — scandalously — a toy submarine.

The employees appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, arguing that the Maryland blue law violated the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment as well as the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. They contended that the law was based on specific religious beliefs and compelled all persons to at least minimally observe the Christian day of worship.

The Court rejected these arguments and upheld the law. Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for the majority, acknowledged that the Maryland law and other similar laws had originally been enacted for religious purposes, but concluded that the Sunday laws had evolved to fulfill secular ends.

Over the decades slowly, the blue laws eroded, perhaps first in those States with NFL franchises. In Colorado, all the blue laws have

long since been repealed, the last to go the way of the great white buffalo being Sunday sales of packaged alcohol, banned until 2008.

Isn't it funny how the New Testament's Jewish rules of Sabbath conduct informed lawmakers halfway around the world two millennia later in a different culture and in a different dominant religious setting? What the Pharisees sought to prohibit in Jesus' time legislatures succeeded in controlling in ours.

What is perhaps even more interesting is how Jesus' teaching on Sabbath work was largely ignored in our Christian culture.

Think about it for a moment. The Pharisees admonish Jesus for working on the Sabbath. He heals a poor crippled woman who is bent over and in pain, and he is taken to the woodshed of religious authority for it. Jesus answers the charges of the Pharisees that he has sinned against God in language that leaves no room for misinterpretation. He calls them frauds! Spitting mad, he asks rhetorically,

Each Sabbath every one of you regularly unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So why isn't it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years!

The Pharisees have no answer for him. Red faced and embarrassed, they withdraw from the confrontation, biding their time until they can trap Jesus another way. The crowd cheers him on.

This teaching is easy to understand. We agree with Jesus and the crowd, don't we? So why did our forbearers adopt the position of the Pharisees, rather than that of Jesus, about Sabbath prohibitions? It is puzzling.

What of this idea? Is it alright to buy toys and pie tins, Teslas and aged Scotch whiskey on Sunday? Is it right that our church worship competes with soccer and skiing, with sleep overs and sleep-ins? Is it Christian to skip church to get to the 11 am Broncos game or the 1 pm Rockies game?

To be honest, I didn't give it a shred of a thought before I was hired to make it my business. I particularly love the texts I sometimes get on Sunday mornings where the faithful apologize that they won't be in church because of one of these other Sunday choices. I don't know whether to text back, "Have a good time!" or "Why are you telling me this?"

I have to laugh. In the first year I was here, I worried about how many folks would be sitting out there in the pews each week. If one of you was gone for a week or two, I began to worry that I had done something to drive you off or that our worship wasn't engaging enough or that the whole place was going to fold by the next week.

It took me some time to realize that church is just one of the many options available on Sunday, and hard choices have to be made

between it and all the other things and distractions that draw our attention.

And let me be clear here: I am NOT scolding from the pulpit; I totally get it. We don't live in the 1950s or 1960s. If I didn't have to be here, I might be skipping church, too, to fit all the other things of my life into this narrow Sabbath space. Last Sunday for example, Chris and I took the morning off to unpack boxes after our move to a new home the day before.

It begs the question: what are Sundays for? Why are you here today? What is it about UCC Parker Hilltop that draws you up out of your comfortable bed and home onto the roads and to this place?

Good friends of ours sent Chris and me a card this past week to mark our move to a new home here in Parker. The outside of the card said this: "A home is a sanctuary—a place of comfort, security, and tranquility." The inside read: "Hope you enjoy a sense of peace and belonging as you settle into your own new space."

That's kind of like our church, isn't it? If we turn the first five words around, the card would start: "A sanctuary is a home—a place of comfort, security, and tranquility." We have all come here to church hoping to find a Sabbath home, a place where we can enjoy a sense of peace and belonging.

In the work the Long-Range Planning and Visioning Team has been doing, we have heard these qualities voiced over and over to describe

the atmosphere at UCCPH—we have heard the words, “belonging,” “peace,” “comfort,” and “hope.” Heaven knows we are not finding any of them these days outside our church doors.

Our Colorado children were murdered by their own peers. Innocent moviegoers were gunned down by mental illness unrestrained. White supremacist evil barged into a peaceful house of worship this past week and killed and wounded as many Muslims as it could. We are all terrorized by these senseless acts of violence.

We fight with our friends and family over politics. We wake up to our favorite TV news stations and get so depressed by the time we eat our Wheaties that we don't want to venture out of doors at all. We draw up tight, protecting our hearts and silencing our tongues so as not to cause conflict.

Many of my brothers and sisters in ministry are preaching today that Jesus is not the gospel of peace but rather, the gospel of revolution. I agree and I don't. And here's why:

There's no reason to sing hymns and pray prayers and listen to Children's Time and to these sermons if you are not willing to be changed. If all we want is to be told that we already have the corner on the Jesus market, that we don't need to look deeper and reflectively on how we are ordering the priorities of our lives, then we are in the wrong place. If nothing we experience here causes us to pause, to see the scripture in a new way, or to strengthen our

relationship with God, then by all means, we should all stay in bed on Sunday, for this house of worship and community of Christians has nothing to offer us. This is revolution, a new spin on an old comfortable story.

On the other hand, we need peace. We need community. We need purpose in our lives. We crave the agape love of Jesus and of our sisters and brothers in faith. This church has to be a *sanctuary* in a world of pain and heartbreak. The church is revolution gospel AND it is Good News of Sabbath healing. It is both.

Jesus takes his Sabbath day and makes it count. He uses his faith and love to heal someone. He doesn't pat himself on the back like the fraudulent Pharisees of his parish. He doesn't flaunt his piousness or grab for power just because he can. He simply looks around for the person who is in need of comfort, in need of attention, in need of healing. He meets the need whether he happens to be in the place of worship or out in the wider world. Everywhere is holy when you are looking for the next opportunity to honor God by healing someone else's brokenness.

Who do you know in your life who needs to be healed today? Who needs to be loved, to be paid attention to, to be listened to, to be looked in the eye and have their ears hear a simple question: "What can I do for you?" I'll bet someone in your very same pew needs to be

healed by you today. I'll bet just as boldly that there is something going on with you this Sabbath morning that needs healing.

The server who waits on you in the restaurant later today, the grocery store employee with a disability who struggles to remember that your fruits and vegetables don't belong in the same bag as your dishwashing soap, the volunteer safety patrol who is skiing over to you and asking you with a smile if you are okay after your fall, the struggling college student who tears your ticket at the movie theatre, the police officer who is responding to a domestic violence call this afternoon, and the hospital custodian who is mopping up blood-soaked sheets after yet another senseless act of rage, all these people, they all need healing. They all need YOU to heal them.

Jesus says what we would readily do for our animals on the Sabbath we surely should do for other persons—we would untie them and lead them out to nourishment and hydration. There are people everywhere who need to be released from their pain, who need to be fed and refreshed and you are the hands and heart of Jesus out in the world.

If it's the kids in your life that need your time and attention and affection, if it's your aging ones who need to know that they still matter and that you love them, if it's someone you have been feuding with, if it's someone who lives next door to you with an annoying dog or child, if it's that guy down the block with a messy yard or the woman in

front of you in line with a perfume that makes your eyes water, they all need healing, and that's what Sundays Are For.

Jesus came to church on the Sabbath, but he came as a revolutionary changing the way his people saw God's call on their lives. We come home to this place to find sanctuary, but none of that matters if we do not leave here changed, equipped, and prepared to heal the world with God's unconditional love.

The Sabbath is for church and it's for family and friends and yard work and relaxation and maybe even skiing or golf or soccer or baseball, too. But everywhere you go, in every hungry set of eyes you meet, in everything you do today there is an opportunity to bring healing to others. And that's what Sundays are for.

May It Be So.