

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 2 – June 11th and 14th, 2009

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Dear Friends in Christ,

This text seems to have a natural connection with this time of year. School is out. The weather is nice. Summer is here. Whether the weather actually cooperates or not is another story, but traditionally this is the time of the year when our thoughts turn to slowing things down... taking some time off... perhaps a vacation or at least a diversion from what we do throughout the year. Thoughts of rest.

Throughout the ages people have long understood the need for rest. Human beings are not machines. We need time to recharge, rejuvenate and refresh ourselves. Contrary to putting us behind in our work, taking time for rest often serves to make us more productive and effective in doing whatever it is we normally do.

Taking this observation to a higher level, it is interesting to note that the Gospels often point out for us how Jesus rested. Which only underscores that rest is a good thing. In fact, as our text for this morning points out, it is a Godly thing. Consequently, if there is one central message that comes through loud and clear for us in today's text, it is this:

Theme: The LORD Has Given Us Rest

- 1. Rest brought about by his mighty deliverance**
- 2. A rest observed by our dedicated worship**

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” You're probably thinking to yourself that this is going to be a sermon about attendance in church. Well, while that would be a valid application of this text in our times, since you're all sitting here in church right now, that would be what you might call “preaching to the choir.” Besides, there's a tendency to miss the point of this command when we start talking about the things that we have to be doing in order to keep it. Granted, it is a command to do something. There's no denying that. **“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.”** But the command is to **“Observe the Sabbath,”** you see, and **Sabbath** simply means “rest.” Just *rest*. So this command is not a command to get up and get busy in any way. We must understand that it is, in fact, just the opposite. It is truly and simply the command to Rest.

It's easy to do what the Pharisees in Jesus' day did. They lost sight of the fact that this command was just to rest. As a result, they made the observance of this command very hard. That's right. They made resting difficult. They had a lot of finely detailed rules about how to observe the Sabbath. People had to learn all these rules and follow them strictly in order for them to be considered “at rest.” They couldn't rest even when they were “resting!” They were too busy fooling themselves and keeping up appearances.

Not that this should surprise us. Why do you think that God had to command something as simple

and beneficial as resting in the first place? It's because by nature we have no desire to do truly beneficial things. "What?" you say. "Are you kidding? I love to rest! I wish I were doing it right now!" You're missing the point. You do not understand the kind of rest God wants for us. You don't understand truly beneficial rest, deeply and spiritually significant rest. And that's because we, too, are constantly busy fooling ourselves and keeping up appearances.

Think of all the things you are too busy doing to recognize the truth! Think of all the things you do to prevent yourself from having to think about who you really are and how you're really doing. We busy ourselves with work to avoid home life. We busy ourselves with house cleaning to avoid the mess we are inside. We busy ourselves with small talk to avoid any of the real serious things we know we need to discuss with our kids.

Why, even the things we do for rest and relaxation are in reality just busy work to avoid the truth! We excel at video games and movie trivia because it's easier than learning the hard but important work of living and loving each other. We go on vacation to get away from the person we don't like being in our everyday lives. It's all just avoiding the reality that our conscience is constantly trying to get us to recognize: God watches us and is not deceived. He will call into account the use of every moment, the spending of every dollar, and the sincerity of every single word.

We work hard to tell ourselves he will be impressed with what we have accomplished in our lives. We put the right face on in front of others and work hard to put the proper spin on everything we do so we can at least appear selfless and sincere. But it's all just a distraction from the deep but not fully silenced knowledge within us that there is one Being out there that we are not fooling—at all.

Yet that Being—our God, who knows the full truth about who we are—he puts that wrath aside for the moment as he speaks to us about our lives here. Despite how reprehensible our behavior is to him, he offers the rules of a godly life to us. And when he comes with his commandments, the third thing out of his mouth—only the third thing, mind you, after not worshipping other gods and not misusing his name—is the command to rest ourselves once a week.

But his rest is a reality check. Isn't that interesting? We rest to distract ourselves from reality. He wants us to sit down and contemplate the full measure of reality. The Ten Commandments (cf. also Exodus 20) are listed twice, and very little changes between them. But this Third Commandment has a very noticeable change in it. Both places say to always commemorate the Sabbath day. Both of them say that this rest is to apply to all your sons, daughters, workers, and animals—your whole household. But in Exodus 20 it says to rest because God rested at the end of his six-day work of Creation. Here, however, it says, **"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."**

For as different as they are, both reasons are a matter of remembering who the Israelites really were. It's as if to say, "Who are you to work all week long as though everything depended on your busyness? Even the Creator of All Things rested after creating the universe." And in our text it's like saying, "Who are you, little Israelite, to work every day as though your success depended on it? Remember the LORD, without whom you would still be a race of slaves in Egypt! Remember who made you and who set you free." They were to rest in the reality of who they were. They were to take time to contemplate the reality of who they were, to be comfortable with it. They were not to distract themselves from who they really were, be that with work or play. They were to consider the fact that they were once slaves, and rest in that on a regular basis.

And how about you and me, little Americans, little Wisconsinites, little Lutherans? Can you get comfortable with who you really are? Can you stop maintaining appearances for just one minute and look at yourself with total honesty, as God does? Can you look at me—look at me—can you put down the act for just a moment and look honestly at the problems and messes and stresses that are your life? And, if you can, can you then find any rest in that truth? Rest. Rest, my brothers and sisters. Rest in the truth that God sees all your sins, but to him they have already been punished. In fact, as far as your relationship with

him is concerned, you can completely relax—even rejoice! To him it's as though you never even committed those sins. Remember what Jesus said about rest? **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28,29).**

You know that blow we're always tensed up for, that blow you're always waiting to receive? You know the hammer we're always afraid is going to fall? Well, you can relax now. You can rest in the truth. Yes, **“We all like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6a)**, and it is true that the law of God clearly says that **“those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21)**. But **“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6b)**. Especially now—now that the Old Testament prophecies about the Christ have been fulfilled in Jesus—we need to realize that distraction is not true rest. That's just self-deception that only adds to our burden. True rest is recognizing the truth about ourselves—that we really are sinners—but then realizing that Christ died for sinners. He died for a whole world of sinners! **“Be reconciled to God!” (2 Corinthians 5:20)**

You don't have to work to rest in Christ; he has fulfilled all of God's law for us. In fact, according to the Apostle Paul, we aren't even under an obligation to take our rest on certain days, such as Saturday or other festival days on the Jewish religious calendar. Christ fulfilled those shadows by giving us daily forgiveness through his life and death for us. **“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17)**. I think we have a long way to go in learning to appreciate this rest. Imagine the joy and peace that would be ours if we truly did appreciate it! Imagine that tension in your shoulders and forehead just melting away because you finally realize that you literally have nothing to be afraid of? Nothing!

Thanks to the sacrifice of Christ, God is not at all angry with you and no one else's judgment can trump that. No one else's judgment even matters. Could we really do it? Could we be so carefree and content with who we are? Why not? Paul did! He said to the congregation in Corinth, **“I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Corinthians 4:3-4)**. How could he be so confident? What was his secret? Rest. He took time regularly to be reminded by the Word that he used to be a slave—a slave to sin—but that he was no longer. He truly observed the Sabbath, not just weekly but daily, by remembering that in Christ he was innocent of all charges in the one court that matters. He could truly relax because he didn't have to work at self-deception or distraction. He truly had rest: rest in God's gift of Jesus' righteousness given to us. And that rest is ours, too. Amen.