

Sabbath Customs and the Spirit of the Sabbath

Luke 13:10-18

Scott B. Martin August 26, 2007

I think I've told you before about my wonderful 11th grade English teacher, Mrs. Collins. She was tough, but she was fair and she had a passionate desire for us to really learn something in her class. When you turned a paper into Mrs. Collins she would give you two grades and then average them for your final grade on the paper. She would grade you on the contents of your paper. She would also grade you on the mechanics of your paper, your spelling and your grammar. I remember her quite well because I swear every paper I turned in would come back with an "A" on contents and an "F" on mechanics, which would average out to a C. Thankfully she did not use this same system on the tests! Using Mrs. Collins systems I think it is fair to say that the synagogue leader gets an "A" on mechanics and a "F" on content!

The synagogue leader was right in one sense. He knew his Scripture. He no doubt had Exodus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 5:13 in mind when he said what he said. These Scriptures both say, **"You may work and get everything done during six days each week, but the seventh day is a day of rest to honor the Lord your God."** He no doubt scrupulously kept this law. So why does Jesus call him a hypocrite? We usually call someone a hypocrite who says one thing and does another. This seems not to be the case here and yet it is. Oh, it was not that he was telling everyone else not to work while he secretly worked. No his hypocrisy was much more subtle than that. To make matters even worse his hypocrisy even had the patina of religiosity. He was getting the mechanics letter perfect but missing out on the spirit of the Sabbath, the content and purpose of the Sabbath.

We shouldn't be too hard on this synagogue leader. After all, modern day society seems to increasingly deserve an "F" on mechanics and content when it comes to keeping the Sabbath day holy!

I believe we are in desperate need of coming to a new appreciation for keeping the Sabbath day holy. There was a reason for all those old religious laws, customs and traditions that we increasingly have thrown out the window.

Those of you my age or older will remember a time when stores were all closed on Sundays. Why I even remember when they closed early on Wednesday night as well, so people could go to midweek church services and activities. Schools use to never have activities on Wednesday nights, let alone weekends. Sports leagues never did anything on Sunday mornings. Those days are long gone in this age of Wal Marts being open 24hours a day 7 days a week!

Perhaps we even need some new religious laws, customs and traditions. True, we can not count on, nor should we expect to count on, the wider society to enforce these religious traditions and customs as in the past. We are after all an increasingly pluralistic society.

I'm not even sure individual churches or denominations should develop these new Sabbath laws, customs and traditions; although they can certainly help people develop them. These new Sabbath laws and customs are going to have to be a personal choice and a family tradition. This is part of the genius of Jewish observance of the Sabbath. Much of it takes place in the family, not in the synagogue.

As we develop these new Sabbath observances it will be helpful to view the Sabbath as a whole day. This is not a sermon whose sole purpose is to equate Sabbath observance with going to church for one hour on

Sunday. The Sabbath is not an hour it is a whole day of 24 hours. Hopefully we will plan to use part of that time for worshipping with our faith community, but this should not be the be all and end all of Sabbath observance.

We do not have to recreate the wheel when it comes to Sabbath observance. We can draw on the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors, both Jewish and Christian, over the last 4,000 years. The Jewish observance begins and ends with prayers over a cup of wine. There are three meals and pleasurable activities like singing, spending time with family and enjoying the good things life in God's world affords. Part of the preparation for Sabbath includes things like bathing, haircuts, beautifying the home with flowers, and dressing up.

The Jewish Tanakh and Siddur says that the Sabbath has three basic purposes. These purposes can help guide our own observance of the Sabbath day.

The first purpose is to commemorate the main redemption story of the Jewish people, God saving them from slavery in Egypt and giving them the promised land. Slavery involves forced labor. The Sabbath involves rest, relaxation and NO forced labor or even labor to earn a living. While as Christians our main story of redemption is about the coming of Jesus, and his death and resurrection, we none the less also honor redemption of the our spiritual ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

This Sabbath observance is not just a remember of something from the distant past. It connects modern day people to this ancient story and makes it their own. It also makes a current statement for people in any time and place. As Richard Swanson points out, "This commandment, by the time Jesus was raised to observe it, had long been one of the decisive marks of

the Jewish people. It had become an argument against the Babylonians, who held the people of God in Exile. It had been part of the resistance of God's people against Antiochus IV centuries later. Sabbath had become a symbol of the resistance God's people offered to tyrants of every sort and every time." Richard Swanson is right on track. As I recall Sabbath observance became one of the main arguments for the 40 hour work week in the early days of the labor movement. Sabbath is a time to remember and connect to past acts of salvation history. This remembrance helps form the kind of faith community that can continue to resist the principalities and powers of our day.

What kind of Sabbath actions can highlight these things? Certainly remembering the stories through reading, liturgical action, meditation, etc. would be appropriate. But other actions could be included as well. One could write letters for Amnesty International. We could educate ourselves and others about issues of the day to which these ancient stories of redemption speak. Etc. Be creative!

Secondly, the Jewish Sabbath is a time celebrating God's creation of the universe. We all know the story of creation in which God works to create the universe over a six day period, how at the end of every day of creation God said everything was good, it was very good, and how on the seventh day God rests, sits back and takes delight in everything that has been created. In our workaday world it is all too easy to take no notice of the beauty and wonder of God's creation.

Traditionally the Jewish celebration of the Sabbath involved such things as good food and cut flowers on the table. It is even considered a mitzvah, a good action, for husbands and wives to have marital relations on the

Sabbath. The Sabbath is not meant to be a day on which people abstain from the good things of life. It is meant to be a celebration of life and being.

What kind of actions can we build into our Sabbath observances? How about making it a day to putter in the garden? Don't tackle any backbreaking jobs. Choose tasks that allow you to enjoy God's creation. Maybe taking a walk in the park, or going to the beach, or a hike would be appropriate. Yes, as much as I hate to say it, the golfers might be right about feeling closer to God on the golf course than in church, but only if God's name is invoked at times other than in vain when a putt is missed or a ball lands in a bunker or in a pond!

The third purpose of the Sabbath is to offer a taste of what the world will be like when the Messiah comes. The Sabbath is meant to offer a foretaste of what the kingdom of God will be like. As Christians we say the same thing when we all gather around the communion table.

It is precisely this point that Jesus makes in our Gospel passage today. Jesus calls the synagogue leader a hypocrite because he totally misses this point. Jesus heals a woman who we are told had been bent over double for eighteen years because of an evil spirit. Jesus sees her in the synagogue. He calls her over and heals her right then and there, in the middle of the synagogue service. This is one of the few times Jesus initiates a healing. It may be the only time. Usually the one in need of healing calls out to Jesus, comes to Jesus, or has someone get Jesus. Why do you suppose Jesus initiates this healing in that moment. Certainly the synagogue leader was right. The woman had been like that for 18 years. Surely Jesus could have waited till after the Sabbath was over and healed her then. She didn't even ask to be healed.

Notice what Jesus says, **“Doesn’t each of you untie your work animals and lead them to drink water every day – even on the Sabbath day? This woman that I healed, a daughter of Abraham, has been held by Satan for eighteen years. Surely it is not wrong for her to be freed from her sickness on a Sabbath day!”** Jesus is saying that the Sabbath day, of all days, is the perfect day to bring healing to the individuals and the world. The Sabbath is meant to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God in its fullness. It is a day when the forces of brokenness, sin, and evil are overcome.

The reaction of the worshippers is telling. We are told they were ALL ashamed. Those who would not deny water to their animals were ready to deny healing to this sister in the faith in the name of their understanding of Sabbath propriety. They were justly ashamed. The worshipping community is meant to be a healing community, a place where the ultimate healing of this sinful world is anticipated and lived out in ways large and small.

Immediately after our passage today Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God being alike a mustard seed, which though it is the smallest of all seeds grows into a great bush in which the birds of the air can make their nest. He speaks of the Kingdom of God being like yeast, which as everyone knows a tiny smidge can leaven a whole loaf.

At the conclusion of the Jewish Sabbath the Havdalah, or separation is recited over a cup of wine. Often fragrant spices are waved about symbolizing the hope that the fragrance of the Sabbath will linger throughout the week, until the next Sabbath comes. The Sabbath is meant to offer a lingering fragrance, a lingering reminder of the glory of God’s creation, of God’s loving redemption of us and the world, and the hope that God’s Kingdom will come in its fullness. May we all develop ways of observing the Sabbath Day in our lives and families. Amen.

