

Sermon (6/3/18, Mark 2: 23-3:6):

The first church I served was in Bergen County, New Jersey. One of the odd things about this County was that they still had Blue Laws. This meant that on Sundays, by law, most stores were required to close and those stores which were allowed to be open, such as grocery stores, would need to rope off certain aisles so that customers would not purchase prohibited items.

Having never lived in an area with Blue Laws before, seeing those roped off aisles seemed very strange. Sometimes, when I desperately needed something from one of those aisles, the temptation was great to sneak under those ropes. There it was, hanging on hook, just beyond my reach. So close yet so far.

Rare is the state or, as in this case, the county that still adheres to such laws. The interesting thing is that Bergen County isn't some small community where these laws only affect a handful of local merchants. No, Bergen County is a shopping mecca, filled with gigantic malls and lots of retail stores. People come from all over to shop there.

There was a time when Blue Laws were relatively common. It was something begun by early Protestant Reformers in an attempt to keep the Sabbath from being profaned, which for Christians, is on a Sunday.

For the most part, these laws no longer exist. Places like Bergen County have become an anomaly.

Today, talking about Sabbath keeping seems about as out of date as Blue Laws. For the most part, everything is up and running 24/7, and so are we. With the internet now added into the mix, what we can't do in a physical building, can now be done on line, including an increasing number of jobs.

Added to this is the fact that when we're not working or purchasing, we tend to be running children and grand-children to sports events or other activities. Their schedules have become as crammed as ours. There's also the need to maintain all those things we've purchased like houses, cars, electronic devices and so many other things. Sabbath keeping seems to have gone the way of the horse and buggy.

At first glance, today's scripture reading might leave us with the

impression that even Jesus would think this is a good thing.

In the first instance, Jesus is reprimanded for allowing his disciples to ‘harvest grain’ on the Sabbath. What they actually did was pluck a few heads of grain as they walked through a field, rubbed them together in their hands, and ate them. Jesus ended up defending his followers by saying that humans were not created for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was created for humans.

In the second story, Jesus seems to almost be taunting the Pharisees who were already upset with him. After looking his critics in the eye, he instructs a man with a withered hand to stretch out his hand. The man does, and his hand is healed. This in-your-face healing on the Sabbath pushes the Pharisees over the edge. They storm off in a huff to conspire with the Herodians on how to get rid of this trouble making Jesus and we’re only in the third chapter of Mark!

So, is Jesus really suggesting that Sabbath keeping, one of the big ten that God gave to Moses, isn’t important?

Actually, Jesus never said that keeping the Sabbath holy had become unimportant. Instead, what I think Jesus was concerned about was how the rules had become more important than the reason behind the rules. The rules had become idols in and of themselves.

Every now and again, I will be at Home Depot when they close off an aisle so that a Fork Lift can shuffle some things around. Of course, it’s usually an aisle I need something from. I can see it right there, just out of reach, sitting on a shelf. So close yet so far. Not so patiently, I wait.

Now the reason for roping off the aisle is clear. If something should accidentally topple over during that fork lift reshuffling, they don’t want anyone to get hurt. It’s for everyone’s safety not to mention the avoidance of lawsuits.

In all honesty, I’m not so sure many people understood the reason behind roping off certain aisles in a store on Sundays in Bergen County. Of course, people knew it was the law but why was this law made in the first place and what was the reasoning behind it?

In the Deuteronomic version of the ten commandments, the reason behind Sabbath keeping circled around two main points. The first being

Creation.

Many of us know the first biblical creation story. In six days God created and then on the seventh God sat down, put his feet up, and said, "Today I'm not working. Today I'm simply going to enjoy what I created." God then made it clear that this Sabbath resting thing was just as important, if not more so, for us human beings.

The second reason has to do with the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Keeping Sabbath is a way of reclaiming our status as a freed people—a people no longer enslaved by all the systems and all the busyness and all the demands that tend to define our lives.

Here are some other things to think about regarding keeping Sabbath.

Keeping Sabbath reminds us that we are loved not because we are productive but because we are. We come to worship on Sabbath to be reminded by the water splashing in the baptismal font and the message that goes with it, that we are cherished, beloved, cared about for no other reason than we are the apple of God's eye.

We gather here to be community, individuals from all walks of life with varied gifts and incomes and talents and backgrounds and ethnicities and accomplishments, to learn that this hodgepodge group of people that God has somehow cobbled together all share a common bond of being loved by God and, therefore, called to love each other.

Keeping Sabbath reminds us that we need to rest. We are just not physically, mentally, and emotionally equipped to keep going endlessly. Lack of rest in today's society is a significant crisis. It's making us sick. People aren't sleeping like they should. They rely on sleeping pills to get some sleep. They're driving on roads while taking micro naps. We wear busyness like a badge of honor. Keeping Sabbath not only as individuals but also as a society reminds us that rest needs to be valued far more than we are valuing it. Not only do we need to give ourselves permission to rest but we need to give others permission to rest as well.

While I'm not sure the blue laws in Bergen County accomplished what was originally intended, there was one benefit that I felt was a good one. It gave most everyone a day off, especially those whose low paying, often menial jobs tended to keep them working endlessly. One mandatory

day of rest for all. Pecking orders and hierarchies were put on hold, just as demanded in the Deuteronomic law of Sabbath keeping where it says that Sabbath keeping applies to everyone including ‘sons and daughters, slaves, resident aliens in town, and even livestock.’ Everyone equally gets time to rest.

Keeping Sabbath reminds us that by letting go of being in charge for one day a week, we might be shocked to discover that that the world really can go on without us! It won’t wildly spin off its axis and crash into the sun. God is perfectly capable of running the world, at least, for a single day.

Keeping Sabbath provides the planet a chance to rest. Every day we demand so much from her...harvesting, mining, cutting, consuming. Keeping Sabbath means giving our precious planet time to breathe, to recover, to regenerate.

Keeping Sabbath means restoring our relationship with God as we come together not to produce but to worship. To give thanks and to live in a moment of Sabbath peace where God’s kingdom forcefully intrudes, igniting our imaginations and our hearts with holy dreams.

It’s also about restoring our relationships with one another. It asks us to set aside our cell phones, our computers, and other electronics so that we might actually look each other in the eye and realize there’s a person in there. Relationships are taking a real beating these days. Sabbath keeping has the potential to restore some of the brokenness in our relationships.

What’s interesting about Bergen County, NJ is that, over the years, a referendum has regularly been introduced to rid the county of its Blue Laws. Each time, however, that referendum has failed. In fact, from what I can tell, it’s still in effect to this day. One news article I read, suggested that it has become a way for people to resist the over commercialization of their County.

We live in a world where Sabbath keeping has become harder than ever but that does not make it any less essential to our well-being. When we are able to see beyond the ropes that prevent us from doing, we might discover that it’s about something far more important than just adhering to a bunch of rules. It’s about our survival, our health and well-being, our

being able to better utilize our gifts on the other six days of the week. It's about remembering and retaining a way of life that is truly holy and truly beautiful.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.