
Observe the Sabbath

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Second Sunday after Pentecost – Year B**

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy.”
Deuteronomy 5:12

Some people think that Sandy Koufax, the great baseball player of the Los Angeles Dodgers, would not pitch on the sabbath. Koufax was Jewish, and Saturdays are the sabbath in the Jewish tradition. But he did pitch on Saturdays. It was on Yom Kippur that he didn’t pitch.

In fact, it was on October 6, 1965, the first day of the World Series, that Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers ace, refused to pitch because it was the holy day of Yom Kippur. Koufax would attend synagogue that day instead.

So, Don Drysdale was chosen to pitch instead. In two and two-thirds innings, Drysdale did horribly, giving up seven runs, a terrible performance. When the manager came out to pull Drysdale from the game, Drysdale is reported to have said, “I bet right now you wish I was Jewish too.”

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy.”

This is truly one of the most beautiful commandments in the Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, it may be one of the great contributions of Hebrew law. All humanity benefits from sabbath, a rest, a time to appreciate the holiness of creation. All *creation* benefits from sabbath. Like God who rested on the sabbath day, we participate in holiness when we take time for sabbath.

So, I salute athletes who honor their holy days, their sabbaths. And I salute businesses who take the time to take a day off. There is one restaurant business in particular, one of Georgia’s finest businesses, who closes every Sunday. You can see their signs on the expressways: “closed on Sunday.” It is an honorable decision, and it has something to teach the world.

All of us need rest. And not just rest, but a retreat, maybe a retreat from obligation and duty and pressure and work and anxiety. All of us need time when we are free, to be free. A habit of rest, sabbath rest, actually shows us something holy about the world.

Here we are in June; summer has begun! Well, summer can be a time for this sabbath retreat. Take it! Summer can give us some sabbath time. Remember, of course, that not every day is a day of rest! There is a difference between sabbath and escape. If we are simply seeking escape in life, and if we seek escape every day of our life, we are damaging the soul. True sabbath, a time of intentional rest, actually prepares us to engage the world in a holier way.

So, the fourth commandment of the Decalogue says: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” It might be a Sunday, if we are Christian. It might be a Saturday if we are Jewish. It might be a Friday. Remembering the sabbath restores us, recreates us. It is the time of re-creation.

And, then, here comes *Jesus*! In Mark, chapter two, our gospel lesson for today, Jesus and his disciples are plucking grain on the sabbath. He is accused of violating the sabbath commandment. Then, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the sabbath. He is accused again of violating the sabbath commandment.

Indeed, one of the most frequent accusations against Jesus is that he violates the sabbath. He breaks the

commandment to keep the sabbath holy. Jesus is accused of not correctly observing the sabbath. And, according to the tediously worked-out codes of what it meant to keep the sabbath in those days, Jesus was indeed guilty. He was doing things on the sabbath that were understood to be forbidden.

We have just been reminded of how good and holy the sabbath is. If the sabbath is so good, why does Jesus break it?

Well, here is the genius of Jesus. And it is a genius which brother Paul, Saint Paul, would also realize. The law is good. The law is good, for sure. But great commandments set us free.

Jesus did not keep the sabbath simply in order to check a box, in order to be seen to be righteous. With his practice and his prayer, Jesus was able to sense what the sabbath was really pointing to: the love of God and the love of neighbor. Saint Paul would later say that the Law was our schoolmaster, our tutor, but it is Christ who sets us free. Paul would say, "For freedom Christ has set us free!" (Galatians 5:1).

Yes, for sure, it is good to recognize holiness on the sabbath. But it is about observing, not just keeping. When we observe the sabbath, we practice – we train ourselves—to see the world more clearly. We practice seeing God more clearly. And then, we can love more dearly. We love generously and indiscriminately.

If our focus is only on keeping the sabbath as strictly as possible, if our focus is only on keeping any law as strictly as possible, we are missing the greater point. If we are only trying to pass some test, and doing something only so we can say we have checked that box, we are missing the greater point.

Jesus would say, "Something greater than the sabbath is here." "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." The holiness of the sabbath is supposed to serve a greater good, the greater good of love.

So, yes, we keep the sabbath. But we keep the sabbath by observing, by observing the sabbath. When we observe the sabbath, we see things! We see the world better! We love better, we feed our companions and heal those in need, as Jesus did.

We rest on the sabbath in order to be refreshed and enlivened, and also in order to refresh and enliven others! And when we observe the sabbath, every day is sabbath, every day is a holy day, every day is a new day to love God and to love neighbor. They are the same thing: Observe the sabbath, love God and neighbor.

AMEN.

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