

Sabbath Days (rev.1)

2nd Sunday after Pentecost B - June 2, 2024

Sabbath Days are my favorite days, no matter how you slice the week. If we call the first day of week, Sunday, our Sabbath, and set it aside for rest, renewal, and worship, that's the day I get to do this: preach, lead worship, celebrate your milestones with you, help you grieve or rejoice as occasion serves, even do some teaching. It's a blessing to be able to do what one is called to do. This is true even if the road one was called to walk to do so took more twists and turns than one had ever imagined.

If we call our Sabbath the day the Lord meant us to have it on, the seventh day, when even God rested, that's just as sweet, if in a different way. That's the day when I, and I hope you, get to relax under the oak trees, read a good book, maybe listen to a symphony or watch a ball game, have time with family and friends, or just listen to the birds sing and other people's lawn tools cut and whine. Neither form of the Sabbath would be as fine were it not for the other. Perhaps it is well that we take them both, celebrating the difference as we follow the Lord's command in the matter.

Even nursery rhymes would have it so, if you think about it: "...but the child born on the Sabbath Day / is bonny, blithe, good, and gay." That's the way the Children-of-the-Week one ends in England. It's not quite the same as the one used over here that we heard two weeks ago. I checked with my dad this week when I went up to Pittsburgh to see him whether my memory of this was accurate. "It is if it matches mine," he said, which is funny because age has taken much of his ability to remember today what happened yesterday. What happened decades ago, though, that's still there. I went up because his health is not what it once was, and hospice tends to keep what hospice gets. But life has been kind to him even if age has not, and we had a good laugh about this nursery rhyme as well as another I'd almost forgotten: A.A.

Milne's "Vespers". That's the one that begins "Little Boy kneels at the foot of his bed, / Droops on the little hands little gold head, / Hush! Hush! Whisper who dares! Christopher Robin is saying his prayers." An Englishman who named his son Christopher is all but guaranteed to have this one by heart, for all that he's nigh on 100 years old. Wouldn't you know it, he does, with maybe a little prompting from the professor's iPhone, delighting the crowd at the Memorial Day sing-along. He had a ball doing that, showing once again that he's making the most of the time that is given to him. In that is a lesson, if not more than one. At his best, my dad still has the affect of that child born on the Sabbath Day: bonny, blithe, good, and gay – gay in the sense of happy as a clam not at a clam-bake, but as a clam looking down the beach at a clam-bake he missed getting baked in. Which is not in the least ironic; my father was, in fact, born on a Sunday, in the rhyme as in Christendom the Sabbath Day – as was I, many years later, and after more than one life's worth of chop and change had come upon the world.

Yet if it has been my father's fate to trip the light fantastic, it has more often been mine to trip over it. At my best I can be bonny or blithe, but rarely both at the same time. Gay in either main sense of the word has, for better or worse, not been my calling, though I've long since shed the prejudices of my youth against the love that once dared not speak its name, and against those whose outlook on the world is as sunny and bright as a late May morning. I trust that to shed youthful prejudice and ignorance on purpose, and to keep shedding them should they recur, will be held sufficient a mark of goodness to let 'good' stand by me. One can no more fit into youthful prejudice or ignorance than one can, once grown, fit into the clothes one wore to grammar school; 'new occasions teach new duties./ Time makes ancient good uncouth'. 'Born again', Nicodemus was told last week we were to be – that is, born from above. That is: grown up, and I mean up. Those born from above must be committed to what is, to the now. They must hold to truth whatever it may be and wherever it leads. They cannot abide not-knowing what is the case, or not caring.

They must shed illusions, ignorance, error, and sin in all their forms. They must be, in a word, good, or at least die trying. ‘He was a good man’. I’d have that said of me, when the time comes. That, ‘and a credit to his flaws,’ to quote David Lynn Jones tear-welling “High-Ridin’ Heroes.” Yes, that as well. Yet good is only as good does, at the feller said, and I shall be guilty of any good I didn’t or would not do. As will, I am called to say, we all.

Which brings us back to Sabbath days, and what God wants us to do with them. “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy” (Ex.20:8) it went the first time the Lord told Moses about it. The second is like unto it: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Deut. 5:12a). In the AV, it reads, “Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it.” That is: hold it close, make it a blessing to you and to all under your eye or wing. Six days shall you labor out of seven, but not seven. Set one day apart as special, not to be ruined – that’s what ‘keep it holy’ means. Everyone needs a day to rest, recharge, and be renewed – and second following it, to remember who we are and whose, and what life is for. (That’s the ‘worship’ part.) Even those you enslave, said the Lord to the people of Israel – as well as the “stranger within thy gate,” *i.e.* anyone who came to your land from elsewhere and now calls it home. They left where they were for a reason – and far be it that they should fare as you did, O Israel, when you left starving Canaan for grain-rich Egypt way back when, only to find that Egypt wasn’t going to give you that grain for free for long. The Lord saved you from those chains, whips and, hot-boxes, folks, even killed for you on your way out of town, so make sure you do what the Lord said to do. Take one day fully off every week – and that means everyone. Arrange your life and country so that everyone can do this for real – ox and donkey, too. You’ll all be happier than if you don’t.

How’s that working for us? Other than “Do not covet,” I can’t think of a commandment that is less obeyed than this one, or ever was. People the world over are worked to the bone unless they fight like the dickens not to be, whether their

collars are blue, white, orange, pink, or dog. The fight never really ends, and must be won anew in every generation. So must the fight for every right, as in our time it is around voting, bodily autonomy, and teaching the truth of what happened in this country. (I'm still mad that we were schooled about Lexington and Concord but not Matewan and Tulsa, for instance.) As to Sabbath Days, science has proved what wisdom always knew: if you work people to death they will die, and if you work yourself to death you will die. Then, where will you be? Where will we be? "No-one," as those who tend bars or pulpits can attest, "No-one ever says on their deathbed, 'I wish I'd worked longer, spent less time with family & friends.'" No-one.

Yet forget not the prime directive: do all the good you can, by any means you can, whenever and wherever you can. That was John Wesley's way of putting it, though it has the sound of Jesus in it, particularly in the bit from Mark 2 we heard this morning. Jesus and his disciples are doing all manner of things that actually keep the Sabbath holy, only to be yelled-at by people who turned the Bible's poetry into a law code long back, all the better to ruin people's lives with it. JC and the boys are picking and eating some ripe wheatberries as they go through the grain fields, which I didn't know tasted great until a farmer in southern Maryland told me about it. He was amazed, and a little sad, that I didn't know. It's apparently like chewing gum, but tastier, if not as sweet, and you can swallow it, and feel well-fed. Which is what the disciples were after, I'd imagine. They were young men and hungry, mostly, and what better way to get a snack than to reach out and pick one right off where it's growing? 'No point starving on a day of rest', Jesus might well have said. 'You're no good to anyone if you do that.' As he said, "The sabbath was made for people, not the other way on." That's also why he healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath as well. It wasn't the hardest work he'd ever done, but it was among those things that are unabashedly good. Even the Pharisees knew that, which is why they clammed up when he put the question to them about whether he should do it. One may, and hence one must, do good on the Sabbath if not doing so would make

things worse. Have a snack, cure the sick, speak truth to power, and have a chat with your friends. All in a good Sabbath's good day's rest.

Paul echoes that message. Today's reading from his 2nd letter to the people of the church in Corinth begins by him reminding them that he and his friends "preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ the Lord." They do this so that Christ will shine through them, his life "made visible in our bodies." They started doing this to get away from lives of mendacity and shadow, and live as free people who help set others free. They shine with a light they want to see shine from others, the way teachers do with their students, or pastors their flock, and parents their children. But it's not just they who have to live this way. All Christians should. All who live in Christ should live so that Christ shows forth in all that we do, and shows up and in all that we are. As the General Thanksgiving we say at the end of Morning Prayer puts it, 'we pray' that God will 'give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives'. We do so, that prayer continues, 'by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days'.

'Bonny, blithe, good, and gay?' I suppose that if you lived that way, lived truly as Jesus did and Paul said to, your life would look like that of the child born on the Sabbath day. I hope mine does. I hope that our Sabbath renewal, rest, and worship make it so for all of us. It's what we're here for. Living this way might not make us sound quite like Paul does, but it will make us shine like Jesus did, and also put that gleam in our eyes you just know that he had whenever he did something good that upset the haters and fussy budgets of his world. If he could do it way back when, so can we. May God make us so that we do. *Amen.*