

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 14th Sunday After Pentecost, August 21, 2016

Should We Do Work on Sunday?

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Luke 13:10-17

In the creation story we are told that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day (Genesis 1:1-2:2). “... *God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creation that he had done.*” (Genesis 2:2).

That part of the creation story led to the custom of not working on the Sabbath and of it being a day of rest. This carried over into Jewish law and was rigorously enforced by the Pharisees and scribes in Biblical times. In our own time it led to many state and local laws which prohibited retail business from being conducted on Sundays, the so-called “blue laws”, some of which remain in effect in various parts of the country, on a limited basis to be sure, but which still are there.

I can recall when few, if any, stores were open on Sunday. Slowly the blue laws were eliminated but some stores and businesses still remain closed by choice. In some locations stores remain open but sales of alcohol and tobacco are prohibited, at least until noon while church services are being conducted, but after 12 PM those sales are OK. To me that is rather hypocritical.

Today Orthodox Jews still observe a strict prohibition against work on the Sabbath, even to the point of prohibiting cooking or meal preparation. Everything is prepared on Friday before sundown, when the Sabbath begins for the Jewish faith. A large pot of water is often left on the stove overnight keeping it hot so that eggs, for example, can be suspended in a basket overnight and remain hot for eating the next morning. The stove cannot be turned on or off on the Sabbath, that would be considered as work, so the pot remains on the burner until sundown Saturday, when the Sabbath is over for the Jews, and the stove can be turned off. This is how the rule of not working on the Sabbath is observed by Orthodox Jews today and reflects the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes in Biblical times.

Of course, the entire concept of blue laws is essentially long gone today and

virtually every retail business is open seven days a week. People no longer observe the injunction to rest on the Sabbath and often, if they don't want to work then, they have no choice because their job requires them to be at work.

I have a pastor friend who generally supports the idea of businesses being closed on Sunday, yet I recall her complaining one time that a restaurant that she went to on a Sunday was closed.

Let's be honest. Who among us has not gone shopping or out to eat on a Sunday? We do it. It is convenient.

Several years ago Betsy and I were travelling over a weekend. Our anniversary was on a Sunday and we were looking for a nice place to stop for a meal where we could celebrate. Every restaurant we could find was closed except for a Waffle House, which is where we ended up for our anniversary meal. A Waffle House hardly qualifies as an up scale restaurant.

I was a bit frustrated at that turn of events but, had I given it more thought, I should have applauded those other restaurant owners for giving their employees a day of rest on the Sabbath.

But what constitutes rest on the Sabbath? Must everything grind to a total halt or are there exceptions?

Should hospitals and pharmacies remain closed and tell the sick or injured to come back on Monday? I think that you would find that to be ludicrous. Certainly Christ would not condone refusing to give someone needed medical care just because it is the Sabbath.

That is the gist of our scripture reading from Luke today. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. That was not work in the eyes of the Pharisees or in the Law of the Torah. But preaching and teaching is work, vital work to be sure, but it is still work for someone. Imagine if it was prohibited on the Sabbath. What would churches and synagogues do? When would they hold services? Would they even be able to exist?

Clearly not all work can be prohibited.

In our reading from Luke, while Jesus is teaching a crippled woman appears and Jesus cures her of her afflictions. Was that work? Is it work for a doctor or a hospital to treat the sick or injured on Sunday?

Well the Pharisees considered the act of curing the woman to be work. The preaching was OK, but not anything else.

Walter Bruggemann commented that, *“Sabbath, in the first instance, is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of well being.”*

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Jesus refused to be defined by the Law of the Torah and the desires of the Pharisees. He didn’t pursue private well being. He did what was necessary to be done, the Sabbath notwithstanding. The woman was ill. She was afflicted and he tended to her needs. What that work? Was his teaching work?

I think not.

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites and reminds them that they water their oxen on the Sabbath. Is that not work?

No it isn’t. They are attending to the needs of their animals. In a like manner Jesus was attending to the needs of the woman and was also attending to the spiritual needs of the people in the synagogue by preaching and teaching.

The moral issue here is one of interpretation --- what is work and what is not.

Charles Cousar, et al ⁽¹⁾ said, *“The leader of the synagogue and his colleagues [the Pharisees] fail to see that Jesus has taken the initiative in releasing the woman from the bondage of Satan. By forbidding such conduct on the Sabbath, they put themselves on Satan’s side in the struggle for human lives, and they become enemies of Jesus. They badly misjudge the conflict taking place between the rule of God and the rule of Satan ... The authorities’ blindness leads to their final rejection of the prophet who could save them.”*

So what is work on the Sabbath and what is not?

Do Wal-Mart, Target or Ingles have to be open on Sunday? Certainly not! They aren’t doing God’s work by any stretch of the imagination. Yes, it is convenient for us when they are open, but it isn’t necessary.

Should pharmacies be open? Should hospitals be open? Should churches hold services? Of course they should. They indeed are doing God’s work. They are vital.

Rather than running around to those businesses which ignore the Sabbath, we should honor the Sabbath by worshiping God and by engaging in activities which praise God and his creation. Go out and enjoy the magnificence of these mountains which surround us. Look at the beauty of the flowers, the trees, the birds and other animals or just rest in the sun and enjoy the day.

Amen.

(1) Charles B. Cousar, et al, Texts for Preaching, Year C, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011