

**1 Samuel 21:1-6; Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

**Luke 6:1-11**

**June 26, 2016**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***On the Road with Jesus***  
**AT WORK AND WORSHIP**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

According to North Carolina state law, alcohol can only be sold, served, and consumed after twelve noon on Sundays. Some cities or counties may further restrict Sunday sales.

According to North Carolina state hunting regulations, gun hunting is prohibited on Sundays between 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. except on controlled hunting preserves.<sup>1</sup>

Those are the only two Sunday laws I could find in my brief research of current “blue laws” in North Carolina.

Of course, if you’re traveling on Sunday and looking for a place to eat lunch, you can’t stop at a Chik-Fil-A and eat a chicken sandwich. According to the Chik-Fil-A website article called “Why We’re Closed on Sundays,” “Founder Truett Cathy made the decision to close on Sundays in 1946 when he opened the first store in Hapeville, Georgia. He has often shared that his decision was as much practical as spiritual. He believes that all franchised Chick-Fil-A Operators and their Restaurant employees should have an opportunity to rest, spend time with family and friends, and worship if they choose to do so.”<sup>2</sup>

Truett Cathy’s business decision, “as much practical as spiritual,” closely reflects the fourth commandment which Susan read from Deuteronomy 5. When Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, they were commanded to “observe the sabbath day and keep it holy.” The specific commandment was “the seventh day — you shall not do any work” and the rationale given was “that you may rest. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

The other version of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, which is found in Exodus 20, has the same fourth commandment — “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy; you shall not do any work” — but the rationale is different — “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and that is in them, but rested the seventh day.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

Both of these events — the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and the creation — are at the heart of the Jewish faith story. They are bedrock foundations of the life of the community. Worshiping the God who created everything there is, the God who liberated them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in The Promised Land is the glue that holds the community together. The commandment to “remember the sabbath day, and keep

it holy” is a gift from God — as much practical as it is spiritual, given for our physical and spiritual benefit.

In his book, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen writes, “One of the most obvious characteristics of our daily lives is that we are busy. We experience our days as filled with things to do, people to meet, projects to finish, letters to write, calls to make, and appointments to keep. Our lives often seem like overpacked suitcases bursting at the seams. In fact, we are almost always aware of being behind schedule.” According to Nouwen, that relentless “busyness” leads to constant worrying that inevitably fragments our lives. He says, “Worrying causes us to be ‘all over the place,’ but seldom at home. One way to express the spiritual crisis of our time is to say that most of us have an address but cannot be found there. We know where we belong, but we keep being pulled away in many directions, as if we were still homeless. ‘All these other things’ keep demanding our attention. They lead us so far from home that we eventually forget our true address, that is, the place where we can be addressed.”<sup>3</sup>

Four hundred sixty-one years ago last Monday, John Calvin preached a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:12-14 called “Sabbath Observance.” In his sermon, Calvin said this about the commandment to “keep the day of rest, to hallow it as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee”: “Let us acknowledge that this order was not given solely to the Jews in order for them to have a certain day on which they might assemble themselves, but at the same time it applies to us also . . . The majority hardly care about the usage of this day which has been instituted in order that we might withdraw from all earthly anxieties, from all business affairs, to the end that we might surrender to God. . . On other days, seeing that we are so occupied with our affairs, we are not as much open to serve God as on a day which is totally dedicated to this. Thus we ought to observe Sunday . . . in a way in which we are neither impeded by nor occupied with anything else, so that we might be able to extend all our senses to recognize the benefits and favors with which he has enlarged us. . . And when we have spent Sunday in praising and glorifying the name of God and in meditating on his works, then, throughout the rest of the week, we should show that we have benefited from it.”<sup>4</sup>

How often we hear this fourth commandment about remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy as a negative — “You can’t do this, you can’t do that.” And yet, as Calvin says in his sermon, the sabbath gives us the chance to “surrender to God” and “to serve God.” Isn’t it true that we all need that kind of time? Isn’t it true that, as Dorothy Bass has said, “We need Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it.”

One of the greatest challenges folks from here in North Carolina faced on the many partnership trips to Tabasco, Mexico was adjusting to the different approach to time. We are so clock- and schedule-driven, but as guests of our Mexican hosts, we had to adjust to a different daily rhythm. Over time, I discovered if you could surrender yourself to the new rhythm, there was something delightfully refreshing about the pace, especially when we gathered for worship. Worship seemed to begin more-or-less at the announced time, but it really seemed to begin when the time was right. And worship

didn't end after exactly one hour, but when worship was finished. Some of the worship services in Tabasco went a long longer than one hour, but they were nothing compared to the six-hour worship service I attended in Lusaka, Zambia!

Perhaps that's why the following story made such an impression on me. Think about what it means to "stop and be with God" as you listen. A group of persons from a United Church of Christ congregation in the U.S. was on a mission trip to South America. Two of the group members were a dentist and a medical doctor. The rest of the group was made up of their staff members. They had gathered some supplies to take to a remote village, to use as they treated people during their visit. They would leave the rest of the supplies for medical students to use in their field education.

The group had to hire some indigenous people to carry the large load of supplies and to be their guides. They estimated it would take three days to travel from the city to the village. They covered so much ground on the first day, the group members began to think they could make it to the village in two days instead of three. However, on the morning of the second day, the guides didn't seem to be in any hurry to get moving. When it got to be 10:00 a.m., the dentist finally asked, "What's causing the delay in our travel?"

One of the guides said, "You're right, if we had left early this morning we would be at the village long before we had planned. However, it is only our bodies that have come this far. We must wait for our spirits to catch up!"<sup>5</sup>

Our Lord Jesus kept sabbath. In the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel, he tells us, "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom." (Luke 4:16) Throughout his ministry, Jesus kept sabbath — he stopped to be in the presence of God — either in the synagogue for worship or in deserted places to pray by himself or with his disciples. Our two gospel stories today tell about two different sabbath days and conflicts that arose between Jesus and the religious leaders about what Jesus was doing on the sabbath. In a nutshell, the stories seem to be about two different perspectives on the sabbath: the Pharisees defined the sabbath by citing what *wasn't* allowed; Jesus defined the sabbath by asking what is the right thing to do.

On one sabbath, the disciples were hungry, but they probably could have survived until they got back to a village and found something to eat that had been prepared before the sabbath. On another sabbath, the man with the withered hand showed up, but he probably wasn't in any danger of dying from his hand problem. Surely Jesus could have waited another twenty-four hours (even twelve hours) to heal the man. Then Jesus could have avoided all of the controversy about the sabbath, about what you *can't* do on the holy day.

But Jesus didn't get caught up in the negative definition of keeping sabbath. Instead, he placed human need and doing the right thing above our inevitable tendency to get legalistic. Did Jesus ever tell anyone — his disciples, the crowds, even the religious leaders — that the sabbath no longer mattered? Absolutely not! If anything, Jesus not only taught what was most important about keeping sabbath, but actually did

what was most important about keeping sabbath. How can we possibly debate what our answer will be when Jesus asks the religious leaders (and us also, as Calvin points out), “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”

How ironic it is, and how incredibly sad and horrifying, that the religious leaders’ answer to Jesus’ question about what is right and allowed to do on the sabbath is found in their reaction and action: “But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.” (Luke 6:11) Even as Jesus is “observing the sabbath day and keeping it holy” by doing good and saving life, the religious leaders are “doing harm on the sabbath, and seeking to destroy life.”

Sabbath time doesn’t have to be restricted to Sunday morning, but there’s something to be said about gathering with our fellow Christians “to stop and be with God.” However, as Calvin said in his sermon on that June 20 so many years ago, “we have to note that there is more and that indeed it would be a meagre thing to have a rest regarding physical activity but not involving anything else.”

As I was planning today’s worship, I came across a liturgy that included an affirmation of faith from the Heidelberg Catechism in our *Book of Confessions*. The question for the Lord’s Day 38 asks, “What does God require in the fourth commandment?” The answer is certainly in line with what Jesus teaches about and does on the sabbath: “First, that the ministry of the gospel and Christian education be maintained, and that I diligently attend church, especially on the Lord’s day, to hear the Word of God, to participate in the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian service to those in need. Second, that I cease from my evil works all the days of my life, allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.”<sup>6</sup>

After an early life of striving to find fulfillment in many different ways, Augustine finally cried out, “How long, O Lord, how long?” After he was baptized, Augustine wrote about God and our need for God’s sabbath rest, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.” God’s gift of sabbath isn’t just for the hour between 11:00 a.m. and 12 noon on Sunday morning. No, God’s gift of sabbath is for our whole life, because God’s sabbath commandment helps us fulfill the greatest commandment of all, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31)

***Let us pray: Lord, we are restless and need to find our rest in you. Lord, this day is a gift from you, not a burden. This day is an expression of love, not a demand of the law. We thank you, Lord, for the rhythm of rest in our life of work. Help us to be quiet and still that we might hear you. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>[www.portal.abc.nc.gov](http://www.portal.abc.nc.gov) and [www.ncwildlife.org](http://www.ncwildlife.org).

<sup>2</sup>[www.chick-fil-a.com](http://www.chick-fil-a.com)

<sup>3</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperOne, 1981), pp. 23, 36-37.

<sup>4</sup>From *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, "The Fifth Sermon . . . Thursday, June 20, 1555, Deuteronomy 5:12-14." Found at [www.newhopefairfax.org](http://www.newhopefairfax.org).

<sup>5</sup>Rev. Magee Iddings, "Keeping the Sabbath," at [cpcchurch.org](http://cpcchurch.org).

<sup>6</sup>"The Heidelberg Catechism, Q.103, Lord's Day 38," *Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), p. 46.