“Thank God for the Weekend!”

Mark 2:23-3:6

June 3, 2018

 Sunday’s are weird aren’t they? You never quite know what to do with them. And the function of a Sunday changes over your life time. As a little kid, it is probably like any other day, but your parents take you to church. Then when you get into your teenage years, you start to rebel a little bit. Mom, I don’t wanna go to church, its boring. I remember one Sunday I had a sleep over at a friend’s house where we had stayed up all night. I assumed that I would be allowed to sleep in. Nope, I was forced to go to church in my pajamas. Then you get to college and that is a time where a lot of kids get the freedom to do what they want. When we were moving all my stuff into the dorms before I started we were driving around town. We drove past the Presbyterian church in town and my Father said, “That’s where you’re going to church.” I thought to myself, whatever dad, I’m not gonna have time for church. For the first time in my life I had the decision whether I wanted to go or not. So I didn’t for awhile. But around the beginning of November I started to feel that I needed to go. Then I showed my face at that Presbyterian church and became a regular.

 My favorite song about Sunday (besides hymns) is “What I love about Sunday” by Craig Morgan. I’ll give you a little bit of the song. If I was at home or in the car, or singing karaoke I would sing it for you but I won’t do that here. “That’s what I love about Sunday, Sing along as the choir sways, every verse of Amazing Grace and then we shake the preacher’s hand. Go home into your blue jeans, have some chicken and some baked beans, pick a backyard football team, not do much of anything, That’s what I love about Sunday.” It happened to be on a Sunday when I saw Craig in concert at our county fair. I was on the stage crew that night. I had to help take apart the stage and get all of his stuff back into his trailers. During that I got to meet him and speak with him for a few minutes. Very cool, I even asked him about this song, he said that this song always reminds him how important Sundays are for God and family.

 It seems like in our culture that Sunday’s have lost its meaning. Among a lot of my friends, Sunday is brunch day or get rid of my hangover day. Many young parents will feel the pull of youth sports. There will be softball, soccer and other tournaments out of town on Sundays. Or else people just want to use Sunday’s as a family day because they are working so much and have too much going on during the week. Not long ago, many states in our country had blue laws. Those started in the city of Philadelphia. Because of the culture of so many factory workers, the city decided to have everything closed on Sundays. Then people could have a life. Sunday school was much more extensive in those days since public education was not universal. People would go to church to learn about the bible and also learn to read and write. It was a way to help people move up in the world. As education became more prevalent the need for such an extensive Sunday school lessened. Eventually we had a labor movement come along to give us the 40 hour work week. It could be said that God created the weekend, but we made it better. The blue laws started to fade away. In North Carolina you could not buy alcohol until noon, then last year that went away. In Minnesota all liquor stores were closed on Sunday until last year. The last blue law they have in place is not being able to buy a car. Wally is that the case here?

 Many people have weekends off but many do not. We think of the working poor. Many are working several jobs just to make ends meet. Often their schedules mean they must work Sundays or even every day of the week. So what does Sabbath mean to them? And what does Sabbath mean to us when not everyone can have it like we do?

 We are back in Mark again after some time in John. Mark begins with the baptism of Jesus and not the birth. Then he was driven into the wilderness. He emerges unscathed and calls his first four disciples. Then he heals many sick people and develops a following. Then he heals the paralytic. There he says to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. There he gets questioned by some scribes. There the opposition slowly begins against Jesus. Jesus is presuming to speak and act for God. He is violating the most important boundary of all, the one between God and what God had created. The man is healed but the skepticism begins. Then Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. He gets into an argument with the Pharisees about fasting. This brings us to today. The opposition to what Jesus is doing slowly builds.

 They were walking through a field and the disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees say to Jesus, Look why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath. It wasn’t illegal to eat on the Sabbath for people ate on the Sabbath all the time. The problem was the preparation. They were harvesting grain on the Sabbath. The problem is probably more for us modern readers of the text. The dispute of what is legal and illegal on the Sabbath was always happening. Rabbis have often argued that the Messiah would come only if all Israel would keep a single Sabbath perfectly. Sooner the Messiah would come than would we agree. The Israelites are not a monolithic group. There are disagreements. Some scholars have said that Jesus was a Pharisee. So this might have been an intra-Pharisee argument. This scene made Jews think, was what I do on the Sabbath appropriate. Most of us know very little about Sabbath observance and few of us could manage it. As I talked about earlier, we don’t do a very good job. We almost take pride in our non-observance. We may go to church but then we are off to the packer game. We have to get the lawn mowed, the porch painted and then take the kids to their friend’s house. We think that those activities are “resting in its own way”.

 One thing that seems to go unnoticed is that the disciples aren’t picking their own grain. There is no reaction from the farmer. You would think he would be quite upset. A whole group of men trampling through the farmer’s wheat field. That poor farmer. Anyway after Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees, he responds, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the House of God, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone but the priests to eat and he gave it to his companions. The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” We can see from the flow of Mark’s story that Jesus engages in a series of pointless offenses. He could have waited until the Sabbath was over to heal people. He defends his disciples careless trampling of the field and the threshing of the grain. He compares his disciples to David of all people. Why does Jesus keep going out of his way to pick fights?

 Then we see Jesus entering the synagogue. A group of people gathered just like we are today. Everybody is there, the Pharisees, Jesus, the disciples and your average joes. They are all gathered to remember what Sabbath means. That God promises more than just weary workday, after workday, after workday then death. That when God delivered them from slavery, everyone was to have Sabbath. The king, the rich, the poor, the immigrant, even your slave. Everyone gets a day off. The man with the withered hand is there. He is a part of this community. But this guy only has one working hand. So he isn’t quite there. Think of India today or other cultures that eat with their hands. Your right hand is your public hand. The one you eat with, the one you shake hands with. Your left hand is your private hand. This would be your bathroom hand. You never use this hand to gesture unless you are going to insult someone. The left hand is never used for eating, not even placed on the table. Lacking a public hand, the man would have been in isolation.

 They are watching Jesus. It doesn’t say who they are. It could be the Pharisees or it could be everybody at the synagogue. Jesus had been unpredictable of late, he needed some watching. So he gives them something to watch. Come here. Is it lawful to do good or do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill? Silence. We should expect that. Would anyone actually answer with evil? Jesus takes their Silence as hard heartedness. He gets angry, there’s really no reason to be angry. He tells the man to stretch out his hand. Then it was restored. The man was probably very surprised. Maybe not quite a pleasant one. Sure his hand was healed and he would be able to function in community. But now he would forever be the “guy who got healed on the Sabbath”. Nothing would have been lost if Jesus had just waited until the next day. Maybe Jesus could have invited everyone back to the synagogue later. It would have been a great testament to God’s power. Jesus picking fights he didn’t need, probably the man with the hand didn’t need it either.

 The last line of the scripture doesn’t help us much either. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians on how to destroy him. This is sort of like the US and Britain Allying with the Soviet Union during the war. These are two groups that do not like each other whatsoever. What we have here is a strange passage with some musings on the Sabbath. Perhaps the folks that are opposing Jesus don’t think that he is doing this the right way. That he is making people angry for no reason. Maybe the Pharisees also want to follow the work of John the Baptist. They think that Jesus is getting in the way. Perhaps this is why they conspire against him. Too many sermons on this passage depict the Pharisees as fire-breathing traditionalists. This is the way we have always done it people. That is too easy. They were also invested in the kingdom of God. They just didn’t see it the way that Jesus did.

 So back to Sabbath. What does it mean for us today? God created the Sabbath for humanity. This was meant to be a pleasurable break. That we should take a break and relax. There is so much pressure in our country to work, work, work. Make more money, buy more stuff. That’s not what we are called to. When we don’t rest, things catch up with us. We get sick, we loose mental clarity. This is why God created the Sabbath. So that we may worship. That we may spend time with our family. That we can take in God’s great creation. Let’s remember to do that. We won’t regret not making one more sale, winning one more case, preaching one more sermon, whatever it may be.

 Let’s also look out for those who cannot Sabbath. Those who live paycheck to paycheck and one missed shift could lead to eviction. Or the choice of do I pay my rent or my heating bill. Advocate for policies that let all spend time with family and all to Sabbath. If you own a business, make sure folks get time off. Sure you can expect your employees to work hard, but having rest makes employees more productive and happy. God knew about that before the experts did.

 This isn’t supposed to be a guilt sermon. Not trying to bemoan the rise of youth sports and brunch. Just a reminder to be grateful for what God has created in the Sabbath. And remember to do it. Let us rest in God. Amen.

**Mark 2:23-3:6**

**Pronouncement about the Sabbath**

23 One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’25And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ 27Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

**The Man with a Withered Hand**

3Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ 4Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. 5He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.