

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

How is your weekend going so far? Is it restful? My weekend is Friday and Saturday, since I work on Sunday. On Friday I worked on painting my house, and would have continued that yesterday, if it hadn't been for the rain. So, instead we spent some time straightening up and organizing our garage. We even managed to get rid of some stuff. So all in all it wasn't a particularly restful weekend, but it was nice to make progress on both of those projects. You will have noticed that Sabbath is the theme of our first and Gospel readings today, and you have just heard me confess that I am not very good at observing a day of rest. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one. We're in the post-Pentecost season now, when we consider what life looks like on this side of the resurrection. How shall we now live in light of Jesus' death and resurrection? There are three things I want to raise up from these readings. 1. Sabbath is a gift, 2. we have tendency to turn gifts into burdens, and 3. the Sabbath is for everyone. It is mercy for all.

First, the Sabbath is a gift. Our first reading this morning is from Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible. Deuteronomy is the Greek name for this book. It means "Second Law." It's called this because the first time the law was given was back in Exodus as the Israelites were leaving Egypt. Now in Deuteronomy it's 40 years later and they're getting ready to enter the Promised Land. So Moses reminds them of God's law, God's instruction, to prepare them for their new life in their new home. Our reading is the entirety of the Third Commandment – remember the Sabbath and keep it holy (or special.) The Sabbath is to be a day of rest. No work is allowed. Why? Two reasons are given: First, because God rested on the seventh day after creating the world. If it's good enough for God, it's good enough for God's people. And second, Moses reminds the people, "You were slaves." You know what it is like never to have a break. You were slaves, but you're not any more. God rescued you from the burden of slavery. So don't continue to live your lives as if you were still slaves.

Second, we tend to turn gifts into burdens. This first reading is the background to our Gospel text. We're back in Mark now after a long break for Lent and Easter, back to Jesus bringing the Kingdom, or the "Reign of God" near. This Gospel reading is about the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over keeping the Sabbath. The Pharisees were very strict in their moral and ritual practices. They had rules for what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. You could only walk so far. You couldn't harvest or prepare food. So when they see Jesus' disciples plucking grain and eating it, they accuse Jesus of not being a proper follower of God's law. (Now I want you to remember my rule about Pharisees: If you hear a story that has Pharisees in it and you don't see yourself in the Pharisees, you're probably missing the point.)

The Pharisees' operating principle is that it is what they do for God that really matters. The better and more strictly they follow the Law, they think, the more they are made right with God. And don't we fall into that same way of thinking, even we good Lutherans who should know better? I mean, here we are this morning, keeping the Lord's Day holy, while so many others are doing God knows what. And so begins our slide down that slippery slope of dividing the world into good people and bad people. Some deserve help when they need it, good people like us, and others don't. The Pharisees are proud to be among the "good people" who do what God requires, and they look down on those who don't keep the law like they do. But Jesus tells the Pharisees that they've got it backwards. The law, particularly this law, was meant as a gift,

not a burden. It was meant to relieve burdens, not add more. And certainly not to be used as weapon against others.

That brings us to the third point: Sabbath is for everyone, and it is a means of God's mercy. You see, the Sabbath isn't just a matter of personal piety. Sabbath is meant for everyone, and it serves the common good. God is as clear as can be about this. Sabbath is not just to give *you* a break. It's also for your children and your animals. And it is for resident aliens – the immigrants, migrants, and refugees in your midst. It is even for slaves, those whose labor you benefit from. Everyone needs a break from work. Everyone. Remember, God says, that you were slaves! You were foreigners! And the only reason you're not still slaves and foreigners in a foreign land is because God had mercy and rescued you. So you also ought to show mercy.

So what does all of this have to do with us today, we who are not Israelites? We don't have slaves any more, and very few of us have beasts of burden. In the United States we don't have Sabbath laws any more, but we do have laws about how many hours a person can work at a job. We have 8-hour workdays and 40-hour work weeks – unless you're a doctor or a nurse and work 12-hour shifts. But then you work only a 36-hour week. Doctors and nurses earn a living wage, though. Unfortunately, we don't ensure that all jobs pay a living wage. There are many people who have to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet because a single full-time job isn't enough. Those people are not getting a Sabbath. Or a break.

The question before us throughout the post-Pentecost season is, "How shall we as Christians now live in light of Jesus' death and resurrection, in light of our own salvation by the grace of God?" Today we ask, how shall we live in light of God's merciful desire for all to have Sabbath rest? How shall we live in light of the coming Kingdom of God? In God's reign things are meant to be different from the way the world has been working. Because the way the world has been working is oppressive, dysfunctional, and hopeless for so many. If we're not experiencing it that way for ourselves that just means that we are the fortunate ones, the ones for whom the world as it is works just fine. And so we might not really want it to change. We might not want to pay more for goods and services so that others might earn a living wage. I mean, I'm already paying a lot for my cool tech gadgets, my iPhone and my computer, for instance, made abroad by cheap labor in countries where labor laws don't exist. I would certainly rather not pay more. And that makes me part of the problem, resistant to change – like those Pharisees who went off and looked for a way to have Jesus killed.

Look, I'm not an economist. And I'm not here to tell you what to do. I may be looking at things all wrong when it comes to practical solutions for the complicated problems we face. But I am here to say that the Jesus who liberates us from the power of sin, death, and evil by his death and resurrection, and who claims us as his own in Holy Baptism, calls me, and you too, to repentance – to a change of heart and mind, to think not just about what is best for us, but what is best for all people, in our community, our nation, and our world. Our baptismal vocation leads us to ask how we can show mercy, just as we have been shown mercy by God,

How we respond to that call depends a lot on what and whom we trust. Will we cast our lot with the world as it is, or with the future that God envisions for us, that reign of God that God is working to bring about even now in the midst of the world as it is? I'm hoping and praying for the latter, since faith is God's work in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and since God is ever faithful and merciful. May it be so. May the gift of faith transform us to be active in love on behalf of those who most need mercy. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.