Pentecost 2B. June 2, 2024. Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.

First Reading: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded
you. [13]For six days you shall labor and do all your work. [14]But the seventh day is a
sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or
your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of
your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female
slave may rest as well as you. [15]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; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the
sabbath day.

Alternate version of the story Genesis 2:1-3

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. [2]And on the
seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh
day from all the work that he had done. [3]So God blessed the seventh day and
hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in
creation.

The Gospel: Mark 2:23-3:6

One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “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, 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.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come

forward." Then 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. He 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. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The Sermon

I don't know how it was here, but "back in the day" where I lived stores were all closed on Sunday. "Back in the day" in some families there could be no movies or card-playing on Sunday. In some kosher Jewish homes today, from Friday sundown until Saturday sundown, there is no cooking, no turning on or off of lights or appliances, no driving of cars, nothing done on the Sabbath that can be called "work".

For most of us, this is almost incomprehensible.

But when Jesus walked this earth, keeping the Sabbath was expected. It honored the 7th day of the Creation story, the day God rested. One day per week was to be spent enjoying life, worshiping the Lord, and putting aside all work. Fighting was only allowed for self-defense.

There was always debate as to what was considered "work." For example, Jesus' disciples plucking a few grains of wheat to eat wasn't really work, but it came close to harvesting, which WAS work, so it was a slippery slope to breaking the commandment.

But the main idea of the Sabbath was to make life joyful and at least bearable for people who worked hard. And most of us today work hard.

Like most of us, I don't keep a regular Sabbath – to my detriment. But, just IMAGINE what keeping a Sabbath might mean….

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Blessed are the families who come to church and Godly Play in the morning and spend the afternoon enjoying God's good creation. But there is always laundry and cooking, always a bit of shopping, always email to attend to: 7 days a week.

It's like the seminar that teaches us how to take care of ourselves. Most of us know exactly what we "should" do, but the question arises, "Why don't you do it?" I have a beautiful, wooded garden. I work hard to help maintain it. Why don't I take a walk in it – just for pleasure? I may work on Sundays, but why don't I take another day off on a regular basis?

Enough already! Guilty as charged.

But what about the Gospel story today?

Two things stick out to me. The man with the withered hand. And the grief Jesus feels about the hard hearts of the people challenging him.

It was a dramatic encounter. Jesus walks into the synagogue on the Sabbath. His detractors are watching him to see if he will offend the Sabbath laws. Jesus sees a man with a hand that made it impossible for that man to work.

Jesus asks, "Is keeping the Sabbath for helping people or leaving them helpless?"

Stony silence.

Mark tells us Jesus was both furious and deeply saddened. Jesus desires healing and wholeness for the man with the withered hand, as well as for the people who were looking for ways to conspire against him. Seems it was easier for him to heal the man's hand than it was to heal the hard hearts of the detractors who would now have more reason to destroy Jesus if he offended the Sabbath laws.

If Jesus were here today, would he seek to heal our diseases? I think yes. We are also blessed with doctors who do that as well as they can.

But more importantly, would Jesus seek to heal our hardened hearts? Our hearts are hard when we pull into ourselves and put our own interests above those of others. Our hearts are hardened when we make an idol of doctrines, practices, opinions or political parties.

For example, the Book of Common prayer states that baptized Christians are welcome to the Eucharist. But we have opened Jesus' table of holy communion and forgiveness to <u>everyone</u> who wishes to receive this gift. We break an Episcopalian "rule" for the life-giving benefit to a person who might not be

baptized yet – just as Jesus broke the Sabbath "rule" by healing a man's disabled hand.

Once again, God's undeserved love, the blessing we call grace, triumphs. As always in Jesus' world, forgiveness triumphs over sin, love triumphs over division, wholeness triumphs over the brokenness we sometimes seem to prefer.

Our hearts are softened for healing when we notice and take joy in comments like these that were shared recently at an interfaith meeting in Skagit County.

Lora, an indigenous elder shared a story about how the creator gave each tribe a unique language, yet also gave us the capacity to cooperate and respect each other.

Tony, who works with youth affected by gang violence, talked about how much we need each other to help heal the harms we've done to one another.

Keiko shared how Japanese-Americans whose families were incarcerated during WWII are now standing in solidarity with refugees held in detention at our border.

Roman Catholic priest Paul talked about the teaching of respect for the image of God in each person.

Maggie envisioned a world in which we bring out the best in each other and create the world we long for.

Charis reminded her listeners that everyone is our neighbor, without exception.

Miranda shared her experience of working at the Food Bank – unconditionally accepting people wherever they are in life.

We can find such powerful stories right here in this congregation as well.

We may have different visions of how to make the world a better place, and still honor, respect, and like one another. Each person at that Skagit County meeting chose to light a candle of hope rather than cursing the hard-heartedness of others.[1]

The Holy Spirit blesses us with softened hearts so that we can accept forgiveness, so that we can bless others.

[1] From Paths to Understanding, Terry Kyllo, at a public event at the Lincoln Theater in Mount Vernon May 2024

One of the most beautiful stories that the Gospel-writer John remembered shows us how Jesus broke through all kinds of rules to hear, respect, and heal a Samaritan woman.

At that memorable encounter at the town's well, Jesus engaged a foreign woman in theological conversation that led to her well-being and to the well-being of her entire town. He overcame the rules against talking with women, against talking with foreigners, against accepting sustenance from an assumed "unclean" source. And we tell and retell that story – because it shows that love, kindness and compassion can overcome any rules that would exclude, harm or weaken another.

That's honoring the Sabbath. That's something we as followers of Jesus and as citizens might carefully consider. That's something we might give thanks for, because otherwise we'd all remain mired in our self-interest rather than engaged in the well-being of our sisters and brothers on this earth.

Richard Rohr reminds us, "Jesus taught that it's all about love, and in the end, that's all we're all going to be judged for. Did we love? Did we love life? Did we love ourselves? Did we love God, and did we love our neighbor?" [2]
And to do this, we trust God's word of love to and for us: Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Outtake:

"From the Hebrew Bible, we learn that keeping the Sabbath day holy—ordering it—involves corporate worship and thanksgiving to the God who made us and abstaining from busy practices that take our attention away from God. Further, we are to allow and encourage others in our charge to rest from labor, too. While keeping the Sabbath may feel strange, it is living faithfully to God. We slow or

[2] Richard Rohr, from "Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations from the Center for Action and Contemplation, May 26-31, 2024

stop our consumption and distraction, instead worshipping and trusting God, who has delivered us and our forebears time and time again….

"…in our gospel reading for today, our Lord demonstrates his lordship over all things, including the sabbath itself. Jesus and his disciples disregard the political and religious laws and customs – provocative actions. And perhaps Jesus could have found a more polite way to have the conversation with the Pharisees. But he forces the point: faithfulness to the sabbath is not faithfulness to a rule book but to the God who institutes the sabbath. Our devotion should always be directed to God, and while that often includes faithfulness to God's church, we must be wise and discern if and when they are ever at odds." The Rev. Randy Steinmann, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Neptune, NJ.