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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
2nd Sunday after Pentecost/Year B/Proper 4
June 3, 2018
Text: Mark 2:23-3:6

After a seemingly long hiatus, we finally return to the gospel of Year B-Mark! By the second chapter in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been quite busy. He has been baptized, driven out into the desert and dealt with Satan. He has begun travelling throughout Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God and a message of repentance. He has called a few people to follow him as disciples and because of his increasing reputation, huge crowds seek and follow him out of curiosity and need as anyone who is sick, lame, paralyzed or possessed by demons is cured from their dis-ease. Jesus does all these things swiftly and with authority in Mark's gospel and it does not take long before he ruffles the feathers of the local religious leaders. The Pharisees and scribes perceive this Jesus of Nazareth to be a threat to their so-called prestige, power and authority for they lauded themselves as the ultimate teachers and keepers of the Law. This Jesus seemed to hold the Law and the Sabbath in little regard in their eyes. While they kept the rules, Jesus seemed to discard them in favor of humanity.

No one had given Jesus permission to teach in a synagogue and on the Sabbath day, no less, but then he exorcised a demon! Who was he to speak with authority and command unclean spirits? On another occasion, Jesus cured a paralyzed man and pronounced that the man's sins were forgiven! Wasn't this blasphemy? Then Jesus caused a stir when he called Levi, the tax collector, to be one of his disciples. People like him were collaborators with Rome, a traitor to be reckoned with. And on top it all, Jesus accepted Levi's invitation to dinner! How could Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? And when the Pharisees asked Jesus why he and his disciples were not fasting like John's disciples, well, they were just beside themselves. Which brings us to today's lesson that we don't hear very often.

The Pharisees have caught Jesus' disciples plucking grain to munch on as they walked along. Ordinarily this would not be a blip on the radar except that they happened to do it on the Sabbath. Jesus doesn't stop them and therefore gets the blame. Later, he heals a man with a withered hand, again something he does on the holy day. Again, his actions rile those who now plot to do him harm. Was Jesus doing these things just to get under their skin?

Or was it because (as we are often told in the Gospels) that Jesus knew what humankind, especially the religious leaders, had in their hearts and minds. And when people got caught up in other things, Jesus had something else on *his* mind and he said it.

Indeed, in these teachable moments in today's gospel, as Jesus had something deeper in mind. His goal was not to get rid of the Sabbath but to put the Sabbath back into its proper context and show its true purpose. Jesus reminded his critics that the Sabbath was not a day in which God's people were to be burdened with a list of regulations governing every detail of their conduct. The Sabbath was given by God to be a day of rest, a time of refreshment-just as God took rest on the seventh day of creation in the Book of Genesis. The Sabbath was also meant to be a day to remember God's presence with praise and thanksgiving. Certainly, God's commandment, "*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*", did not prevent people from picking grain so that they could eat. This is why Jesus said to them, "*...the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.*" And the commandment certainly did not prevent people being made whole. And this is why Jesus called the man with the withered hand to come forward while the religious leaders looked on. "*Stretch out your hand.*" Jesus said and the man's hand was restored.

It is two thousand years later and what are we as Christians, to make of this gospel? What purpose might it serve in our ever busy, fast-paced, consumer lifestyle?

On one hand we are to be reminded of the gift that is the Lord's Day. For many that means being in tuned with *ritual*- attending church, being present in our spiritual community where we hear God's Word and receive the sacraments, and give thanks to God for God's presence in our lives. It is also a day set aside (if we are lucky) to be *still and rest* our minds, bodies, and spirits from all the things that pull and tug at us during the week. Of course that is easier said than done these days.

Most of us can remember Sundays as they used to be. I can remember huge Sunday breakfasts with Mom's homemade biscuits and after the dishes were done my brothers and I would sometimes go out into the back yard to play or watch television or I would draw and paint for hours-grateful to be in my own little world. Sometimes, during the summer months Daddy would load us all into the car and we would go to the zoo or to Grandma's or take long leisurely rides to no

place in particular. Then we would come home and maybe take a nap and before long it was suppertime. But *none* of this ever happened if first we didn't go to church. Being Roman Catholics way back then (and this is before Saturday evenings counted as Sunday) meant that *every* Sunday one went to church unless you were close to death. In my house, if you were too sick to go to church, you were too sick to go anywhere else so don't even try to fake it. In fact, one was supposed to be really sick in order to stay at home or face the pangs of hell, so said the nuns that taught us.

Sundays also meant that chores were done on Saturdays and you had better make sure that you had ALL of your ingredients for Sunday dinner or whatever else. There was no such thing as stores being open for anybody to go in to buy what they should have gotten on Saturday. You were just plain out of luck. I remember one Sunday Mom said that she planned to prepare a particular dish but when we sat down to eat, it wasn't what our mouths were set for. She wasn't the kind to go over or send us over to the neighbor's to "borrow" anything. If we didn't have it, we just didn't have it.

Those lazy and laid back Sabbath Sundays are now just a memory as Sundays are now filled with everything there is. And I do mean *everything!* Unless of course we are speaking of Goedeker's where they are open "every day except Sundays!"

Earlier in the week I came by a wonderful essay by theologian Barbara Brown Taylor who wrote an essay entitled "Letting God run things without my help." She wrote about her experience as a parish minister and said in part, "When I was a parish minister there was no hope of remembering the Sabbath, at least not in the Hebrew sense of resting from my labors. If I wanted a Sabbath, I had to make it a moveable feast." (Ain't that the truth?) She continued by explaining how after she left parish ministry things were remarkably different. (Hmmm...) Taylor then concluded her essay with this: "Week by week, I keep reaching for the gift God has offered me-the one human beings are so reluctant to accept that God made it a commandment... Once (she writes) I attended a funeral a black Baptist church, the preacher consoled us by telling us that the person we loved had gone on to that place where every day is Sunday. At the time, I believe I flinched. Now I know what he meant. We do not have to wait until we die to experience resurrection. God is ready whenever we are, with a weekly rehearsal for those who are willing to lie back in God's arms."*

Yet, on the other hand, the Lord's Day is not just about lying back and being still (if one can) but also being *refreshed* so that eyes, minds, and hearts are cleared and opened in order to be about God's work in the world.

Maybe three or four summers ago someone in our ECW sent an email. And the email contained some wording that we have used on our church sign: 'Enter to worship. Depart to serve.' And this is the point that Jesus makes.

In the gospel the Pharisees only saw their self-righteous religiosity. But Jesus saw the bigger picture, a greater perspective that went further than endless rules and regulations. Compassion, service, and the renewal of life were to come first, Sabbath or no. And so on days of Sabbath, demons were exorcised and it was okay to snack on nature's granola and a man with a withered hand came away with not one but two working hands.

Where do we see the needs today? Who needs to be fed? Who and what needs to be healed? To be restored?

As another theologian put it: "We need a re-commitment to a Sabbath life, a Sabbath perspective. Not just reasons to take a long weekend or plan that long overdue vacation. A Sabbath perspective that reorients us to enter into Monday and a new week looking for ways in which we might renew and restore the lives of others. Keeping the Sabbath, you see, is not just about your rest, but that of those all around you."**

Let it be so in all of us. Amen.

**"Letting God run things without my help"* by Barbara Brown Taylor.

***"A Sabbath Perspective"* by Karoline Lewis for Pentecost 2B, Ordinary09, Year B, 'Dear Working Preacher.'