

Labor Day in the Church
September 5, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: John 5:1-18

What do you have planned today? What do you do on most Sundays?

Do you go home and spend the afternoon – after coming to worship, of course – quietly in an arm chair reading scripture? Do pray in a closet? Do you spend quiet hours reflecting on your life and renewing your repentance?

Or, perhaps, you approach Sundays restfully, as Andy and Barney did in Mayberry and as generations did in other places across the South. Go to church, eat a big lunch, spend the afternoon on the front porch, wave to neighbors, hum and sing hymns softly while strumming the guitar, maybe take a nap and then go over to Thelma Lou's and watch some TV.

And what about the subject of work? Here in the year 2010, we are not THAT far beyond the time when Biblical admonitions about commerce and working on the Sabbath still shaped life. If memory serves, it has been within only the last 25 years that major retailers such as Belk made the decision to open for business on Sundays. One fast food place, Chick-fil-A, still closes its stores on Sundays.

On the other hand, 25 years is even longer than it sounds in relation to the hyper-acceleration in the pace of life. Globalization, technology, the corporate push for productivity and the effective end of the 5-day work week: They all mean that many people never really unplug from work. The idea of setting aside a day of rest seems like an old-fashioned luxury, something our modern world just doesn't allow. Or so we might tell ourselves.

Last week in my sermon, we focused on the story of Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath. But we didn't really dwell on the issues related to the Sabbath. So I've been thinking about that topic. Then, along comes, Labor Day tomorrow, a holiday that deals with the issue of rest from labor in a completely secular way.

It's ironic, isn't it? In today's text and others, Christ reinterpreted the Sabbath, releasing his followers from its legalistic requirements. Then, Congress puts a law on the books that mandates a day of rest.

So, on this Labor Day weekend, I thought we might spend a few minutes thinking about how all of this intersects and what it all might mean for those of us who seek to live the Christian life in an increasingly secular world.

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First, a little background.

The word Sabbath is Hebrew for an “intentional time of rest.” It echoes throughout the Old Testament. In the second chapter of Genesis, God rests on the seventh day of creation. In Exodus, we find God’s instruction to Moses for God’s people to do the same. Because work on the seventh day was forbidden, the people of Israel had to gather twice the daily amount of grain, which probably meant that the people were happy to have the next day off.

Through the centuries, God’s people as the nation of Israel enshrined the Sabbath more and more deeply into law. God’s people were not to kindle a fire nor were the retail shops to do business. The book of Numbers even includes a story of a man being stoned to death because he gathered sticks on the Sabbath. In the days of the great prophets, when God’s people strayed in all sorts of ways, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah all scolded the people. They called them to return to the strict observance of Sabbath laws.

So it was headline news when Jesus, the New Covenant in flesh and blood, brought a radically new perspective. The gospels include multiple stories of Jesus very purposefully doing things that the laws of Old Covenant prohibited. He permitted his disciples to pick the heads of grain as they walked along, saying their hunger was more important than a few rules. More than anything, he healed on the Sabbath, women and men with all manner of disease and handicaps.

He showed in the most poignant ways how the Jewish religious officials had become so bound up in their rules that they lost perspective. Twice Jesus pointed out how the rules favored beasts of burden over people. In Mark, he said, “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.” But the clincher was when Jesus said he was Lord, therefore Lord even of the Sabbath and how it should be observed.

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In its own unique way, the Gospel of John puts a fine point on all of the debate. As John does throughout the gospel, he tells the facts of the story, which is what we heard in our first reading. Then, he reports how Christ interprets those facts in a new light.

As we heard, Christ notices a man so weak he cannot even muster the strength to ease himself into the healing waters of a bubbling spring on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Overlooking the pool altogether, Jesus skips ahead. He puts it to the man straight: Do you want be healed? Then he tells the man to stand up, pick up his mat and walk.

When the religious officials of the day see the man carrying his mat down the street, they find out that Jesus healed him. They don't care about the miracle that has occurred, the physical liberation of this man who had been ill for 38 years. They don't even care about busting the man for carrying his mat, a sure Sabbath no-no.

Instead, like Barney Fife rushing to catch a jaywalker, waving his ticket book in the air, they think they have Jesus nailed by the law for sure. It was legal, you see, to heal on the Sabbath *if* it meant saving a life. But healing a person after 38 years, well, that would have to wait for another day. So they moved in for an even more public persecution of this man who called himself the son of God.

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Gail O'Day, the new dean of the school of divinity at Wake Forest University, gets right to the heart of the matter in her commentary on the Gospel of John.

What's happening here, O'Day says, is that Jesus and the religious officials are talking right past each other. Jesus and the man he healed are talking about one thing – specifically, that the man has been healed and how he should respond with his life. The religious officials, on the other hand, are too busy thumbing through their rulebook. For them, it's all about the Sabbath. They fail to see that a man who has suffered gravely for 38 years has been healed. They fail to consider in their hearts who this Jesus might truly be.

God has come into the world. The old has passed away and everything is new. From that day on, every day is the Sabbath, every day is a day that God in Jesus is at work in the world, healing the sick, releasing the captive, helping stooped women throw off their burdens and stand up straight. But both parties to the conversation talk right past each other.

Does that remind you of something? Does it echo what we hear in today's political dialogue in America – one extreme view facing off with those whose perspective seems, to them anyway, to threaten their very way of life?

For the Jews in the Gospel of John, that was what was at stake, really. Yes, the Old Covenant was rooted in law. But the law was an expression of the very identity of the

community. The Jews couldn't separate the laws from their way of life and their self understanding. The law came to mean something in and of itself, rather than a reminder of God's promise, the very promise that underwrote their adoption by God.

Sometimes in the public debate today, we hear someone say: "We are a nation of laws." Often, it's a response to an appeal based on common sense or compassion, or simply seeking to deal realistically with a complex major issue, such as immigration. Now, to be clear, there is no excuse for some of the harsh divisiveness and flat-out, deceptive distortion of the facts that some are guilty of today.

But, deep down, each of us has that instinct in us, the need for a standard that is durable, non-negotiable, unshakeable, something we can count on NOT to change when all else seems to be whirling around us.

Today, some in the political debate look to our nation's constitution for that kind of crystal clarity, as if millions of women and men, including our nation's Supreme Court, the head of the third branch of government, had not spent the last two centuries seeking to interpret and sometimes amend the Constitution because it is a living document.

This tendency to find something that is rigid goes beyond politics and the courts. We in the church have our share of fights where we throw the rule book at each other. We do it with scripture. Some families of faith insist that everything in the Bible is literally true, that things happened just as it says. But we have other books we throw at each other. In our denomination, we've gotten pretty good at that with the Book of Order, our church's constitution.

In the sanctified halls of baseball, it's the debate about whether umpires need the help of instant replay. It happens wherever free will, human creativity and a desire for progress comes in contact with good principles of organization.

But all that is of this earth. All of it deals with our mortal flaws and limitations. The stakes in the fifth chapter of John are much higher. Jesus is making his greatest "I am" statement of them all: I am the son of God, Lord of all, including the Sabbath.

And in one sense, we are not that different from the religious authorities of his day. They missed the point, in part, because they were watching the clock and the calendar. They jumped on Jesus for not waiting until sundown to heal the man. We check our calendar and say, "I will make time next month to think about whether Jesus might be the son of God and what that might mean for my life. Right now, I just have too many other pressing matters to attend to."

“You say a man who was paralyzed for 38 years stood up, picked up his mat and walked down the street? Well, that’s nice. Excuse me, that’s my mobile phone. I need to take this call. ”

“You say he was healed by a man named Jesus, and this Jesus said he will work to heal souls as long as his Father is working? Gosh, look at the time. You’ll just have to excuse me. I have a lunch meeting.”

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Once the fracas between the Jews and Jesus begins, the story almost loses sight of the man who was healed. The Jews press him to turn over Jesus. But the man honestly isn’t sure who Jesus was or where he went after the healing. They move on. He slips into the crowd.

Jesus finds the man a little while later, in the temple, worshipping God. Hours, maybe minutes, after being healed from a disease that immobilized his body, what does the man do? Does he run up and down the street drawing attention to himself and his new found mobility? Does he go find a girl? Does he go to the bar and buy a round of drinks? No, he doesn’t even go find his friends or family to throw a party. He goes to worship.

That’s a pretty good response when, all of a sudden, nothing is familiar, when the old has passed away, the world seems a little uncertain but also fresh with new possibilities. Jesus told the people that day that he would work as long as his father is working. That means they are both still at it, together with the Holy Spirit.

So, like the man who was healed and went to worship, we come here as our first act on the first day of the week. We come to worship, to witness to God’s healing touch. And in Christ, through the Spirit, God meets us here.

Our triune God still asks, as Jesus said that day, “Do you want to be made well?”

Christ still hosts the table you see spread out before you, inviting us all, saying, “I am the bread of life.”

Jesus still says -- on Labor Day, on the Sabbath and every other day -- “Come all who are weary, and I (I !) will give you rest.”

Amen.