

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10  
Hebrews 12: 18 – 29  
Luke 13: 10 – 17  
14 Pentecost Proper 16

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### **“Church Lives Matter”**

A colleague of mine publishes a list every August of all the congregations in the Diocese of Olympia by order of the number of people in each congregation who attend Sunday services on average in the preceding year. So, I just got his list for 2015. ASA or average Sunday attendance is one of those common metrics that churches collect and report to their bishops and to the larger church. Having a simple number like that, rank-ordered from largest to smallest invites more questions than it answers, but it does make for interesting speculations about the importance of the Sabbath day these days. Saint Barnabas ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> out of about 92 congregations with an ASA for 2015 of 114 people. Our ASA has gone down in the past 3-4 years from a high of 142 to our most recent 114. That’s not why I am retiring. But it is a decline over previous years and should make us address the question of why fewer people are in church on any given Sunday.

Our Puritan fathers and mothers took religion very seriously. In many ways, they tried to create a “theocracy,” that is a government based on one religion’s principles. The Puritans had particularly strong views of keeping Sabbath – the honoring of the first day of the new creation. And for many years, the Puritan view of Sunday held firm in our country. The so-called “blue laws” prohibited many secular activities on Sundays. Almost nothing other than church was tolerated by the Puritans. Sunday was a stern day devoted to lamenting sins and begging God for forgiveness. One of the stories about the origins of Boston baked beans is that the pot was put into the banked fire on Saturday night and thus the cooked beans could be eaten on Sunday without breaking any Sabbath prohibitions about work. Many of these prohibitions lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when there were still laws prohibiting playing cards, fixing wagon wheels, or playing baseball on Sundays. In Texas, until 1985, there was no selling of pots, pans, or washing machines on Sundays – which might explain some things about Texas. Even to this day, there are some states that prohibit the sale of automobiles on Sunday. For those who want to live where the Sabbath is enforced the most, moving to Bergen County, New Jersey is recommended.

So, here is Jesus, getting challenged by the religious leaders for healing on the Sabbath. Luke doesn’t have Jesus making 120 gallons of wine on the Sabbath; Luke has Jesus healing a long-suffering woman on the Sabbath. If only I could do that sort of thing every Sunday – it would be standing room only around here. The miracle of choice is a healing miracle – the making of someone whole again, of restoring someone to full membership in society. The religious leaders think they have caught Jesus in a trap by accusing him of violating the letter of the law about the strict observance of the Sabbath. This public shaming of Jesus is intentional and is designed to lower Jesus in the eyes of village where he was teaching. Of course, Jesus turns the whole story around and shows who has honor and who does not. What greater value of the Sabbath is there than someone is healed by her presence in synagogue? Being in church is supposed to heal us and make us whole. Being in God’s’ presence is supposed to make us feel better. What better

sermon could Jesus preach than to heal an obviously impaired person and return that person whole and healthy to her community?

So, is Jesus saying that all Sabbath laws are silly? Is Jesus on the side of those who think Sabbath is an outmoded concept designed to make us feel sinful and bored at the same time? Is Jesus taking on all the “kill-joys” of the world who want everyone to be as miserable as they appear to be? Would Jesus buy a car on Sunday?

We should note that Jesus offers healing to a sick person. Jesus uses his gifts to help another person end her illness. Could we imagine Jesus saying to that woman, “Come back tomorrow?” or “See my assistant for an appointment, today is my day off?” Who among us would not do what Jesus did – help the woman right now? When we are presented with someone in dire need, and we have the capacity to help that person, we don’t look at our union contract to ask, “Is this in my job description?” We help as best we can as soon as we can. But we act on behalf of the needs of another, not for our benefit.

So, perhaps the real value of coming to church on Sunday is not just for your own spiritual benefit but for the benefit of the person near you. Perhaps our presence helps someone else. Perhaps our faith strengthens the faith of the person behind us who feels hopeless in the face of difficulties or who is feeling unloved or ignored or just simply tired of it all. We say often that it’s not about us; but being a faithful participant in community worship might be both about us and about the person we don’t know who listens as we sing, as we pray, as we take Holy Communion, and, by our presence, is brought closer to God and to that peace which passes all understanding. It’s certainly true for me. I draw enormous strength and peace by worshipping with you all as a community of faith. I sense your faith, I know your faith, and it gives me hope and strength. After all, I get paid to be here, but all of you are here because you chose to be present.

But, for many people Sunday morning might be the only time a family can actually be awake and together in the same room. Sunday morning might be a time of being together and isn’t that, somehow, a form of Sabbath? Episcopalians, some have joked, are so confident of God’s love that they can take the summer off. Others have claimed that the Puritan notions got left behind as Americans moved west so that all guilt was dumped before they hit the Rockies.

The Book of Common Prayer provides for home worship and I would urge all families on those days when getting to church does not work to spend some time, as a family, in prayer, offering thanks and asking for God’s help. That can be a righteous part of a lazy Sunday at home. I still think coming to church is a good idea and one that nurtures our faith and keeps us spiritually toned. I do think that claiming to be spiritual but not religious is more than a bit like being curious but uneducated. I am reminded of the old Episcopal Church ads that pointed out that Jesus came to take away our sins but not our minds. I really like the one about the person in traffic, using strong language, and the ad opined that we say God’s name enough in traffic, how about saying God’s name in church.

God rested on the seventh day but not because God really needed a nap. God rested to reflect on the work of creation; to honor that creation by paying attention to it. God spent that time

absorbing that work, valuing the outcomes of creation, cherishing the wonders and complexities of that which God had created. Sabbath is not a particular day of the week; Sabbath is a way of living into God's kingdom. Sabbath is the way we create spiritual meaning in our lives.

Dear friends, my Sabbath time is coming very soon. I will set aside my sworn duties as your rector and take time to reflect on these past nine years. I will cherish the wonders and complexities of being Saint Barnabas together. I might even take a nap or take a Sunday off from church. But I am not being set free from bondage; rather I am acknowledging that as the word of God has been put in my mouth, so, now, do I call you and touch your mouths for God's great purpose. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." Amen.