

22 June 2003
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

“It’s a Heart Thing!”

Text: Mark 2:23-28 (Deut. 5:12-15)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It’s easy to criticize the Pharisees that we heard about in the Holy Gospel this evening. For they were, don’t you think, a bit *overzealous* in their application of God’s Law? For in their enthusiasm to keep the Sabbath Day, and make sure every else did also, they had (over the years) searched the Scriptures and in their consideration and deliberation on them came up with 39 specific kinds of work you either could or could not do on the Sabbath. All very exact and precise . . . including a prohibition on picking heads of grain. For the people had questions about exactly what you could or could not do, and what was work and what was not, and the Pharisees wanted to have answers for them. They had good intentions.

But this kind of thinking on the part of the Pharisees and of the people shows a major flaw in their regard of the Sabbath Day. For the questions about what exactly you can or cannot do, or what is work and what is not, is reminiscent of the questions of children who want to know – for example – *exactly* how much dinner do I have to eat to get dessert? Exactly *how clean* do I have to clean my room? When you said don’t hit my sister, you didn’t say I couldn’t *poke* her! And parents get exasperated over those kinds of questions, don’t you? But not because of the loopholes children come up with – for really, we can even sometimes admire their ingenuity! . . . No, we get exasperated because while the children are questioning the *exact externals* and *minutiae* of the rules, that’s not why we made the rules in the first place. **Its not really the externals we’re after, it’s the heart.** We want to teach them love and respect and care and honor and humility and gratitude. And when those things are demonstrated, the room doesn’t have to be all the way clean, or the dinner all the way eaten, does it?

And so you know how Jesus felt when He and His disciples were confronted by the Pharisees that day. For while the Pharisees were concerned about the *exact externals* and the *minutiae* of the rules, that’s not why God said **“Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.” It isn’t really the externals He is after, its our hearts.** For He wants us to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. He wants us to look to Him for everything that we need. He wants us to live by faith in Him and His Word. He wants us to want to spend time with Him in His Word, and in His House. **It’s a heart thing.**

And so questions regarding how much do we have to do to keep the Sabbath Day, or questions about loopholes, reveal the problems that exist in our hearts. “*Do I have to go to church today?*” reveals a heart problem. “*How often do I have to go to church?*” reveals a heart problem. “*Do I have to go to church on vacation?*” reveals a heart problem. **And those are heart problems we all have.** . . . And “keeping the Sabbath Day” is also not just a matter of going to church and not working. The person who comes to church but pays no attention is no different than the person who skips church to play golf. The person who comes to church but falls asleep is no different than the person who is at home and sleeping. The person who comes to church and thinks himself superior because of it is no different than the person who stays at home and thinks that all the people who go to church are hypocrites. **And those are heart problems we all have.**

It's a heart thing.

And so God commanded and established a Sabbath Day to work on our hearts. For what did God say in the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy?

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.”

Fine, but why? Why does God want that? Too often we stop there and forget the rest of it, and so it becomes merely an external thing. But God continues and tells us why He wants this – and **it's a heart thing**:

“You shall 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.”

It is a day to *remember*. Not just to rest, but to remember. To remember that without God, they were slaves. They were not a people, they were possessions. They had no land, no future, no nothing. And God brought them out. God rescued them. They didn't even want to go! And once they left, they kept wanting to go back! They had nothing, but God in His love and mercy and compassion chose them and gave them everything. *Remember this*, God says. Remember His love, remember His promises. . . . And to cause them to *remember*, God at the same time also established the worship, the Divine Service, of the Tabernacle and the Temple. For there they would hear His Word, and

remember His deeds. They would see the blood, and remember His promise of a Saviour. They would see the smoke, and remember His presence. His deeds **for them**. His promises **for them**. And His presence **for them**. And through His Word, and His forgiveness, and His presence, God was working in the hearts of His people. Giving them faith and love to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. It wasn't just the externals God wanted done right, God wanted their hearts. He wanted them. The Sabbath, and the things of the Sabbath, the externals, were made for the benefit of man and his heart – not man for the Sabbath.

And to illustrate this to the Pharisees, Jesus uses the extraordinary example of David and Abiathar the High Priest. And what happened is this: David was on the run from Saul, who wanted to kill him. And he had nothing. He was hungry. He was tired. He was struggling and desperate. Yet he was God's anointed one. The one whom God had chosen to be king after Saul! . . . So as he flees, he comes to the house of the Lord, and he asks for something to eat. But the only food there is the bread of the presence in the Tabernacle, which was only for the priests to eat. And they were to eat it only in the holy place. There were specific rules for its making, and changing, and consumption. And Abiathar gives it to him. . . . So, Jesus asks the Pharisees, did David sin? Did Abiathar sin? Would it have been better to let David and his men die in order to keep the Sabbath laws? Should God have struck down David and Abiathar for breaking His law? . . . No answer is given, for none is needed. The Sabbath, the Tabernacle, the sacrifices, the Divine Service, were made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

And so too for us today with our heart problems. We do not keep the Sabbath simply by showing up at the right place at the right time. We do God no favors by being here. Rather, He is here **for us**. **God the Father** is here to take care of His children – to speak to our hearts and work in our hearts, that we remember Him and His love for us. **God the Son** is here to take care of His brothers and sisters – to feed us with His body and blood, to give us His life, to renew our hearts, that we remember Him and His deeds for us. And **God the Holy Spirit** is here to gather and take care of His Church – to unite us in the truth, to give us the forgiveness of our sins, to raise our hearts, that we remember Him and His promises to us. It's a heart thing!

And so we gather here in this place, not because we have to, not to keep the law, but so that God can keep us. We gather to remember, that just like the people of Israel, we too, without God, are slaves to sin. Without Him, we are not a people, we are not a Church. Without Him we have no future. Without Him we are in bondage to the things of this world, and to the prince of this world, Satan. . . . But God brought us out! He rescued us! Not because of who we are or anything in us, but solely in His love and mercy and compassion. He chose us who had nothing, and gave us everything! *Remember this,*

God says. Even if it looks on the outside that you have very little, or nothing, **remember that it's a heart thing**, and I have given you everything. And even if it looks on the outside as if those who do not know me have everything, **remember that it's a heart thing**, and what good does it do you to have everything in the world but forfeit your soul? *Remember this . . .*

For the Sabbath, or worship, or the Divine Service, is not about rules, or limits, or loopholes, or minimum daily requirements . . . it's about **God being here for you**. So come, God says, God commands. But come not as an obligation, and come not like the Pharisees, who with their objections did not see in Jesus God here for them. No, come to the House of the Lord like David came to the House of the Lord. Come in need, and hungry, and struggling, and desperate, and repentant, and with nothing to call your own. Come and, like David, be fed by God and live. Eat the bread from the altar of God, the bread of the presence, the real presence, the true body and blood of your Saviour, given and shed for you. For here is God for you. God incarnate for you, God who died on the cross for you, God who rose from the dead for you, God who lives for you. God come to you in His Word and Sacrament. ***“Do this,”*** Jesus said, ***“in remembrance of me.”***

In remembrance. That's what the Sabbath is all about. Hearing and remembering and believing; believing and receiving forgiveness and new life; and living that new life. A new life in faith, in trust, in hope, and in confidence. A new life with a new heart. Until the day comes when our Lord will call us out of this world, this Sabbath, to live in His presence forever, in a Sabbath that will never end!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.