**“Biscuits Are Ok, But Not Cookies”**

Mark 2:23-3:6

I’m showing my age by mentioning this, but there’s a great scene in the movie “Chariots of Fire” where Eric Liddell is forced to decide if he will live up to the convictions of his faith. Eric had been outspoken in his belief that the Sabbath is a day of rest, and he often counseled young children not to play ball on Sunday. Eric Liddell was a missionary, but he was also a world-class runner. As he was traveling on a boat to the 1926 Olympics, he learned that his one and only event was scheduled for Sunday morning, and tremendous pressure was placed upon him to compromise his convictions. This event was his one chance for an Olympic Gold Medal, before returning to the mission field. But true to his convictions, Eric Liddell refused to run on a Sunday.

As a society, a lot of our social convictions about the Sabbath have changed since 1926. There was a time when movie theaters and stores in most cities weren’t allowed to be opened on Sunday. But almost all these “Blue Laws” have long since faded away. And maybe that’s for the best. I think when religious convictions are forced on people by law, they kind of lose most of their meaning. It seems to me that it’s not a conviction unless you have a choice.

Besides, I’m much more concerned about the reverence of the Sabbath within the Church, than out in the world. If our government chooses to distance itself from religious laws and customs, so be it. As I’ve said, religion should be a choice, not a mandate. So, to the Christian Church, I have two questions: How seriously do we choose to reverence the Sabbath? But I guess to answer that question, we must also ask: What does it mean to reverence the Sabbath?

Well, years ago, in my first little church, I did a Bible study on this morning’s twin stories of “Picking Grain on the Sabbath” and “Healing on the Sabbath.” And I asked the folks at that Bible Study to tell me how they used to reverence the Sabbath in their childhood.

According to Connie Brady, in Eugenia and Billy Townsend’s house where she grew up, no one was allowed to play cards or go to the movies on Sunday. And Connie’s grandmother wouldn’t even cook on Sundays.

According to Beth Ohlandt, in George and Martha Hill’s house, they made sure the cows and animals got fed on Sunday morning, but there wasn’t any plowing or harvesting on the Sabbath. And there surely wasn’t any fishing. Sunday was for church and rest.

Now Bootsy Leland’s mother, Julia, she would bake biscuits on Sunday because that was daily bread. But she surely wouldn’t bake any cookies, because cookies were simply for pleasure. Rumor has it, though, that she would put a little extra sugar in those biscuits on Sunday morning.

What I learned in that Bible study was that our forefathers and foremothers made choices about their convictions—their convictions for reverencing the Sabbath. And regular Worship attendance was always at the very heart of their convictions.

But in all fairness to us today, it would be very difficult for us in the 21st century to live up to the ideals of our grandparents and great-grandparents. And the fact is that it was often difficult for them as well.

Eugenia Townsend said she was always impressed by her mother’s conviction not to cook on Sundays, but she was also confused when her family would go to a restaurant on Sundays. This only forced others to have to work on the Sabbath.

Beth Ohlandt told me about one of her great aunts who wouldn’t subscribe to the Sunday newspaper because people were paid to produce and deliver it. This seemed kind of funny to Beth because most of the work for producing the Sunday paper takes place on Saturday. It’s the Monday paper that is primarily produced on Sunday.

And if we are honest with ourselves, even the most pious among us today is no different. If we turn on a light switch or stop by the grocery store, we’re making it necessary for somebody somewhere to work on Sunday. For that matter, by coming here this morning, you’re listening to a person who is paid to preach on Sunday.

In every time and every era, it has been difficult for Christians to understand and follow what it means to reverence the Sabbath. And it was the same for the people of Jesus’ day and time as well.

In today’s New Testament reading, Jesus and his disciples happen to be walking through a field of grain, and as they were walking along the disciples would reach out and pluck off the heads of grain, rub it in their hands so they could separate the chaff, and then eat the grain. They were hungry.

But some Pharisees just happened to be watching all this, and they were greatly disturbed. From their point of view, the disciples were harvesting and threshing. They were working on the Sabbath, and, therefore, breaking one of the Ten Commandments. After all, work is work, whether it’s for personal consumption or commercial sale. From their perspective and their convictions, harvesting and threshing were clearly work, and that is what the disciples were doing. According to the convictions of the Pharisees, the disciples were clearly not reverencing the Sabbath.

Through the centuries, some Bible scholars have tried to explain away this dilemma by saying that Jesus and his disciples must have been starving. In other words, it was sort of an “ox in the ditch” situation. Like an ox in a ditch, their lives were at stake, so that work would be the exception to the rule. But in the story that comes right before this morning’s readings, Jesus’ disciples were practically accused of being gluttons, so they clearly weren’t starving.

Other Biblical scholars try to explain it by saying that Jesus and his disciples must have been on their way to the Temple to make a grain offering. If so, then, maybe that ‘end’ would justify the ‘means.’ But there’s nothing in the story that would support that theory.

Instead, I think we have to recognize that Jesus knowingly and consciously allowed his disciples to break the religious convictions of his day. And in the next story about Healing on the Sabbath, it’s Jesus himself who violates a religious conviction. So, what’s going on here?

Well, to answer that question, I want to talk about something that Jesus said in the story that comes just before this morning’s reading, the story where Jesus’ disciples were practically accused of being gluttons. The issue in that story was fasting. Why didn’t Jesus’ disciples fast? Why did Jesus’ disciples not uphold that spiritual conviction? Now to be clear, Jesus said there is a time and a place for fasting, but, during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, that wasn’t the time for fasting. But here’s what I really want you to hear. Jesus says, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, as the new wine continues to ferment and expand, the old stretched out wineskin will burst. You’ve got to put new wine into new wineskins.”

Now to apply this wineskin saying to the issue of Sabbath observance would look something like this:

The Sabbath Day is God’s gift to humanity. It’s one whole day in seven when we can enjoy worshiping our God and having uninterrupted time in the presence of our creator. And folks, that’s supposed to be a joyful thing. Psalm 122 proclaims, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’”

And the Sabbath was also intended to be a day of rest. Folks, you can’t go through life at 100 miles an hour, without ever pulling into a rest stop. Sooner or later, you’ve got to refill your gas tank. And that’s not only the way cars work, it’s also the way we are made as well, and that’s why God gave us the wonderful gift of the Sabbath rest.

But in Jesus’ day and time, all the Sabbath shoulds and shouldn’ts, and dos and don’ts, and musts and mustn’ts had turned God’s Sabbath blessing into a heavy burden. And that burdensome understanding of God’s law was the old stretched-out wineskin that Jesus was talking about. And I believe that the New Wine Skin that Jesus offers is sort of a new way of understanding the true intent and true nature of the Laws of God. Maybe another way of saying this is: We truly reverence God on Sundays when we receive the gift of Sabbath as a blessing, and not as a heavy burden.

That’s why Jesus was angry with the Pharisees in the second story because of their hardness of heart. They cared more about upholding their convictions of the letter of the law than healing a man with a withered hand. Without two healthy hands, the man couldn’t work to earn a living to survive. That’s why Jesus asks, “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?”

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” In that light, I personally think it would be reverencing God to go out in the woods with your grandchildren and pick blackberries on a Sunday afternoon, and then come back and bake a pie together; even though, that harvesting and baking would have been considered work only a century ago. But to me, that’s not work. That kind of Sunday afternoon family activity would be a celebration of the wonderful gifts of God’s good creation and a strengthening of family relationships. It would be life-enhancing and life-nurturing. It would be doing good on the Sabbath, and I think that would be very reverencing to God.

However, just because the Sabbath was made for humankind, that doesn’t mean we can do anything we want on the Sabbath. Jesus also said he was Lord of the Sabbath. You see, I believe that the Sabbath is the one day of the week that we are called to go out of our way to put God first. Now certainly we should put God first every day, but the Sabbath is a day when we should put all our distractions aside and make uninterrupted room in our lives for God.

Like the ancient Jews, we Christians are called to set aside one day of the week where we rest from our labors, one day in seven where we come together and celebrate what God has done and is doing in our world and in our lives. Like our forefathers and foremothers, I hope that we will make choices about our convictions. Now some of our convictions may be different from theirs, but the conviction of reverencing the Sabbath remains the same. And regular Worship attendance has always been at the very heart of that conviction.

Now, with that said, I don’t want you to come to worship because your preacher made you feel guilty; I don’t want you to drink from that wineskin. It is my hope that you would say, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let go to the House of the Lord.’” And so, I pray that this congregation would continually come together and worship joyfully each and every Sunday, celebrating God’s good gift of Sabbath.

Let us pray:

God, we come here this morning to meet you, to praise you, and to worship you. We come here this morning to reverence you, and to thank you for your love poured out to us in Jesus Christ. Thank you for the gift of Sabbath, and may we always reverence you by doing good on the Sabbath, enhancing life, and finding our life in you. Amen.

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June 6, 2021