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Peace Lutheran Church  
Holbrook, Arizona  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
June 3, 2018

**TEXTS: Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2: 23-3:6**

The first bell would ring around 7am. Mary and I had been awake for awhile but usually remained beneath the warm covers talking, as we waited for the sun to crest over the ridge and begin to heat the Marawaka valley. Nights are cold in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. A little later we would take a cup of hot tea and sit outside, basking in the welcome warmth of the climbing tropical sun. Around 8 o'clock, the church bell—a gift from a Lutheran congregation in Germany—would ring again. To us, who lived next door to the village church, the second bell meant little, but to the folks who lived way down the valley or here and there upon the surrounding mountains, it meant it was time to start walking. By the time the third bell would ring around 9:30am, several dozen folks would be sitting around the church building on the grass. They'd chew betel nut, mothers would pick nits out of the kids' hair, and they'd visit.

Soon the guitars would start strumming. The young people would sing a Pidgin song translated, "Come, come, come inside. Come, come come sit down. Jesus calls out to us to come..." Slowly, the people would drift into the simple village church and seat themselves on the long backless benches—men and boys on the right, women and girls on the left. The musicians would continue to sing for maybe a half hour, while the people clapped their hands and joined in. They'd wait until the church was full and then the service would begin.

After worship, the congregation would again sit down outside on the grass to chew betel nut and visit. We'd sit with them, learning relationships, practicing our Pidgin and enjoying their wonderful senses of humor. After an hour, people would drift back to their homes to sleep and munch on a banana, a stick of sugar cane or some cold sweet potato.

Mid-afternoon, I'd often wander down to the playing field near the school and join in a game of volleyball or watch a soccer match. The competitors were vigorous, but friendly. Various sports would continue until sunset which, in the tropics, always comes around 6pm.

Folks would then wander back to their homes for the big meal of the day. Visitors were common, even expected—but never formally invited—and everyone would sit down around the fire, while the womenfolk would serve the food. Banana leaves were the plates, fingers were the utensils. Before anyone ate, however, the “papa” of the house would thank our “Papa” in heaven for the food. After all were filled—there’s no shortage of food in PNG—we’d lean back and the stories would begin. Papua New Guineans are wonderful storytellers. Eventually, the visitors would head for home and, as the fire burned low, evening prayers would be offered, after which the family would stretch out by the fire and sleep.

So a typical Sunday in Papua New Guinea would pass.

This morning, I awoke at 4:47am with a start. I’d forgotten that this morning was a communion Sunday—and I’d prepared the bulletin as if it were a non-communion Sunday. How could I have forgotten that? I knew it was the first Sunday of the month; I’d even emailed our members reminding them to bring their “noisy” coins for the second offering. That’s twice now I’d forgotten about communion. Is this what happens as you get old?

I hopped out of bed, trying not to disturb Mary, and jumped into the shower, shaved and dressed, ready to get out the door by 5:30am. Did I have time to cut some roses to bring to church? No time for that this morning!

Driving to church as the sun was rising, I wondered if I’d forgotten anything else. Would Yolanda have come in last night to clean? Certainly. She’s very reliable. Would Earl come in early to fold the bulletins? Yes, he will. Barbara, of course, would be there to set up for communion. Probably the plants outside would need to be watered—it was so hot and windy yesterday—and then I’d need time to rehearse my sermon—after I’d revised and reprinted the bulletin. Would anyone see the wasted paper in my trash bin?

Getting to the church, of course, I checked my email. There was a message from Linda Greinke that her mother is not doing well. They’d, in fact, called in Hospice yesterday. I’ll have

to make time to call Elaine later. There, in my Inbox was the email from Mike, inviting me to check the PowerPoint presentation for this morning's worship. God bless that man! I'd better take a quick look at that to make sure everything a go; if a change is needed, there needs to be time for that. And yes, there were several other emails needing attention but I'd better prioritize and get the bulletin re-done and my sermon rehearsed.

Before I know it, it's 9am and time for the Worship Team to rehearse. That's always a blessing—but where does that time go? Before I know it people are filing in for worship, Yolanda's playing her prelude and the candles are being lit.

Afterward, I want to be sure to talk with any visitors and if Ruth Wallace is not working but here, I want to invite her over for a birthday meal this Friday—and oh, remember to wish Troy a happy birthday, too! Did I remember to include Vivian May on the Prayer Registry? She's having some back and leg issues. And did I include Elaine Snell on the prayer list? And if I get around to her before she leaves, I want to talk with Vicki about Mary and I coming over sometime to look at the RV she wants to sell.

There should be time to go home for a quick lunch before returning to church for the 2pm Costa Rica mission trip meeting. Let's see, what was I supposed to do for that? Oh yes, I had offered to check with the various airport parking companies in Las Vegas to see where I can get the best deal for four cars for the week we'll be gone. No, I hadn't done that but there'll be a little time before 2 to check online and perhaps make a call or two. Our departure date is coming up so fast!

Do we have any company coming tonight? Nothing? Well, you never know what arrangements will be made following worship or who might show up at our door. If no one, maybe there'll be time to finish working on our personal budget for June—a task I started on Friday night and still haven't finished. Or, there's my box of summer clothes sitting by my bed, ready to pull out and, in its place, put away all my winter clothes. It'll be good not to have to be digging in that box for the right pair of shorts and the right shirt to wear in this hot weather. I'll be glad to get that job done.

And although tomorrow is our big watering day, I'd better take a look at the plants outside this evening, after it cools down, to see if they need some water. This weather is sucking everything dry. I'd hate to lose the investment of any of those plants. Would there be time to watch one of the movies Brenda left with us to watch this summer? Will I be too tired and fall asleep mid-movie on the couch?

And thus will pass a fairly typical Sunday for Jeff Johnson these days.

In our Scripture readings this morning, we heard read that portion of the Ten Commandments which tells us to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy..." In our psalm, we read how there is a "law" for God's people which tells us we are to ease (our) shoulder from the burden, i.e. that we are to observe a Sabbath rest, in order that we might "*sing with joy*," i.e. worship God. Finally, in the Gospel text, we see Jesus and His disciples chastised by the Pharisees for walking through the fields and eating grain, because it was the Sabbath and such activities, deemed as work, were prohibited. Jesus reprimands the legalists by saying, "*The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath.*" Today I'd like you to join me in wrestling with this question of the Sabbath and how, as Christians, we are to observe it. What does the Third Commandment mean for folks like us in Holbrook, Arizona living in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

First, let me straighten out a possible misconception from my first example. You might think that PNGians are a carefree, even lazy people, because of my description of their Sunday pace of life. While it is true that PNGians tend to be more relaxed and are less concerned about time than we Americans, they are not a lazy people. Able to walk from sunup 'til sundown, planting, weeding and harvesting huge vegetable gardens by hand, carrying huge bags of coffee beans or loads of firewood up and down mountains like Mt. Elden outside of Flagstaff, constantly weaving or whittling, PNGians are every bit as industrious—if not more so—than the average citizen of the U.S. So, dismiss the thought that PNGians are able to observe a more relaxed Sabbath because they are a more relaxed people.

Second, is my description of a typical Sunday true for you? Perhaps those of you who are already retired have a less stressed lifestyle but I don't know; I know many retirees who are busy, busy, busy. Sure, we may take a drive but is it to Home Depot so we can get what we need to fix the plumbing? Sure, we may get together with family but does that create a bunch of stress in and of itself? I wonder if many of you aren't like me in that Sunday has become all too often just another day. The stores are open nearly 'round the clock and so Sunday becomes a good time to shop, clean the house, catch up on the laundry, do homework, finish the deck, paint the trim, pay bills and prepare for the week ahead. While I would hope we Christians hold a different attitude toward Sunday than the rest of the world, I wonder how much of our lifestyles differ from that of our non-believing neighbor. Have we got so caught up in livin' life that we let our Sabbath observance slip? Someone once told me that this commandment to observe the Sabbath is the most violated, by Christians, of all the commandments. We've come to see busyness as virtuous.

Let's take a look at the word Sabbath and see what it means. First, let's be sure we don't equate the Sabbath with Sunday. The Sabbath means a day set aside weekly for rest and our worship of God. The Jews observed their Sabbath on Saturday, as do the Seventh Day Adventists out on McLaws Road. Because of the significance of Jesus' resurrection, which occurred on Sunday, Christians early on moved our Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. (We probably also did this to distinguish ourselves from the Jews.) But for those who must work on Sunday, another day can become the Sabbath. I knew a nurse who regularly worked weekends, who chose Wednesday as her Sabbath because that's the day she got off and she would attend a midweek service in the evening. A Sabbath is one day out of the week—any day, really—set aside for rest and worship.

Now, let's consider this important matter of why God commanded us to observe a Sabbath. Remember, every commandment God gave us was given not to make our lives more difficult, to burden us or restrict our fun. Quite the contrary. Our loving God wants to see us happy, healthy and in good relationship with Him and with others. Consequently, He has prescribed certain laws to help us develop these kinds of lives—lives that are happy, healthy and full of good relationships. Think of the other commandments: "*You shall not kill.*" What kind of world would we live in if there was no respect for another's life? Life is hell when we're constantly worrying about our safety. Or take, "*You shall not steal.*" Can there be any peace, any contentment, any joy in life if

we're constantly worrying about safeguarding what is ours from thieves? That, too, is a kind of hell.

You see, when God commands us to “*remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,*” He’s not trying to restrict us, but to help us. Any sensible person knows that we burn ourselves out when we never stop to rest and play. And, when we never take time to focus on God and our worship Him, we fall out of relationship with Him—and other potentially destructive idols take His place in our lives. God wants us to live happy and healthy lives in which He is not only Savior and Redeemer, as Derek will sing about in just a bit, but He also wants to be our Friend, our Advocate, our...Lover. He modeled for us the necessity of a Sabbath day in the story of creation when He Himself rested on the seventh day, admiring the goodness of creation. So, let’s remember with this commandment, as well as with all the others, that God is not trying to restrict us but to help us. We may feel restricted at times but it’s for our own good.

Next, I think it’s important to remember that the Sabbath is a day to both rest and worship. Lots of people—even more and more Christians—are apt to remember the rest part and forget about the worship part. We will go camping (when the forest’s open), take a drive, visit relatives, hike, go to a movie or read on the Sabbath, fulfilling, even exceeding, the “rest” part of the Sabbath definition. I’m not one to say a Christian must warm a pew in one’s own church every Sunday but there are churches or at least worshiping groups wherever you may be. Visit another congregation, even if it’s of a different denomination, if you’re out-of-town. There are outdoor services at many of the bigger campgrounds. As a last resort, prepare and participate in your own worship or devotional service. Don’t use the old excuse, however, that you can worship God every bit as well on the golf course or in the woods as in church. I don’t know anyone so self-disciplined as to actually worship God in those settings. Remember, God wants us to worship Him, not for his sake, but for ours. Father knows best. We will be more whole, more focused, more dynamic and creative people when we observe both parts of the Sabbath: rest and worship.

Finally, we must take a look at Jesus’ experience and the words of our Gospel text. He and His followers were walking through a grainfield on the Sabbath, plucking and eating the heads of grain. Both of these activities were considered work and, therefore, forbidden by the strict

definition of work at the time. They were confronted by the Pharisees and accused of violating the Sabbath law. Jesus' response is a good one for us to remember, even memorize. He said, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*" Translated, Jesus is telling the legalistic Pharisees to concern themselves with the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law. This is what I was trying to say a moment ago when I said that God has given us these commandments for our own good, not because He delights in seeing us follow a whole bunch of ridiculous rules. We're not told in Mark's account of this story why Jesus and His followers were walking on this particular Sabbath. I'm sure there must have been a good reason or Jesus wouldn't have been doing so. Jesus didn't break laws for the sake of breaking them. Anyway, they are hungry and they eat. Jesus reminds the Pharisees, by reprimand, that the purpose of the Sabbath is to help people. The Sabbath is the servant of the people, so to speak: people are not to be the servant of the Sabbath. The Pharisees, in trying to define what is work and what is worship, had gone too far—and they began to see Sabbath observance as rule-keeping, not life-giving rest and worship. The servant of the people, the Sabbath, had become the master of the people—and a harsh master at that! It would be like saying that we take a shower because it's the rule that we take a shower. Jesus would say, take a shower when you're dirty. The shower is a servant to help a person get clean; it's not a master requiring obedience.

The principle I extract from the story of Jesus and the Pharisees is that human beings are more important than any stated law. If your friend is falling apart emotionally and it happens to be the Sabbath, deal with him or her—even if it means forgoing a particular worship service or planned outing. If washing your car is restful and therapeutic for you to do and you're not neglecting another Sabbath observance by doing so, then do it! When it falls your turn to work on Sunday, go ahead and work—just schedule another day for rest and worship, and then observe it.

It's not always easy to observe the Sabbath as we are commanded to do. We may love to live in a less demanding, more laid-back culture like PNG, but we don't. Demands of family, work, school and yes, even church, make their claims upon us and we need to respond. In doing so, however, let's keep it balanced. God has prescribed a good formula of one day weekly set aside specifically for rest and worship. Remember, it's for our sakes, not His, that He has done

so. Father knows best. Let's observe the Sabbath—and be happier, healthier, more creative and spiritually dynamic people for it. Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“The First Day Of The Week” (ELW#246, but to the tune of “Blest Be The Tie That Binds”
After Epistle	“Trading My Sorrows”
Sermon	“Jesus, I Am Resting, Resting”
Offertory	“Savior, Redeemer Of My Soul” (Derek Eckman, Soloist)
Closing	“O Day Of Rest And Gladness” (ELW#521)