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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the third commandment is about honoring the Sabbath.

The third commandment is about remembering the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy.

The first commandment is "You shall have no others gods before me."

The second commandment is "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

And then we come to the third commandment about the Sabbath Day, the day of rest, the day on which no work is to be done.

PAUSE

Now, Martin Luther was wont to say that the most important of all the commandments is the first.

Indeed, if we follow the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" ...

If we follow the first commandment perfectly, there would in fact be no need for all the other nine commandments.

Because the other nine commandments are all about the ways in which we make gods of other things.

The other nine commandments are about how we make idols of this or that.

The fifth commandment, for example, is about the idol called "power."

The fifth commandment says, "Thou shall not kill."

The fifth commandment is about wielding power over other people.

It is about the idol called "power."

Or take the sixth commandment, which is about the idol called “lust.”

The sixth commandment says, “You shall not commit adultery.”

The sixth commandment is about making sex our god.

And this follows with all the other commandments.

Each commandment addresses some idol in our human experience.

So, keeping this in mind, what possibly could be the idol that the third commandment addresses?

What god do we worship when we forget to honor the Sabbath?

Is it not the idol called “time”?

You see, with respect to the third commandment, God wants us to understand that time is often placed upon a pedestal, like any other false god.

PAUSE

Now, one way to define an idol is as that which wants to control our lives.

An idol is that which wants control of our lives.

The desire for power can work on us so as to control our lives.

Lust and sex can work on us so as to control our lives.

And yes, time, too, can work on us so as to control our lives.

And it is true that whatever it is that has ultimate control over our lives, that is our god, that is our idol.

And time then is one more thing that can exert ultimate control over us.

PAUSE

It is interesting to me, that our usual go-to response when we are asked by others, “How we are doing?”

Our typical, go-to response is “I’ve been really busy.”

“How are you doing?” “Oh, I’ve been keeping busy.”

Or, people might ask us, “How is work going?” and we respond by saying, “It’s busy.”

Or, if someone asks us why they haven’t heard from us for some time, we say, “Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve been busy.”

The state of being “busy” is often used as an excuse.

The state of being “busy” is often used as an expression of personal wellness.

The state of being “busy” is often used as a measure of our work ethic.

To be busy implies that we have been making the best use of our time.

Because to be anything less than busy suggests that we are being bad stewards of our time, that we are somehow wasting time.

To be anything but busy is often seen as a failing in us.

Is it not okay to be still? Is it not okay to be passive?

To be inactive, to be “chill,” to be unproductive even just for a little while?

“What did you do today?” someone might ask us.

And what would they dare think if we responded, saying, “Nothing. I did absolutely nothing today.”

PAUSE

Time. So the third commandment is about the stewardship of time.

It is not just about refraining from work. It is not just about taking time to rest.

It is not just about the idol called “work.”

People are sometimes described as “work-a-holics.”

Some people cannot stop working ever.

They are at their work 24/7, morning, day, and night.

They work at the office, they do work in the car, and they work at home.

And so work, yes, is one idol.

But, even more profound than that, the third commandment is about how we use our time as a whole.

PAUSE

Now, Jesus when he was teaching in the synagogue on one particular Sabbath...

On particular Sabbath Day, long long ago, Jesus redefined the Sabbath, as we see in our Gospel today?

In our Gospel reading, on this one particular Sabbath, while teaching in a synagogue, Jesus was confronted by a woman with an ailment.

And this woman had been crippled by her ailment for 18 years.

Eighteen years. She was bent over, unable to stand up straight.

And she appeared before Jesus. And what does Jesus say?

“Woman, this is the Sabbath Day. I can’t heal you today, for that would be considered work, and the Jewish law forbids doing any work on the Sabbath.”

“Woman, come back tomorrow. And then we can talk about making you well.”

No, Jesus doesn’t turn her away.

Jesus doesn’t make this ailing woman endure her suffering for another day.

No, instead Jesus says, “Woman you are set free from your ailment.”

And then Jesus places his hands on the woman, and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

PAUSE

Now, in Lutheran theology, we might go to one of Luther’s famous quotes to make sense of this scene in the synagogue...

We could go to Luther’s famous quotes, namely the one that says, “Sin boldly.”

Sin boldly.

Jesus may have thought to himself, “I really shouldn’t be healing this woman on the Sabbath.”

“I really shouldn’t be doing this on the Sabbath, because I am breaking the Jewish law.”

Jesus may have been thinking this to himself, but finally, Jesus may have said to himself, “The heck with the law, I am going to heal this woman anyway.”

And thus, we have Luther’s quote, “Sin boldly.”

Of course, what Luther meant by that phrase is that everything we do as people is tainted by some sin, but that shouldn’t stop us from trying to do God’s will.

And I remember first hearing this phrase back in college.

I was going to the bible study on campus, and I confided in the pastor afterwards privately, that I wasn’t sure if I was coming to bible study for the right reason.

I told him that I felt I was attending bible study because another college student, a female, was in attendance, and that I was a bit smitten by her.

To which the pastor told me, “Well, you are probably coming for the wrong reason. Every action, no matter how well intentioned is tainted by sin, but that should not stop you from still coming to Bible study.”

In other words, he said, “Sin boldly.”

But the other part of that Luther quote is “But rejoice in the Lord more boldly still.”

“Sin boldly, but rejoice in the Lord more boldly still.”

Now, this is all well and good, but we know that our Lord Jesus Christ was without sin.

So Jesus, when he decides to go against the tradition of the Jewish law regarding the Sabbath, when Jesus heals this woman in the synagogue, he is not “sinning boldly,” per se.

No, there is something deeper going on here.

This is not Lutheran theology at work here, “sin boldly, but rejoice in the Lord more boldly still.”

No, this is not Lutheran theology.

What we see going here in our gospel is in fact Jesus theology.

And Jesus theology shows us that the best stewardship of our time, the best use of our time, in which our time is NOT made into an idol...

Yes, the way we are to approach every minute, of every hour, of every day is from the mindset of MERCY.

To be sure, Jesus tells those in the synagogue, "You know what it is to be merciful."

"You untie your ox or donkey, and lead it to water, even on the Sabbath."

"You are merciful towards your beast of burden."

"And yet," Jesus says, "You would begrudge this woman mercy who has suffered 18 years, simply because it is the Sabbath Day."

PAUSE

Sisters and brothers in Christ, mercy is what we are to do with our time, it is the very best use of our time.

Being merciful never becomes idol worship... Being merciful never exerts power or control over us...

But instead being merciful renews our very creation. Being merciful renews our very humanity.

PAUSE

Indeed, mercy is that which, according to Shakespeare, is our defining characteristic as human beings.

If we have ever read Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, in Act V, Scene 1, we observe there Ariel, who is a spirit, talking with Prospero, about Prospero's intention to take revenge upon his brother Antonio, for Antonio had betrayed his brother Prospero, and had sought to kill him by setting him upon the sea to die.

Only Prospero didn't die, and now Prospero is ready to exact his revenge on Antonio, but Ariel tells Prospero that Antonio has changed, such that if Prospero were to see his brother now, and how he has changed, he would not exact his revenge.

To which Prospero says, “What do you know of it, Spirit? Did you get set out to sea, left to die? Did you get betrayed by your own brother? Do you really think you would show mercy?”

And Ariel, who again is but a spirit, says, “I would show mercy if I were human.”

And there is Shakespeare’s definition of what it is to be human.

To be human is to be merciful, as the spirit Ariel explains.

Being merciful undoes the power of idol worship, not just with respect to the third commandment but with regards to all the commandments, w.r.t. all those things that want power over us.

To offer mercy to ourselves that we aren’t working our bodies to death.

To offer mercy to the world around us that we don’t exhaust the earth’s resources, that we don’t pollute the environment.

To offer mercy to our spouse that we aren’t unfaithful to them by committing adultery.

To offer mercy that we don’t exert power over others, including our enemies.

Be merciful! This THIS is God’s one directive to us in this passage today.

Yes, as religious people we can even fall prey to making God’s laws an idol, like the religious people of Jesus’ day did here regarding the law about the Sabbath, such that they begrudged the healing of this infirmed woman.

But being merciful undoes idol worship. Being merciful is to align ourselves with the mind of God, because God himself was merciful toward each of us through the death of his Son Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.