

Lectionary 21C 2019, Luke 13:10-17, August 21, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Ever since I announced my retirement I've been asked the question, "What are you going to do once you're retired?" At times I'm half-tempted to answer, "The first thing I'm going to do is skip church and sleep in on Sunday. Then I'm going to wash the car, go to Home Depot, buy a leaf blower and blow out all my leaves on Sunday, just like half the neighborhood does anyway." For at least forty years now, going back to the days when I was in seminary, I've led a highly sheltered life. At least on Sunday mornings. From about the hours of 5 am until 1 pm on Sundays I'm like a monk in a monastery. A few years ago, and here's my true confession from the pulpit, I did skip church on a vacation Sunday. I wanted to see what was going on in the world outside what for me was always a sacred time of obligation. I'm probably not telling you what you already know, but there's a whole 'nother world out there on Sundays. People are out and about moving around, and they aren't necessarily going to church. They're going to the store, out to eat, starting projects, blowing their leaves out the yard.

We all know how much Sundays have changed over the years. Each generation has seen the addition of things to do on Sunday that were previously forbidden. My parents saw the movie theaters opening up on Sunday afternoons, something I always took for granted. My generation saw stores opening up on Sundays, first during the Christmas shopping season and then every Sunday. My children simply take that for granted. There's not much left you can't do on a Sunday, except maybe buy a car. It's only a matter of time until that changes.

We used to regard Sunday as our Sabbath day. The word Sabbath means "rest." For Israel the Sabbath was, and still is, Saturday. Christians adopted Sunday as their Sabbath because Jesus was raised from the dead on a Sunday, the first day of the week. For two thousand years Christians gather for worship on Sundays to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. Where the majority of the culture is Christian Sundays are encouraged, and sometimes enforced, as a common day of rest. I leave it up to you to draw your own conclusions whether or not we can still call our culture Christian when Sundays are regarded as just another day of the week.

So when Jesus encounters criticism for working too hard on the Sabbath we might think, "how quaint." We might recall when our pious grandmother criticized someone for playing cards, or mowing the lawn on a Sunday. It's difficult for us today to see what all the fuss was about. Of course Jesus can do what needs to be done on the Sabbath. After all, the text tells us he already went to church that morning. He put in his hour of worship. The rest of the day he was free to do what he wanted.

Some of us might be nostalgic for rule keepers on the Sabbath. We look back on those lazy Sundays when you went to church and didn't do much else. But those days are long gone and they aren't coming back. We live with a lot more freedom.

But freedom can become just another way of bondage. And sometimes it seems to me that's exactly what's happened. We've traded the bondage of lots of rules about what can and can't be done on Sundays with another kind of bondage. We live in an era that measures worth by how busy and active we are. How many times do you hear, when you ask a friend whom you haven't seen for a while, how they are and they respond by telling you how busy they've been, doing this, working on that, taking care of the children or the parents or the grandchildren, or how exhausting work has become or they never get any time off? I know I hear it all the time. I've even responded that way myself to a friend's inquiry. We have become a society and a culture that values busy-ness and activity. It's almost like we have a great need to show how worthy we are, how valuable we are, by the number of activities and projects and events we fill our calendar with.

At first it may not seem like it, but we are like that woman bent over from a spirit of illness. We are stooped to the spirit of an age which says your worth is reflected in how busy you are. We are bowed down to the gods of commerce and consumerism, to the idols of cramming it all in and getting things done. Our eyes can only see the ground in front of us, a road that ends up looking like a treadmill, constantly turning, never any pause, never any rest.

Even those of us gathered here this morning, who did take the time to come and hear God's Word, to share in Holy Communion, can be tempted by this spirit and find yourself bowed low. If you are sitting here thinking about all that you want to get done today after church this spirit is also tugging at you. But you also know that Jesus comes to heal us of our bent frame, and lift us up to stand straight once again, to praise God and delight in his presence. By his death and resurrection Jesus sets us free from all that enslaves us. In this case the enslavement is to a false sense of value and worth and even freedom. True worth and value, the kind Jesus gives, brings us back to his Word, to his community of disciples, to a day out of the week in which we pause from our regular labor in order to stand up straight and praise God.

What might this world begin to look like if Christians started to make a conscious effort to live out the true freedom God gives us by gifting us with the Sabbath? What if we simply said "no" to the endless projects, to treating Sunday as though it were just another Saturday, and instead devoted it to worship and to true rest for body and soul?

Stores will continue to be open on Sundays, it will be more and more like any other day of the week. But as disciples of Jesus we can be a little bit of heaven

for a world bound to its 24/7 treadmill. It won't always be easy, living out of step with a world grown crazy with its frenetic pace of life. But the risen Christ frees us from all bondage, and liberates us to live as new people. Our stooped backs and weary hearts are lifted high, to stand straight up and proclaim with clear voices our praise of the God who sets us free. Amen.