

“Sunday Will Never Be the Same”

In Virginia, until the end of the 1970s, we had ordinances known as Blue Laws or Sunday Laws. These laws prohibited the sale of certain items on Sundays. I remember going into a Hechinger's store one Sunday (Hechinger's was the local version of Lowe's or Home Depot) to find that many aisles were roped off and displays covered. When I asked why, I was told they could not sell items on Sunday that involved work, such as tools and mops, etc. Interestingly, many places prohibited the sale of cars on Sundays. There are often still restrictions on alcohol sales on Sundays. I remember in North Carolina you could not buy alcohol until 1 p.m. on Sunday. In Maryland, the only place to buy alcohol on Sundays was at a restaurant that had an off-premise license, and you paid dearly for it.

The laws seemed to stem from the idea of keeping the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest. One should rest on the Sabbath, so you should not be able to buy tools with which you would be working. Alcohol sales were prohibited on Sunday so that no one was kept away from church by drink. Prohibiting alcohol sales could also have been a holdover from prohibition or the Temperance Movement, which saw alcohol as the devil's potion. They seemed to have missed the wedding at Cana story in the Gospel of John.

The synagogue leader in today's gospel seems to be the poster boy for Blue Laws. Jesus heals a woman who was crippled for eighteen years, and the leader scolds Jesus for performing the healing on the Sabbath. He thought there are six other days in the week to perform miracles; there was no need to heal someone on the Sabbath. She had been ill for eighteen years. What difference would one more day make? If healing was work and Sabbath observance was crucial, maybe he had a point. However, Jesus did not think so.

Jesus' point is that she has lived with this crippling affliction for eighteen years, she should not have to put up with it one more day. Also, there is no better day to be cured than the Lord's Day. After all, it is the Lord who is making the cure possible. Being cured on the Sabbath in the synagogue also made the healing public, the miracle obvious, and praising God for the healing would be natural in the synagogue. Those are all good aspects of the miracle.

Jesus adds to his argument by reminding everyone that they perform tasks on the Sabbath. They untie their animals so that they can get water. If they do this little bit of work to help a beast, then this woman, who is one of God's chosen people, a daughter of Abraham, should be healed. Jesus calls the official a hypocrite and rightly so. The only work Jesus did was to touch the woman. The only work she did was to stand up straight and praise God. The official did more work complaining about her healing than either Jesus or the woman did.

Of course, in terms of Sabbath keeping, we are also hypocrites. Very few of us keep the Sabbath as God intended. We are here worshipping God as is called for on the Sabbath. However, few of us dedicate the Sabbath to rest and restoration. We work at our jobs, do chores around the house, or go shopping. What's more, part of our Sabbath keeping often means that others cannot have a Sabbath of their own. In order for us to have a time of leisure on our Sabbath, other people have to work in restaurants, stores, parks, and theaters.

In modern Israel, Sabbath keeping is very strict. Given that most Israelis are not observant Jews, this is remarkable. At sundown on Fridays, shops close and people head home to be with their families. The religious spend their Saturdays in worship. Others go to parks, visit friends, or stay at home to enjoy family. It is a day of rest and restoration just as God commanded it to be.

While the Blue Laws may have started out as a way to allow religious observance or to force it on society, when legislatures considered repealing Blue Laws, it was merchants who opposed it. They wanted a day off. They wanted to give their staff a day off. They knew that staying open had real costs for people's health and well-being. Now the only major chains closed on Sunday are Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A. Additionally, if you visit a Hasidic Jewish neighborhood, you are likely to find all shops closed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday in observance of the Jewish Sabbath.

In the absence of Blue Laws, anything goes in the U.S. Certain businesses feel they cannot afford to be closed on Sunday if their competitors are open. But God created a day of rest for our own good. God knows that working and going nonstop is not healthy. Science and medicine tell us that as well. Yet nowadays the world tells us that we need to "go, go, go, do, do, do." If we are not on the go all of the time, we are missing out on life. Blink and you have missed the latest news item, the latest outrage, or the latest fad. Society says that sitting in the shade and sipping lemonade is for losers, the lazy, and old people.

Jesus points out at another place in scripture that people were not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for people.¹ That is, the Sabbath is a gift from God to all of us. Rest. Refresh. Worship. Watch the clouds. Listen to the birds. Play with your children. Visit with friends. Do a hobby. Read a book. Do nothing at all. Revel in the love of the one who made us, and who knows that the body and the mind have their limits.

I won't suggest we bring back Blue Laws or punish miracle workers who heal on the Sabbath. But I hope that we can all realize the need for Sabbath wherever we can find it. The God who created us in love also created the Sabbath, indeed commanded that we keep the Sabbath not just for God's own

¹ Mark 2:27

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emanuel Episcopal Church
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10:00 a.m.
August 24, 2025
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

glorification but out of love for us, knowing that all work and no play makes us not just dull, but unable to live into the abundant life that is God's gift to us.