

"Never on a Sunday"

Until the end of the 1970s we had ordinances known as Blue Laws or Sunday Laws in Virginia. 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 Lowes or Home Depot) to find that many aisles were roped off and displays covered. When I asked I was told they could not sell items on Sunday that involved work such as tools and mops, etc. 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. Interestingly, many places prohibited the sale of cars on Sundays.

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. It could also have been a holdover from prohibition or the Temperance Movement which saw alcohol as the devil's drink. 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. There are six other days in the week there was no need to heal her on the Sabbath. She could wait another day. Perhaps the official had a point.

However, 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 it possible. Being cured on the Sabbath in the synagogue also made the healing public, the miracle obvious, and praise to God for the healing would happen in the synagogue.

Jesus adds to his argument by reminding everyone that they do needed work on the Sabbath. They untie their animals so that they can get water. If they do this little bit of work and kindness to a beast then this woman, who is a daughter of Abraham, be healed. She is one of God's chosen people. 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. Jesus calls him a hypocrite.

Of course, in terms of Sabbath keeping we are also hypocrites. Very few of us keep the Sabbath as God intended which is for worship and rest. What's more, part of our Sabbath keeping often means that others cannot have a

Sabbath of their own. People have to work at restaurants, stores, parks, and theaters so that we can have leisure on our Sabbath.

In Israel Sabbath keeping in the neighborhoods is very strict. Given that most Israelis are not observant Jews it is a remarkable thing. At sundown on Fridays shops close up and people head home to be with their families. Saturdays are spent in worship or in the parks, visiting friends, or staying home to enjoy their family.

While the laws may have started out as a way to force or allow religious observance, 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 wellbeing.

In the absence of Blue Laws in U.S. anything goes. God created a day of rest for our own good. God knows that working and going nonstop is not healthy. Science and medicine tells us that as well. Yet, nowadays the world tells us that we need to "go, go, go." If we are not on the go all of the time or we are missing out on life. Blink and you have missed the latest news item, the latest outrage, or latest fad. If we miss out on any of these then our lives are going to be empty. Is that really so?

Jesus points out at another time that humanity was not made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath was made for humanity. 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 nothing at all but 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 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 life abundant that is God's gift to us.