

Time for Celebration

Isaiah 58:13-14; Revelation 19:6-10

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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Isaiah 58:13-14

13If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; 14then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Revelation 19:6-10

6Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God." 10Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

Here's a question for you to ponder: did God command Sabbath-keeping because the Sabbath is good? Or is it good because God commanded it? Think on that!

Some years ago I had a one-semester sabbatical. We were originally going to Oxford, England, but at the last minute our housing fell through. So we had to scramble to find an alternative place.

We ended up going to Hyde Park, Chicago. It turned out to be a delightful experience. I audited some course in the seminaries in that part of the city; and we took in cultural activities around the University of Chicago.

For Sunday worship we decided we were going to go to a different church each Sunday, and we'd only go to churches within walking distance of our apartment. We made one exception: one Sunday we drove to Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street on the southside of Chicago. This was where the pastor was then Dr. Jeremiah Wright, known as one of the best preachers in all of Chicago.

If that name rings a bell, it's because he was the Obama's pastor and he was the one that, unfortunately, Obama felt the needed to distance himself from when some incendiary clips of Wright's preaching came to light. These clips were taken out of context, of course, and few people understood or knew about the prophetic preaching in the black church tradition. So there was a backlash.

We didn't know that you had to get to Trinity a half hour early to get a seat. Otherwise, you'd get shuttled to an overflow auditorium where the service was on closed-circuit TV. But we were obviously visitors, and there was no way they were going to make us go there. They found room for us in the very back row, where we were very warmly welcomed by two older women. They made sure at all times that we knew what was going on.

We were only a few minutes into the service when the tears started flowing down my cheeks. There was such exuberant singing in the black church tradition. Joy was expressed despite the fact that many of these people had difficult lives living on the southside of Chicago.

In many ways they let it be known that this day—the Lord's day—is a special day! It wasn't just in the welcome we received from the people around us, not only in the spirited singing or the fiery, inspirational preaching of Dr. Wright. No, their fine dress was an expression of their worship and devotion. Everyone was dressed in their Sunday finest.

African-American churches for the most part have kept alive the tradition that when you go to church for the Lord's day you dress in your finest. Not just to show off, but to show respect to the God they worship. To not dress in your finest would be an insult to the God they worship.

I have to admit that when we Mennonites started dressing more casually for church it felt like liberation to me. No more white shirts, ties, and suits. We could dress like we dressed the rest of the week. But I have to wonder: have we lost something in moving to casual dress for worship? If we dress for church the way we dress the rest of the week, does that make one more thing less special about the Sabbath?

It must have been a big deal for the early Christians when they switched Sabbath from the last day of the week—Saturday—to the first day—Sunday. This indicated a major shift especially for Jewish Christians. Observing Sabbath on the last day of the week was baked into the Jewish psyche. Something momentous must have happened for the early Christians to make this shift, that is, the resurrection.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week, Christians started to celebrate the Sabbath on that day. It appears as though they met for worship at dawn on the first day, because they believed that was when Jesus was raised from the dead.

They called it the "first day of the week" (1 Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7; Mk 16:2; Matt 28:1; Lk 24:1). But by the end of the 1st century AD they called it "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). It was clear that this day was special and came to be identified with Sabbath because on this day Jesus rose from the dead. Only later did Christians adopt the pagan word, Sunday, for this day, seeing in that name a metaphor for Jesus being raised from the dead, just like the sun rises each day.

But there was more to this shift than just the day on which they worshiped. It led to a new identity. When they asked who they were, they claimed they are a resurrection people. And when they asked how they should they live? they concluded that they should live a renewed,

resurrected life, shaped by the life and teachings of Jesus. This new identity and this new lifestyle of discipleship set them apart both from their Jewish and their pagan neighbors.

In their Sabbath worship there was not only a retrospective look back at Jesus' resurrection. There was a prospective look ahead to when God's kingdom would break into this world in all its fullness, when "the kingdom[s] of the world ... become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (Rev. 11:15b).

There's a whole lot going on in the two texts I just read; unfortunately we don't have time to go into them fully. What they have in common is the use of a feast or a messianic banquet as a figure for what that future kingdom will look like.

Earlier in Revelation (14:13) it is said of the faithful, "**they will rest from their labors**, for their deeds follow them." This speaks to the interlude between death in this life and the life to come in the kingdom.

But now, in the text I read from Revelation, a wedding feast is on; they're to get up from their rest to celebrate. For the New Testament the banquet is a symbol for the wedding of the Lamb, Jesus, with the faithful, the church.

Therefore, there is a festive element to Sabbath; it is a day for celebration.

Observing the Sabbath is as much a mindset as it is as something we do or don't do.

Remember the Sabbath; that is, be mindful of... It should be awe- and joy-inducing. How do we create that mindfulness?

Here might be some practices that could make us more mindful of the Sabbath:

- Prepare ahead for this special day. Begin our Sabbath awareness the night before (like Jews, maybe we should consider our Sabbath as being from sundown the night before until sundown the day of Sabbath). Maybe on Saturday evening after dusk read and contemplate on the scriptures that will be used in worship Sunday morning. Give up social media Saturday night perhaps. I think I remember my dad writing a check Saturday evenings for the offering the next day. That was a tilt toward the gratitude that is expressed in worship through giving our tithes and offerings.
- As a child I thought Sunday was the most boring day of the week. Church was for adults. Even Sunday school sometimes bored me. My parents were correct in that Sunday for them was usually the least busy day of the week. (There's a goal for us; make Sundays the least busy day of the week.) But then in the afternoon my parents just wanted to sit around and read and nap. I wanted to DO something exciting. (I get that now.) Make the day a special day—something to look forward to like the celebration of a child's birthday. Make it what the rest of the week can't be due to work and overall business.
- Do things that bring delight, while also being regenerative. Serve special foods, perhaps. Have some family time. Play games. Perhaps we should restore the practice of visiting with friends and family on Sunday afternoon.

- The Jewish tradition encourages married couples to engage in sexual relations on the Sabbath.
- Do something to take in God's creation. God rested on the seventh day, not because God was tired; God rested on the Sabbath because the work of creation was complete and God wanted to enjoy what was created. Suzanne and I are taking hikes on local trails on Sunday afternoons. They are so refreshing.
- Eternity is sometimes referred to as an eternal Sabbath. I can't believe God will bore us to death for all eternity.
- What is Sabbath for each of us will be different, another reason for not being judgmental about how we remember the Sabbath. I experienced the snow storm last week as Sabbath: things slowed down; a hush settled over the earth; there was less noise. But when I mentioned that to someone, she said, "You don't have children at home." Touche. Depending on our personalities and our stage of life, our Sabbath needs will not all be the same.

Undoubtedly, Sabbath-keeping is increasingly counter-cultural. Gone are the blue laws that kept certain kinds of stores closed on Sunday, for example. Gone are the days when sports leagues are not active on Sundays. I empathize with you parents who have to make tough decisions about what activities your kids can engage in on Sundays.

Being counter-cultural is not all bad. In fact many of us who cut our eyeteeth in the 1960s wear counter-cultural identities as a badge of honor. More importantly, Sabbath-keeping may well be a marker that sets us off from the rest of the world, a practice that helps keep at bay an encroaching secularization of life.

Maybe we don't just keep the Sabbath. Perhaps the Sabbath keeps us. Sabbath-keepers is part of our identity as a people. It shapes our attitudes and activities. What kind of people are we? We are a Sabbath people.

So which is it: did God command the Sabbath because the Sabbath is good? Or is it good because God commanded it? As for me, I'd rather not have to choose between the two.