Sunday, June 17, 1979
THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28, 3:1-6

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy! This is the essence of the 4th commandment. However, the essence has often been forgotten or covered up by an overlay of tradition, rules and regulations and sometime these can obscure the original meaning.

The other day I was reading a story about a young man who told of his understanding of the 4th commandment as a child growing up in a very strict home. Here's part of what he said about the Sabbath and the 4th commandment.

"In the home in which I was raised the word 'Sabbath' was applied to Sunday. That was a distortion, but that was my family's tradition. Sunday was to me the most unpleasant day in the entire week. It seemed to me that all the forces converged on me that day in a conspiracy to keep me from being a normal little boy. I had to wear special clothes — not school clothes or play clothes, but Sunday clothes, fancy, stiff, restrictive clothes that I dared not get dirty or torn. In these special clothes I was taken to Sunday school by my mother, who herself seldom went. My father never went."

"Sunday school and church got communicated to me as something that kids had to do and naturally, I looked forward to growing up so I could do what I pleased on Sunday morning like my father and mother. Sunday school was a chore for me. The thing I enjoyed most was getting my perfect attendance medal. I remember one or two of my teachers, but I can honestly say that I remember nothing more."

"Even though we did not stay for church and normally got home about eleven o'clock, still Sunday did not improve for me. I could not change my clothes and I could not get my clothes dirty. I hated those clothes. It was very difficult for me in that restrictive binding ever to break the Sabbath. I could not play marbles. I could not play tag or baseball; I could not even play roll-a-bat. As I looked around with my childish eyes, the adults who were in my world seemed to be doing what they wanted to do; only the children seemed to be prohibited on the Sabbath. Maybe only children have to keep the Sabbath, I thought. Maybe Sabbath is like an allergy that can be outgrown in time. Movies were out. Games, especially card games, were the work of the devil. Television was not yet invented. Going to a baseball game was out."

"Sunday dragged on like an eternity for me, boring me beyond endurance. I could visit relatives and I could read. I was strongly encouraged to read the Bible, but those thin little golden-edged pages would constantly stick together or bend or tear. They never seemed to turn for my little fingers. And the language of the book with the 'thees' and 'thous' and 'asketh' and 'beggeth' was to me incomprehensible at best and silly at worst."

"As a result, I did not like God. To me God was a stern heavenly father who spent his time telling you what you could not do or punishing you if you ever did it. I was convinced that God had never been a boy. He did not know what fun was. He never smiled beneath his long beard. I knew this because I asked my mother why Sundays were so different and so dull and boring, and she replied, 'Well, my dear, Sunday is the Lord's day.' And I thought to myself, anyone who had a day like that just could not be very nice."

“Of course, I could not admit that, for I had a healthy dose of the fear of God instilled in me by my mother. I grew up forced to do the religious things and hated every minute of it. My weekends were ruined because Sunday was a part of every weekend. Imagine my delight and surprise when I discovered that there is not on Biblical injection anywhere in any of the 66 books in the Bible that prohibits working on Sunday — not one. For you see, Sabbath and Sunday are not the same. They never have been the same.”

This young man discovered an important truth, still often forgotten — the Sabbath talked about in the 4th commandment and the Christian Sunday are not the same! The Sabbath was and is the Jewish day of rest and was connected late in Hebrew history with the creation story in the book of Genesis which describes God as resting on the 7th day.

Sunday, however, is the first day of the week, and is remembered by Christians because it is the day or resurrection. Thus, the early Christians did not observe Sunday as a day of rest, but rather a day of celebration, festivity and happiness. Early Christians gathered together each Sunday to remember the resurrection and part of their remembering including the celebration of HOLY COMMUNION.

Since almost all of the early Christians were also Jews, the Sabbath and Sunday existed together for some years side by side. The early Christians observed both. The Sabbath had its emphasis on rest coming from the Jewish tradition and Sunday had its emphasis on festivity. Later as more and more people became Christians who were not Jewish in background, the Sabbath day idea receded and only the Christian celebration of Sunday, many times called the Lord’s Day, continued.

Then during the Reformation and primarily under the influence of John Calvin, one of the chief reformers, the Christian Sunday came to have many of the rigid rules and regulations of the Jewish Sabbath. Calvin, more than anyone else, added much of the OLD Testament Sabbath day tradition to the Christian Sunday. In the process he actually merged the two days and changed the character of the Christian Sunday.

But now let’s go back even one step further and note that there are actually two Jewish traditions about the Sabbath. This morning in the order of service in the announcement section, we have printed the two versions of the 4th commandment, one from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament and the other from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. The version from the book of Deuteronomy is the oldest of the two. Notice that in this oldest version, the Sabbath rest is not identified with creation and God’s resting on the 7th day, but with the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. The Hebrews are not to work on the Sabbath as a way of remembering that they were once slaves in Egypt and that God freed them from slavery. Remember God and your freedom! And not only are the Hebrews to refrain from work on the Sabbath, but also their slaves, servants, visitors and quests and even their beasts of burden.

Take a day of rest, says the writer of Deuteronomy, because rest is essential to life, and above all take time out to remember God who freed you from slavery. Added to this is the implication that just as you were once slaves in Egypt, you can also become slaves to your job or your vocation. It’s a good commandment to remember for this “Father’s Day.”

The commandment is further implying that human beings in every station and even animals are not to be exploited through work. Do not forget you were once slaves yourself. God has made you free, so remain free, and to help you remember this take the Sabbath day of rest. It

will help you remember God and it will help you remember that periodic rest from labor is the right of every living thing. It is a right guaranteed by God.

If we go back farther into Hebrew history, the scholars tell us that originally the Sabbath was not associated with a particular day in the week, but with a celebration of the new moon. It was a monthly festival and period of rest — a time when the whole tribe had a change of pace, a period of withdrawal and rest. It later changed into a weekly observance.

Once the Sabbath day custom became a regular weekly ritual, it became more and more institutionalized. It also became a way of distinguishing the Jews from all other people. Every 7th day, every Hebrew became publicly discernable, for he or she engaged in no commerce or did no work. Some years ago, our roman Catholic brothers and sisters were more publicly recognizable because they did not ear meat on Fridays.

Through the years, the observance and institution of the Sabbath became the holiest practice in all of the Jewish religion. Hundreds of rules and regulations and definitions were added in order to guide the people in the most proper observance of the Sabbath. Thirty-nine different kinds of work were specifically prohibited. No medical attention for chronic or non-emergency situation was allowed. Thus, Jesus was severely criticized for healing a person on the Sabbath. It was not an emergency situation according to Jewish law. In that instance, Jesus had to remind his critics that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. Institutions are made to serve us; we are not made to serve them.

One could walk only three-fifths of a mile of the Sabbath. Any more walking was considered a violation of the injunction to refrain from work. Three-fifths of a mile was the distance a priest had to walk to do his priestly duties in the temple on the Sabbath. The book of Acts in the New Testament refers to the Mount of Olives as being a Sabbath's day's journey from Jerusalem, in other words — about three-fifths of a mile.

What does all of this mean then for us as Christians today? Jesus Christ said the Sabbath was made for human beings — not human beings for the Sabbath. He was getting back to the essence of the fourth commandment, which is two-fold.

1. First, Jesus recognized the necessity for all of us to have a regular time for worship built into our schedule. Thus, the 4th commandment reminds us of the need for the human spirit to step aside from the usual routines of life and take time on a recurrent and disciplined basis to relate to that which creates life and sustains life — we need time set aside to worship God.

We are not only to worship God when and if we feel like it, but rather we are to take time for such worship on a systematic basis. It was this that the Sabbath was originally designed to provide in the life of the Hebrew people. Take time to be holy, as one hymn puts it. It is when we set aside a certain time to be holy that we are all the more aware that all of life is holy. Saturday or Sunday is not any more holy than any other day of the week, but by designating a day or time of the week as holy, we are reminded that all time is holy.

Each one of us needs a time of withdrawal on a regular basis, a time for worship, a change of pace from life's normal routines. It won't just happen unless we set time aside for it.

2. The second reason Jesus knew the necessity for taking time out of one's usual schedule for a change of pace is that he knew that all of life is better if lived according to a certain rhythm. From the beginning of time, human beings have been aware of a rhythm in all of creation. To

be in rhythm is to be in the flow of life. It is to pace oneself as a long-distance runner learns to pace herself or himself. To have rhythm in life is to know when to work and when to rest, when to sleep and when to be awake, when to eat and when not to eat. It is to have some sense of order, some pattern, some flow to life. The setting aside of one day each week for worship and rest helps put order into all of our living. It keeps us from becoming a slave to our job, or any one of a number of things that otherwise might enslave us.

So, the fourth commandment is a reminder to us that all of our life is to have a rhythmic quality. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Take time for rest and relaxation, and above all take time for God. Amen.