Text: Mark 2:23-3:6

**Introduction**

I’m just old enough, and probably also from the middle of nowhere enough, to remember Blue Laws. Absolutely nothing in the way of commerce was open on Sundays when I was roughly 6 to 7 years old. We used to drive through a downtown business district – another thing that is largely gone – on the way to church on Sunday morning. And all the parking spaces were empty and all the lights were off. And in Iowa they removed the law in steps. The first step was allowing grocery stores to open at noon, should they want to. And they did. And so the first Sunday in July – the first time the new law went into effect – everything was the same as it had been going to church, but coming home the Eagle Grocery store lot was as full as any day. It didn’t take long, if my 7 year old memory is right probably about a year, to go from noon and Groceries stores to just full scale repeal of those blue laws. Such that I remember the Miller Lite Open sign being on in the window of the Bar at the edge of the downtown. And the parking spaces in front of it being full.

Now six-seven year old Mark was always a little precocious. I remember this, because I remember asking Dad a question. We had been memorizing the 10 commandments - including “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”. And I remember asking Dad, “Isn’t this change directly opposite of that?” And I remember his answer in broad strokes, because it roughly quoted our gospel today. Dad’s answer was also tied specifically into being Lutheran – more on that in a second – and into a statement about changing society.

**Text**

The specific Lutheran part was tied into that catechism that we were memorizing in Sunday School. Luther’s explanation to the 3rd commandment is just different than both what a Roman Catholic or a Reformed Calvinist would tell you. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God such that we do not despise preaching and his word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. Not a single word, at least not directly, about a day of rest. The rather strident explanation of Moses or God depending upon how you read our Old Testament lesson – “On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or you ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner within your gates, that your male servant and female servant may rest as well” – in Luther explanation was absent. Part of Dad’s answer was that “yes, the Catholics and some Protestants were lamenting the repeal, but Lutherans could be fine with it, because we were not legalists.” And even 7 year old Mark knew with Dad trotting out the L-word – legalist – that this was something core. The Sabbath was not about not working, it was about hearing the Word of God.

But when that snot nosed 7 year old asked how bagger Jim, a good Lutheran who worked at the Eagle, would be able to do that now that he had to report to work at 10 AM on Sunday. Dad didn’t really have an answer. He kinda stumbled into his back-up. The world was changing. And who were Christians, given that Jews worshipped on Saturday and Muslims on Friday and all kinds of others, who were we to force everyone to take Sunday off. Even then that didn’t seem like an answer for poor bagger Jim. But that snot nosed kid had also memorized the 4th commandment at that time and realized he was pushing it with the questions.

The question about what is a Sabbath? How does one keep a Sabbath? A very Lutheran question of how does one rightly divide the law and the gospel regarding a Sabbath? These might seem meaningless or esoteric questions today. Nobody is remotely close to reviving blue laws. But honestly I think they are closer to the heart of the Spiritual sickness that seems to be over our land.

The heart of the conflict in our readings today is a right division of law and gospel. We all know the maxim that the work expands to fill the time you allow for it. At one extreme you have someone like Annessa to whom we allocate roughly 10 hours a week. And those are quite productive 10 hours. At the other extreme you have the Japanese salary man, or the higher level American corporate officer, who is never not on the clock. Although just what is being produced in those 100 hours a week might be in question. Cemented in the law you have God saying this one day is not for normal labor. All your work should be done in the other six days. And yes, the legalist, which is what the Pharisees are being in our gospel reading, can keep the law by just not moving.

Now the law is good and wise, even if it is not sufficient for salvation. God saying don’t do the normal work on this one day creates space. And God creates that space in the law not just for aristocrats or rich people or clerics, but for the sojourner within your gate. Someone who might not share your religion. But just checking the box that you took a day off work is not really what the Sabbath is about. Luther’s answer gets at the gospel purpose – that we might hear the Word of God. That we might draw near to God.

The legalist answer – “you can’t do that on the Sabbath” – puts the Sabbath before man. The disciples grabbing some grain to eat as they follow Jesus on his healing and teaching ministry are technically breaking the Sabbath, but they are doing so for its deeper gospel meaning. That Jesus might show up at the synagogue and heal. That all of Israel might hear the Word of God. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The legal fencing of get your work done in 6 days, was to create the chance to hear the Word.

**Christology**

Now let me pivot to a couple of things. Because I realize that up to now, this might sound like an argument for those Blue Laws. And sure, I’d love to see something like that, but I’m also not an idiot. Jesus also says that “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”. In the absence of even civil legal protection of a Sabbath – that first use of the law, a curb – our Caesars have declared that they don’t care about the cares of this life taking over all the hours. But what Jesus reminds us is that a Sabbath – drawing near to the Lord and hearing the Word – is not limited legally to just one day. It is located and protected in the promises of Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. And the true Sabbath is drawing near to the Word.

And Jesus promises that drawing near in a multitude of ways. Wherever two or three are gathered. One does not even need the old Jewish minyan – 10 Jewish adult men – to draw near. Wherever two or three gather in the name of Jesus he promises his presence. He promises that the Father hears the prayers of man shut in his prayer closet. Even if you don’t have the words, the Spirit will grant them. He promises to be there in the least of these, in works of mercy done is His name. As the Lord of the Sabbath Jesus has a light yoke. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door shall be open.

The Law or lack of it cannot hinder the presence of a Sabbath.

**Moral**

The only thing that can hinder the presence of a Sabbath is our refusal to keep one.

When we despise preaching and the word. When we run away instead of drawing near to the LORD.

And if you ask Mark Brown – you are free to disagree here, I’m drawing a conclusion from personal observation – this is the core of the Spiritual Sickness across our land. We don’t want to hear it.

We’d be fine with the gospel, but we don’t want the LORD.

We’d be fine with a Sabbath, but we don’t want the LORD of the Sabbath.

The Pharisees had not rightly divided law and gospel. They missed the time of their visitation that the LORD of the Sabbath was present and that meant the healing of the gospel takes precedence. But those Pharisees would never have imagined using the gospel – “the Sabbath was made for man” – to argue against the minimum protections of the law. To eliminate the law’s teaching force. That one day a week you should be about something other than the cares of this flesh. The gospel fulfills the law, it doesn’t cancel it.

We collectively as a people despise preaching and the word. Because we do not want this LORD. We want the Jesus of our own making. Not the Jesus of the cross. We want the treasure, but we don’t want to be reminded that we are but jars of clay.

And because we despise the Word. Because we despise the LORD who is, we get nothing. Nothing but work – the work of the devil, the world and our flesh – work that expands to fill every hour of every day. The work that never allows rest. A heavy yoke.

**Eschatological**

The Old Testament Chronicler once surmised that Israel’s 70 years of Exile were 1 year for every missed Sabbath year (2 Chronicles 36:21).

I might surmise that our exile stems from something similar. When the church is ready to keep a Sabbath – “to hold the Word sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.” Whatever day or hour that might be on. When the church is ready for repentance – to draw near to the LORD - the absolution will not be withheld, and our seeming exile will end.