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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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Mark 2:23-28

Keeping Sabbath

(Fourth in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They Seem)

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. –Exodus 20:8–

The idea of the Sabbath Day has an interesting history. The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word Shabbath, which means to desist. In the fourth Commandment the desisting is to be from work. Scholars have also found evidence of official days off in ancient Canaanite cultures as well as in the widely influential Middle Eastern culture of ancient Babylon. In ancient Babylon, the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days of the month were considered days of bad omen and on those days work was ill advised. But if taking a day off each week in ancient Babylon had anything to do with the development of the Sabbath Day concept in ancient Israel, the difference in purpose between them is profound. In ancient Babylon, not working on the days of bad omen was to avoid bad luck. In ancient Israel, not working on the Sabbath Day was to imitate God and to serve the spiritual and physical needs of people. One of the ideas of ancient Hebrew religion was that there is no such thing as luck, bad or good.

In the 23rd chapter of Exodus there is an elaborated annunciation of the first four of the Ten Commandments which clearly reveals their purpose is to be one of human benefit. Here are from the 10th through the 12th verses.

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your home born slave and your resident alien may be refreshed.

It was this idea of the Sabbath being instituted for human benefit that Jesus emphasized. (And if there is anything that we take from this emphasis upon the Ten Commandments this fall, let it be this—they are for our own good, all of them; to follow them is do ourselves as well as others a most important service.) Apparently, the emphasis upon the purpose of the Sabbath was needed when Jesus lived.

Remember when Jesus was in the grain field, plucking the heads and rubbing off the chaff and eating the kernel. This was considered work by some religious leaders and

they criticized Jesus for it. That was when in reply he made the statement, *The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27)*

So what does it mean for people today to keep the fourth commandment? Does it mean following the Sunday Blue Laws of old and maintaining prohibitions against certain activities such as dancing and going to the movies on Sunday? Should we even interpret the Commandment to mean that we should worship on Sunday? Many Catholics and some Protestants worship on Saturday night now instead of on Sunday. Do we think that if people worship on Saturday night and then play golf or pursue some other pleasant avocation on Sunday that they are breaking the fourth Commandment? If we do not make a list of specific things to do or not do on the Sabbath, what does keeping the Commandment mean for us?

Well, if we are to work six days a week and not seven, might the Commandment at least mean that we are not to work all the time, that our lives should consist of more than work, that there is at least something, and most likely more than one thing, that is as important as work and we need to take time for it? If we are not to work all the time than we are to use at least some of our time for something other than getting ahead. With that in mind, in order to follow the fourth Commandment, we need to live in such a way that work is the means and not the end of life? Considering that the purpose of the Commandment is to benefit people, would its implication be that there are things other than work, such as relationships with God and neighbor, which are needed in order for life to be at its best, that spiritual experiences such as awe and beauty and worship are important too. If we are to have such experiences might we need to set aside significant blocks of time for them, not just a minute here or there, but at least one day a week in principle? The fourth commandment may be especially important to highlight for ambitious and successful people. It might serve as a safeguard against gaining the whole world but losing our souls, as Jesus once put it. (Matthew 16:26)

When I was a college student I visited Israel for six weeks as a volunteer on an archeological dig. I learned there just how serious the idea of desisting from work on the Sabbath can be. We volunteers had time off from work at the archeology site every Sabbath or Shabbat as the term is expressed in Israel. Another volunteer and I wanted to use one of our days off to travel from Jerusalem to the city of Elat, which is on the very southern tip of modern Israel and the very northern tip of the Red Sea. There are basically two ways for poor college students to get around in Israel, public buses and hitchhiking. As it was Shabbat the buses were not running and so we thought we would hitchhike. We were advised not to try and hitchhike on Shabbat because the majority of Israelis do not drive then. But my friend and I were twenty years old. What was there that we were not capable of doing? So we started off on a Sabbath morning and got a ride about half way to our destination. We were dropped off at a little crossroads in the middle of the Negev dessert. Now, there is a protocol in Israel about hitchhiking that is understandable but resulted in my friend and I having a very long day in the dessert. The sequence of picking up hitchhikers is this: soldiers first, then other Israelis, then just about anyone else, then American college students. However, there are generally enough cars on the road in Israel to accommodate just about everyone looking for a ride—except

on Shabbat. And there are few cars traveling south through the Negev on any day. So there we were stuck in the middle of the Negev in the blazing sun all day long, what few cars that came by and were willing to take on passengers took only the soldiers who were standing with us. By the middle of the day we gave up trying to get to Elat and hoped only for a ride back to Jerusalem. Thankfully, someone finally came by, someone who saw the desperate look in our eyes, someone to show us mercy, someone who drove on the Shabbat but who kept the Sabbath.