**First Reading Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

*This portion of the Ten Commandments instructs the Israelites to keep the sabbath. The Israelites are to rest, and they are to allow their slaves, their livestock, and the foreigners living among them to do the same. They were once slaves, and so they are to treat their own slaves justly.*

12Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

**Psalm 81: 1-10**

1 Sing with joy to God our strength and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob. 2Raise a song and sound the timbrel, the merry harp, and the lyre. 3Blow the ram’s horn at the new moon, and at the full moon, the day of our feast; 4 for this is a statute for Israel, a law of the God of Jacob. 5God laid it as a solemn charge upon Joseph, going out over the land of Egypt, where I heard a voice I did not know: 6 “I eased your shoulder from the burden; your hands were set free from the gravedigger’s basket. 7You called on me in trouble, and I delivered you; I answered you from the secret place of thunder and tested you at the waters of Meribah. 8Hear, O my people, and I will admonish you: O Israel, if you would but listen to me! 9There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not worship a foreign god. 10I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

**Second Reading 2 Corinthians 4: 5-12**

*When we carry out God’s ministry we do so not for our glory but for the sake of Jesus Christ whom we proclaim as Lord. The power for ministry comes from God, not us, so that we persevere no matter what, trusting in God’s power and promises at work through us.*

5We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. 6 For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.7But

we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12So death is at work in us, but life in you.

**Gospel Mark 2:23—3:6**

*Jesus challenges the prevailing interpretation of what is lawful on the sabbath and tells his critics that the sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around. Healing the man with the withered hand is work that cannot wait until the next day.*

P The holy gospel according to Mark. C Glory to you, O Lord. 23One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” 25And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” 27Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” 3:1Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” 4Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. 5He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

**SERMON**

So…in my experience, having a 4-year-old can be a very confusing time. One of the reasons why it can be a confusing time is because of the questions my 4-year-old asks me. I kinda miss the questions of the 2-year-old phase, which was pretty much limited to, “What’s that?” My 4-year-old asks me questions that make me have to think and sometimes rethink things. Sometimes I’m thinking about things that I’ve never really thought about it detail before. Last week it was explaining what Memorial Day was, which seems simple until you have to talk about war and military.

The topic that gives me the biggest headache is healthy and unhealthy food. It’s simple if we have an apple and a cookie and we ask which is healthy and which is not. The fruit is healthy, of course. But what about fruit juice or fruit snacks or ice pops that are made from fruit juice? What about veggie straws, which are a snack food but have vegetables in them? Hamburgers and pizza may not be the best choices, but hamburgers are meat and pizza does has cheese and tomato sauce. So, what’s the answer? The answer is, it depends. And you hate to give a 4-year-old that answer!

But the truth is, “It depends,” is the answer to a lot of questions we have about life and about faith. As much as we would like to have a “yes” or “no” response to every question or issue, life does not work that way. Our faith doesn’t either. And yet, we really wish it did. Or, we still live and act as if it does. And that’s the danger zone in our faith. When we live according to an understanding that we know deep down is no longer true, but we hold to it for any number of reasons…because someone we love and respect taught it to us…because we will loose something if give it up…because something about the new way makes us uncomfortable or because we just don’t like change. But when we are no longer listening to the Spirit, then we are no longer following Jesus.

Today, we are looking at a commandment in Deuteronomy that is then questioned in the gospel of Mark. It is the commandment about the Sabbath. The 10 Commandments can be found both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. We have the account from Deuteronomy 5. This commandment tells God’s people that the Sabbath observance is for EVERYONE. It is described as a day of rest for both people and animals, for family members, for slaves, for the foreigner who resided among them. After the commandment itself, there is a sort of explanation for

following this commandment…it is a reminder that the people were once slaves in Egypt, who did not have the opportunity to choose to rest. But God cared about their oppression, and God reached out to deliver them to freedom. The Sabbath is a day for God’s people to remember with gratitude that they no longer live under the oppressive grasp of Egypt…they live in the open hands of their gracious and benevolent God. The Sabbath represented their freedom to rest, to not be driven to exhaustion.

Yet by Jesus’ time, the law that had been given as a gift to celebrate freedom from oppression was now being used to oppress once again. It was used more like a fist tightened around God’s people again. One of the curses of humanity is that we can take something gracious and life-giving and use it to squeeze the life out of each other. The examples in the gospel passage include the disciples picking grain to eat on the Sabbath and a man who is crippled being healed on the Sabbath. The religious sticklers say no picking grain on the Sabbath…no healing a crippled man on the Sabbath. To them, it doesn’t matter if you’re hungry, it doesn’t matter if you’re suffering, God would rather have you hunger and suffer until the next day, so that the Sabbath is observed.

And here is where the “it depends” approach to the law comes into play. Jesus, who came to reveal God’s ways, had a different understanding of the law in these particular cases. Now, don’t misunderstand…Jesus wasn’t coming to take away God’s commandments. But he needed to restore the spirit of these commandments which was to promote the health, the life, the well-being of humanity! These laws were given to help God’s people live together as free people, to remember and live in gratitude for what God had done. We see particularly in the commandment about the Sabbath, in addition to being a day of rest that is beneficial to our well-being, it is a celebration of the way in which God’s outstretched arm reaches into the world to free those who are unjustly squeezed by the fist of humanity.

The grain-picking and hand-healing are part of a much larger picture of Jesus as God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm once again extended into the world. Jesus came to free God’s people…all people…from this power of sin. In those days and still today sin has caused misguided human beings to distort God’s life-giving ways by transforming them into oppressive, imposing rules. But Jesus came to demonstrate that God’s power is for delivering humanity into freedom and life, especially those who are oppressed by human effort. So, Jesus

restores those who suffer…Jesus eats with all kinds of people, regardless of their status…Jesus calls disciples from professions that are considered by others to be unworthy of the life of discipleship.

God’s laws are intended to help us live peacefully together, to give everyone the opportunity to experience well-being and freedom. God does not intend God’s commandments to separate people into good and bad, worthy and unworthy, clean and unclean, in God’s favor and out of God’s favor, free and need to be controlled. Sabbath is a celebration of God’s liberating power, a gift of rest to a humanity who needs it but also an opportunity to celebrate this gift through worship and through works that share this message and experience of liberation with others.

This is just one of many times in which Jesus teaches God’s concern for the well-being of humanity in the face of those who use God’s law for oppression and control. Jesus proclaims himself, the Son of Man, as lord of the Sabbath, who has come to continue God’s work of liberation. Jesus does this for so many people he encounters along the way, and he does this also for us through his death and resurrection. Jesus is Lord of liberation, reaching into this world to free us from sin to live in freedom and well-being and gratitude, to live in recognition that our God doesn’t oppress, our God loves.

Sabbath is more than just a day; it is a way of living. We live in recognition that, because we are not God but are human beings we do need rest in our lives, as God commanded. We also celebrate and worship this God who frees us from those forces that makes us feel like we are running on a tread mill in life, many of which are human imposed. And because of Jesus, we understand that if the laws or commands of God are used in ways that squeeze the life out of any person or group of people than that is not God’s way. God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm set humanity free from that which binds us. By the hands of Jesus, ALL people receive dignity, well-being, and wholeness. Amen.