

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Psalm 103:1-8
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Sermon for August 28, 2022

AN ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Make a list, check it twice.

Our gospel reading for today finds Jesus where so many of the gospel stories find him, in church on a Sunday. Of course, it was a Jewish church, and they called it a synagogue. And it was a Jewish Sabbath, which would have been on a Saturday rather than a Sunday. But the point is the same. We find Jesus in so many Gospel accounts in a holy place of worship on the holy day of the week.

What happens in these various accounts always have one thing in common: Jesus performs some act of healing or instruction that elicits the disapproval of some of the Jewish traditionalists who are also in the synagogue, and then Jesus attempts to enlighten them about what it truly means to worship God in a special place on a special day.

Just so, in the account we read today, a woman who has been suffering from a crippling disability approaches Jesus during a synagogue service. Jesus cures her on the spot, and thereby incurs the indignation of the leader of the synagogue, “There are seven days in the week,” the synagogue official says in effect. “Couldn't you have waited another day to help this woman? She's been crippled for eighteen years, for goodness sake. What difference would one more day make for her? With so little at stake, why would you violate one of God's most sacred commandments to keep the Sabbath day holy by refraining from work?”

In response, Jesus as he always does points out that the commandment forbids us from engaging in activities that run contrary to God's own nature, not from

activities that are themselves reflections of God's nature. He illustrates this instruction by a fairly homely example of how even the Jews intuitively and reflexively acknowledge the rightness of helping an animal on the Sabbath, even though it might require labor. How much more so, then, would God approve of his children helping each other?

To us, freed as we are from the almost comical restrictions and prohibitions that were part and parcel of the Pharisaical mindset that prevailed in the time and place where Jesus came into the world, this seems obvious. We don't live in a world or a culture where carrying anything heavier than a dried fig is considered to be work, and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. We don't live in a world where boiling an egg is considered work, and therefore prohibited on a Sunday. We don't live in a world where you must walk no farther than 1000 yards from your home on a Sunday.

Or to put this another way, what we regard as acceptable worship is very different from what was regarded as acceptable worship in Jesus' time and place, and therefore the idiosyncrasies of that time and place make easy targets for our criticism and even ridicule.

But just because the peculiarities of ancient Jewish laws and practices make such easy targets for our modern and enlightened ridicule doesn't mean that the whole idea of there being an acceptable way of worshiping God and keeping his special day holy is something we've grown beyond, something that we can simply dismiss as unsophisticated and outmoded, a relic of a primitive and even absurd understanding of worship.

What's important to remember is that here, as always, Jesus is not giving us a set of rules, a set of specific do's and don'ts that apply in all times and places and circumstances. What Jesus is always demonstrating for us are heavenly principles, which we are then asked to apply to our specific time and place and circumstance, relying on our own sincere attempt, under the guidance of Christ's own Holy spirit within each one of us, to discern the application of those principles to our own lives.

So that's what I'd like us to think about today. In all the Sabbath stories like the one in our reading today from Luke, we notice that Jesus never ever disputes the importance of remembering the Sabbath, and keeping it holy, the Fourth of the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew word that we translate as Holy literally means to be set apart, and Jesus never once denies the importance of having a special day, the

Seventh day, that we set apart from the other six days, and treat it in such a way that it provides a special sort of sanctuary from the worldly concerns that normally command so much of our attention and effort.

Sundays these days don't command the respect from the culture that they did even when we all were young. Stores don't close, and Sunday dinners are pretty much a thing of the past. And there's little we can do individually about that. But we can take steps in our individual lives to give Sundays the honor of being set apart.

I'm going to suggest seven such steps. The list isn't meant to be exhaustive, and there may be some suggestions on it that seem silly or unnecessary or misguided. Maybe so. The idea of offering it is simply to stimulate individual reflection on what we each might do to make our separate Sundays special to God.

The first suggestion is: Watch your tongue.

The words that come out of our mouths is of central concern to Jesus and his followers. James put it perhaps most bluntly in his letter:

⁶And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of ^[a]iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of ^[b]nature; and it is set on fire by ^[c]hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

And Jesus himself repeatedly warns against the dangers of gossip and slander and deceit. "Let you yea be yea and your nay nay; all else is from the devil"

Few of us here, I believe, are prone to coarse or obscene language, and we can be thankful for that. I am constantly shocked and mortified by the language that floats around us all day in music and movies and all other forms of media. I am appalled when I hear young people in the gym talking with each other, even though they're obviously good kids.

So I don't think we need to remind ourselves not to swear or curse or speak profanely. But I would suggest that, on Sunday, we make a conscious effort not to say anything bad, or demeaning, or gossipy about anybody, for any reason, no matter how strong the temptation. And above all and over all, do not lie. To anyone. About anything. No little white lies. No lies to make people feel better about themselves. Nothing. Nothing but the truth, Your Honor.

The second suggestion is: to offer a sacrifice. And that means, to cut something out of your life, on Sunday. It could be simply to make a monetary donation, to your church or elsewhere. Or it could be a different form of sacrifice. The most obvious one is time, which is the most valuable thing any of us possess. Coming to church is a sacrifice of your time, of a couple of hours of your life. Do it, not out of habit, but out of a conscious expression of your gratitude to God. Or it could be sacrificing your time to call up an old friend, or to beautify a bit of God's creation, or to cherish a memory of someone who loved you and helped you. But whatever it is, do it as a conscious decision to offer that time to God, and as a remembrance of God's sacrifice of his beloved child, and of that beloved child's sacrifice of his life.

The third suggestion is to read your Bible. If you sacrifice your time by coming to church, you'll read your Bible of course. But if you don't come to church, for whatever reason, take time to read some portion of the Bible. For all its difficulties, for all its ambiguities, for all its complicated history, the Bible is the Word of God. Jesus read it and studied it and understood it and interpreted it for all of us. Jesus considered it to be the Word of God, and so should we. So on Sunday, set aside your other reading, and, at least for a few minutes, simply read the word of God.

The fourth suggestion is easy: Say grace.

In our most holy sacrament, and also in the great miracle of the loaves and fishes, it's emphasized that Jesus, before he ate or distributed food, was careful to say grace, to give thanks to God. This may seem like a small thing to us, but evidently to God, it's very important: that before we eat, we acknowledge Him.

Most of us eat several times a day, and in the hustle and bustle of life, the habit of giving thanks to God before we stick our fork into whatever's in front of us may be lost. The suggestion is that, on Sunday, at least, we make a conscious decision and practice, before we stick our forks into that inviting food in front of us, of taking a few seconds and remembering that our lives and everything that sustains them is a gift of God's grace and that we say Thank You.

The fifth suggestion, and this will sound a little odd, is that we hang out the laundry. The Bible in many places stresses the importance of confessing your sins before God. This is an aspect of Christian worship that we pretty much don't want to think about, but there's no question that Jesus puts it at the forefront of real

worship. The very first thing he says to begin his ministry is: Repent. That means: think about the things where you've come up short, and make the decision to change those things.

So my suggestion is that on Sunday, every Sunday, we take a few minutes at some point to think back, remember the mistakes we've made, the people we've hurt, and to hang that laundry out on the line, with the prayer that God's own spirit might dry them out, and make them fresh and smelling like new.

The sixth suggestion is that, at some point on Sunday, we isolate ourselves. On more than one occasion, Jesus exemplifies for us the importance of being alone with our Father. He sought that aloneness in the wilderness, on the mountain, in the Garden, in the closet.

And once we are alone, we're in a place where we can follow up on the seventh Sunday suggestion, the most important of all. The seventh suggestion is that we pray.

Praying in this church with each other is a wonderful thing; our Lord's own prayer is meant to stress the importance of praying together: Our Father...

But God's true relationship is not with a church, it's with you. You alone. God alone. You and God alone.

So the suggestion is, that every Sunday, you find some time and place to spend alone with God. It's really easy, once you get in the habit. It could be a closet, it could be a living room, it could be the front porch, it could be out on the lawn. And there's no time restraint or condition. There's only one condition. That you do it consciously, and deliberately, putting everything else aside, to be alone with God.

And that's it. That's my list. It may not be your list, but at least it might serve as a model for your list. The suggestion really is that each of us make a list of specific, actual things we can do, every Sunday, to demonstrate that we remember that this day is special, that this day is Holy, that this day is set apart to be a special meeting place between you and God.

And of course, simply making the list is not enough. The concluding suggestion is that, having made the list, keep it somewhere safe, and as Sunday draws to a close, take the list out, and check to see what still needs to be done before bedtime. Make

a list, check it twice. Call it your list of acceptable Worship. As an example of what I'm talking about, I've drawn up a copy of mine.

Watch your tongue; to **O**ffer a sacrifice; to **R**ead something from the Bible; to **S**ay grace over your food; to **H**ang your dirty laundry before God; to **I**solate ourselves; and to **P**ray.

WORSHIP.

And so, heavenly father, we pray this morning that Sunday be set aside, for each of us, in a serious way, as a day of respect and gratitude to You, and of companionship with you, that we may share the same relationship with you that our Lord and Savior also had, in whose name we pray.