

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 3, 2018.

Given our lessons this morning, let's call today "Straight talk Sunday."

We like straight talk, don't we? We like to know where we stand, and what it will mean for us if we do stand as directed, and what it might mean for us if we fail to stand as directed.

If we do obey, we hope for a reward. If we don't obey, we hope for mercy. Sometimes obedience is its own reward. Most humans get this concept. Most dogs don't. They expect a treat. We, on the other hand, are encouraged to take pride in our obedience. It is this pride that is our treat. Of course, what is also our treat, we hope, is that by obeying we avoid punishment.

It all gets a little complicated, both for parents and children, both for God and children of God. When we obey the commandments, do we do so in order to experience pride in obedience, or to avoid a time out, either a temporary time-out or a permanent time-out? When our children obey, are they looking for a verbal "that's a good boy or a good girl," or are they hoping for more? Ice-cream perhaps.

Straight talk is good if it accomplishes its goal. The parent goal for straight talk is the safety and welfare and happiness of the child. The child's goal for straight talk is clarity about boundaries. This can range from "how can I please mom and dad" to "what can I get away with."

The whole business of straight talk amongst humans is tricky. But so is the whole business of straight talk between God and us.

"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy." (**Deuteronomy 5:12-15**) Pretty straight forward. Work hard for six days and then take the seventh day for rest and contemplation and prayer. Or, as this morning's psalm (**Psalm 81**) suggests, "Sing with joy to God our strength and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob." A contemporary version of this straight talk might be "Make sure that your weekly schedule includes time to count your blessings. Don't work or play so hard that you don't have time to praise the Lord. And, to make sure that you have time, I am going to insist on at least one day a week."

The Pharisees, the letter-of-the-law people, took pride in obeying in the extreme, and, in so doing, missed some opportunities to love God and love neighbor. In today's gospel lesson (**Mark 2:23-3:6**), the hungry are fed and the lame are healed on the Sabbath. Commendable behavior? Not for the Pharisees. For them, these are disobedient acts. Rather than honor the good that Jesus is doing, the Pharisees conspire to silence him.

This kind of "obedience in the extreme" causes us to question the whole notion of keeping the Sabbath holy. Our response though is not to throw out the baby with the bath water, but to re-think the scope of obedience. Maybe we should view obedience more broadly. Shouldn't a good work on the Sabbath, like healing or teaching or helping of any kind, be seen as fulfillment of the law rather than a violation of the law?

The challenge, of course, is not to use "obedience in the extreme" as an excuse for not obeying. Obedience is still God's expectation and should remain our intent. Verse 12 of this morning's psalm uses this language: "stubbornness of their hearts to follow their own devices." The alternative to "obedience in the extreme" is not disobedience, but obedience that the Risen Lord would respect. It is God's devices that we are to follow, not our own.

Such a life style – let's call it "expanded obedience" – is demanding. It is as demanding, maybe more demanding, than "obedience in the extreme." St. Paul speaks to this demanding, discretionary lifestyle in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (**2 Corinthians 4:5-12**). He is responding to the grumbling and second-guessing that is taking place in this early Christian community.

Paul acknowledges the challenge, but quickly puts the challenge in perspective. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." If this was an inaugural address, these words would be engraved in marble at a monument somewhere in DC.

Paul goes on: "For while we live" – and here he is speaking of himself and the other apostles – "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. So death is at work in us, but life in you."

Keeping the Sabbath holy is giving life to others. Not taking the day off, but considering how best to serve, even if that service seems a technical violation of the Sabbath commandment. “Considering how best to serve” might mean prayer and study and yes, worship on the Sabbath. You and I are keeping the Sabbath right now.

For Jesus, the man with the withered hand deserved better, and so Jesus healed him, right in front of the Pharisees and on the Sabbath. He didn’t wait a day so that the letter of the law could be honored. He acted, knowing that this technical violation of the Sabbath, this apparent act of disobedience, would anger the Pharisees. Yes, the man was healed, but the opponents were angered.

Did Jesus use the man with the withered hand to make a point? Maybe. Jesus knew how to provoke. But these acts, so irritating to those in authority, were always, in the mind of Jesus, acts of obedience to his Father. And he always found validation for his behavior in the lives of his Hebrew ancestors. In today’s gospel, he cites David. Jesus didn’t invent the concept of Messiah. He fulfilled this promise, this dream. He was obedient to the promise. Obedient to the dream.

This obedience cost Jesus his life. And our obedience to the commandments might well cost us, maybe even our lives. But, as God raised Jesus from the dead, so God will raise us to new life. And not just in the life hereafter, but right now, in this life. This sensation of keeping the Sabbath holy, through an expanded understanding of obedience, is what today’s Collect describes as “profitable for us.”

We get the concept of profit. This is “straight talk.” We understand that there is a relationship between hard work and profit. We see this relationship in school and in business and in the home. We hear the word “profit” and our ears perk up. Maybe that’s why Christian people are so alert. We are striving for profit by honoring the Sabbath through hard work, including helping others. Not obedience in the extreme, but expanded obedience.

We really do have something in common with the dogs. We love treats too. And, in a manner that some find hard to believe, obedience to the commandments, be it in the extreme or expanded, is a treat in itself. For their treats, dogs offer a big Woof. For our treats, we say simply AMEN.