



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist
Post Office Box 441 / 307 Federal Street
Milton, Delaware 19968



www.saintjohnsmilton.org

The Rev. Thomas M. White

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
June 3, 2018

Let us pray: Almighty God, your heart ever beating with compassion, by your Son's example may we follow always the law of love. Renew and energize our bodies and souls by Sabbath rest and worship in order to serve our neighbor with your compassion; through Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord. Amen.

Jesus and his disciples are journeying through a grain field, most likely Jesus teaching them as they go. As they walk, the disciples grab some grain from the stalks to munch on in their hunger. Whereupon some Pharisees, the first-century equivalent of church elders, are deeply offended and complain to Jesus that he and his disciples are violating the Sabbath, the day of rest commanded by God, first by traveling and then by harvesting grain. Jesus rebuts their criticism, not because Jesus regards the Sabbath commandment as in any way trivial or unimportant, but rather because Jesus contends that at times certain demands of the Law are rightly set aside in order to promote a person's well-being or out of necessity in an emergency. Jesus reminds these Pharisees of the time King David did something even more sacrilegious, eating consecrated bread reserved only for the priests to eat. David, you see, was a fugitive, fleeing King Saul who was intent on killing David. Jesus contends that the priest who fed David with the consecrated bread, did nothing wrong by breaking the strict letter of divine law. By satisfying David's hunger, that priest sustained the life of the one God had chosen and ordained to replace Saul as king. So Jesus is teaching that the love of law is superceded by the law of love, in this case helping with kindness and compassion any person in need, even Jesus' disciples in their hunger, even on the Sabbath.

Then Jesus enters the synagogue and meets a man with a withered hand. Knowing the Pharisees are waiting to chastise him if he heals the man on the Sabbath, Jesus asks his would-be-accusers whether it is lawful to do good and to save life on the Sabbath or, by implication, whether he should honor the Sabbath even if it means refraining from helping someone in need. Jesus, unable to deny the demands of compassion, without hesitation, heals the man's withered hand, even on the Sabbath. Jesus refused to put rules, even divine ones, over people's needs and well-being, and broke the rules whenever compassion required it. Healing can't wait a day!

Let me share a true, but sad, story. There is a devout Christian lady who never misses Sunday worship, except in the most unavoidable of circumstances. She diligently strives to obey each of the Ten Commandments. She reads her Bible and prays daily, many times, and is ever-present at the church's weekly Bible study. She is revered by her fellow Christians as a pillar of the church. There is one problem, at least for me. She has disowned her son, having shunned him now for many years. Her son is also a devout Christian. He seeks to live out his faith in Jesus, seeking to do good however and wherever he can, wanting to help any in need. He too worships, he too reads his Bible, he too prays to God. He is disowned, though, by his mother because he happens to be gay. The love of law, it seems to me, has won out with his mother over the law of love. Where, I wonder, is the love Jesus calls us to embody, where is the compassion with which Jesus wishes that we care for one another, where is the dignity with which God desires we treat every person? There is too much hatred, alienation, and division in the world for God's people, followers of Jesus, to be adding to it.

Friday evening a beloved member of our parish, Jane Duffield, called me with word that she was home recovering from her recent surgery. Jane's daughter has been staying with her because Jane is still so weak, but her daughter needed someone to stay with her Mom yesterday between 9 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon. I immediately called the chair of St. John's In-Reach Ministry, Sheila Robinson. In short order, Sheila mobilized Sally Fox and Jean Skocypec to cover those six hours. Sheila called me last night to, of all things, thank me for the special blessing of spending those hours with so interesting and so delightful a lady as Jane. I share this story to ask the question: what if the need for companionship for Jane had been for today instead of yesterday. What about the Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy"? Would there be any question where Sheila, Sally, and Jean should be? Serving and worshipping God at Jane's house on the Sabbath rather than here! Let us never love law so much that we forget to honor and serve the law of love! The biblical witness is clear: God gives us the Law to help us get the most out of life, to help make our life as abundantly full as it can be. But part of the Law's intent is to help us get more out of life by helping others. Sheila, Sally, and Jean learned this truth anew yesterday in helping Jane and receiving in return as much, or more, as they had given.

Sabbath rest and Sabbath worship are not to be neglected. We do so at our spiritual peril. God in infinite wisdom ordains both. Sabbath rest is needed and Sabbath worship is essential so that renewed physically and spiritually, we can return replenished to the world in which we find ourselves to be God's love to others. The spirit of the Sabbath, the spirit of the entire Law, indeed, the Spirit of God is love above all else. Love that feeds a future king of Israel with off-limits bread. Love that heals a withered hand, even on the Sabbath. Love that embraces a gay son and welcomes him home. Love that brings companionship to the sister in Christ who is ill and weak and alone. Love that feeds the hungry. Love that...what is your answer?!

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.