Jeremiah 17:21-27, John 5:10-18

“Who needs the Sabbath anyway?”

 Welcome to the Sabbath service today. It is a Sunday when we celebrate the presence of God by taking time out of our busy schedules to glorify the Lord. A few weeks ago as I was greeting people on their way out after the service someone shook my hand and then asked me: Pastor, were you weed eating your lawn a last Sunday? I thought back and said yes, actually I was. And he responded by saying, Oh. I knew the way that he asked it was not in a complementary or congratulatory way, but one more along the lines of, and this person didn’t say this, but it was along the lines of: we don’t do that around here.

 As I was preparing for this sermon I had the chance to share this Scripture with session on Wednesday evening, by the way you have an awesome session. Listen to what was decided just this last Wednesday: New Beginnings, Great Adventure, Israel, Italy, worship times starting September 9, etc. But as I was saying I shared this Scripture on the Sabbath with them and then with the men’s prayer breakfast and they gave me some great insight that I hadn’t known in the past. Apparently in this region of Lancaster County, more than in any of the surrounding areas, farmers will not go out into their fields to work on Sundays. In other neighboring counties farmers will, but not here. This culture of the Sabbath in which we live here is a very unique and felt one.

 This sermon is not one of these where I pick up on an issue that has come up, a current event and try to interpolate and bring it into the Scripture. I don’t have a neat story about Orel Hersheiser to bring home the point. No, it is just one that finds itself nestled in John as we make our way through this Gospel. Curious, though, that this topic of the Sabbath comes up not long after it has been brought to my attention that in this culture the Sabbath means something far more than it does anywhere else.

 Now, the Sabbath is not a matter of life and death but it is a lifestyle. Although in Jeremiah it is a matter of life and death for whole community of Israel. Obeying the Sabbath is one of the least interesting topics you may want to hear about but what I think you will find is that our approach and our understanding of the Sabbath will ultimately affect how we view our Savior Jesus Christ as either one who gives us freedom or gives us a set of rules. I hope at the end you will be answer the question of who needs the Sabbath with the response: all of us.

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One of my favorite movies when I was growing up was Chariots of Fire. If you haven’t seen that, then you really need to sit down with your family and watch it. It is the epitome of a family friendly movie that has a great message to it as well. Eric Lidell was a real person who was a world class sprinter whose parents were missionaries in China. His best event was the 100 yard dash but he could also do well in the 200 and the 400. He went to boarding school in Scotland so he was invited to run for the British in the Olympics. He was supposed to win the 100 yard dash but the qualifyings were on Sunday and he had made it his principle that he would never run on Sundays. He refused and so was not able to run in the 100. But he did win a gold in the 400 and in the 200. Everyone expected him to win the 100 but he refused because of the Sabbath.

 I always imagined what I would have done if I were in his place, but as a family we always used to go out and play tennis together on Sunday afternoon. What if Bolt said he would not run on Sunday, they would probably change the event so that it would not be held on Sunday. What if Tiger said he would not play on Sunday, then he would not have won the 14 majors that he did, although in the last 3 years he hasn’t really been that present on Sunday. But here was one who was willing to give up a gold medal for the sake of his faith.

 If we look at our Scripture in Jeremiah today he lifts up the observance of the Sabbath as a matter of life and death. This may sound harsh to us today in the 21st century, but it was pretty common in Jeremiah’s day. God commands the prophet to tell the people: if you obey the Sabbath you will receive blessings. If you do not then you will be destroyed. Not much of a choice. Let’s see, I think I’ll obey the Sabbath.

 This type of interpretation was present in Jesus’ day. The Jewish leaders considered the breaking of the Sabbath as a capital offense. In the John Scripture we find that the people first started to plot to kill Jesus as a result of his breaking the Sabbath. In fact most scholars believe that Jesus was crucified because of his stance on the Sabbath. I guess it is a big deal after all, isn’t. Not just a little insignificant topic. But what we find in all of Scripture as a consistent truth, including this Scripture in John, is that Jesus breaks the Sabbath rules that the scribes have laid out. Let’s look at today’s Scripture in John.

 The miracle already took place last week, he commands the man to do what once he is healed? Get up, take up your mat, and go home. Those three things. According to the 1st century interpretation of the Torah called the Mischna states in 10:9 that it was forbidden to carry your mat, or your bedding, on the Sabbath. Jesus was a rabbi, he knew the law, he knew the Mishna, so he commanded the man he healed to break the Sabbath, and this isn’t the only time in Scripture that he does this. Throughout his ministry Jesus heals people, the guy brought through the roof and others, or he tells his disciples to pick grain to get something to eat on the Sabbath, and encouraged other activities that flew in the face of the Sabbath rules so he could put himself up against the law as being something different.

 It wasn’t the Sabbath that he was opposed to, but rather a legalism that allowed the religious leaders to be in a place where they say in vs. 12 who is the person who made you break the Sabbath. Remember they say immediately after the guy just tells them that he has been healed, how dare he. Not, praise the Lord, what a miracle. We praise you Lord for your faithfulness.

 Their focus on the law and on the Sabbath allowed them to completely miss the miracle, miss the healing that Jesus was able to bring about. That is a lesson for us. Scripture is filled with Jesus challenging the Sabbath for the purpose of revealing to all who he is. The key to who he is can be found in Matthew 12:6 where we read that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

 For some reason we see the 10 commandments as being given to us directly by God. If you break one of them, if you murder or commit adultery or dishonor your parents that is a big deal. But breaking the Sabbath is not normally seen on this scale. I remember preaching on the Sabbath a decade ago and afterward a pillar of the church came up and said, well, that was a dud. Maybe it was the sermon, but I bet you it was the topic that was not interesting. But living here in Lancaster County makes the Sabbath interesting.

 There isn’t that much exciting about learning about the Sabbath, sorry. But Jesus’ approach to the Sabbath is that it is a gift from God, and not a burden. When it becomes a burden then he goes out of his way to make a point that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and he proves it. The Sabbath was given to us as a gift so that our freedom in Christ could be realized. We were not made in order to follow rules, but rather we were made to live a life of freedom in a relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ.

 So who needs the Sabbath? Remember Jesus tells us that he came to fulfill the law? Well, that includes the Sabbath as well doesn’t it? How does Jesus fulfill the Sabbath? He reinterprets it through his statement that His Father is still working so he has to work as well. Jesus explains that the Sabbath is not a rule for us to follow, but rather a blessing for us to take advantage of. Who needs the Sabbath? We all do in order to understand the blessings that God is working to provide us. These blessings are better realized if we take the time to rest on a day throughout the week and purposefully take that day not as a burden, but as a blessing.

 We can see this blessing as individuals as we are called to weekly gather ourselves and rest physically but also allow ourselves to rest in a way that we can take inventory of our relationship with Jesus. Of course coming to church on your Sabbath will help with that inventory part of it. Yes, we need a Sabbath to ask how are we doing in our relationship and I hope when you leave today you will ask that question of yourselves as you sit around the lunch table. What do you do as a family to observe the Sabbath as individuals, but also as a family?

 How about us a family here at First Presbyterian. We are a family aren’t we? As a community celebrating the Sabbath how do we do that? How about having periodic times of fellowship when we can break bread together over this community of Strasburg I know that I will never cut my lawn again on a Sunday out of respect for the Sabbath is so strongly felt. Even if my Sabbath is Monday out of respect for the culture in which we find ourselves that has to take precedence.

 But as a church it has to go deeper than cutting our grass. It goes to having the freedom that Jesus displayed and passed on to us to interpret the laws as a gift, not a burden. This cannot be a church that misses the miracle of the Savior because we are afraid of liability, or we have policies that shackle us, not chain us, but shackle us to not being able to use all of our members. The balancing act that Jesus was able to pull off, even if it did cost him his life, was to heal, provide food, work for the good of people even on the Sabbath so that individuals would come to know him.

 Who needs the Sabbath? Well, we all do so that we can experience the freedom that it provides in order to reach out with others with that same love. Amen.