

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Dec 16th 2016

Desiring Patient Fidelity

Here we are in the third week of Advent. I like the focus of the Isaiah reading on “keep the Sabbath free from profanation” – what does that mean in 2016? I recall growing up at a time when the civil “encouragement” of respecting Sunday as the Lord’s Day was the norm rather than the exception.

So-called blue laws (which found their inception in colonial and earlier times) prevented commercial activity on Sundays, regardless of the merchant’s faith tradition (or absence thereof). I think I might have been 8 – 10 years old before we could regularly buy groceries on Sundays, or cars, or even clothing.

What I also remember from those years was a strong sense of family-ness on Sundays. We would always go to 9:00 a.m. morning mass, almost always have a large early afternoon roast beef meal, and then visit grandparents (and aunts and uncles and cousins) on the other side of town. When we returned home we ate leftover hot roast beef sandwiches and watched Walt Disney or Bonanza on television. As society changed and those blue laws were repealed, as the Church created the option to “anticipate” our Sunday mass time, as we aged, much of the weekly family time on Sundays and its “specialness” diminished. But I do miss my hot roast beef sandwiches and the warmth and safety of those times!

A good friend of mine is a very conservative Jewish man who scrupulously keeps kosher and observes the Sabbath. Ed’s preparations amaze me. He travels internationally a great deal for his job and on vacations, and has children and grandchildren living in Israel that he frequently visits. He seems to effortlessly meet his Sabbath and kosher obligations regardless of the other demands on his life. I know that he will not be available for a phone conversation, or an email response, from sundown to sundown on Friday/Saturday. I know that if we share a meal he will have a more difficult time than I in selecting food choices. Ed patiently explains some of the kosher and Sabbath restrictions as we discuss his faithfulness, and I am always impressed by his quiet commitments. He clearly is someone who “keeps the Sabbath free from profanation.”

What is the difference between how Ed observes the Sabbath and our Sunday sabbaths from my youth in the fifties? I think when Ed keeps kosher and observes the Sabbath, he is connecting the actions of his sacrifices with his core faith and spirituality. His choices make sense to him because they are consistent with what he believes. He “holds to the covenant” by how he lives his daily life. His Sabbath is a special day, not just one of relaxing for its own sake, but one that is not like the other days of the week, one where he can relax in and with the Lord. He is not merely fulfilling an obligation, but is acting on his commitment.

And what of us? Do our sabbaths, however we characterize them, connect to our core beliefs? Do we follow the spirit of “Sabbath” by retreating for a brief period from the distractions of the world to be restfully quiet in God’s presence? Do we consciously deny ourselves of some legitimate good so we can feel more clearly detachment from worldly concerns and connection to the divine within us?

Keeping the Sabbath free from profanation, and keeping the covenant of the Lord, is hard, intentional work. There is preparation, and action, and reflection, and then changes in how we act in the future. It

is a way of life, not merely a weekend day. It is a sacred manifestation of gratitude to the Lord from whom all comes to us.

And so my prayer today is for the grace to keep and nourish the gift of the Sabbath and the covenant of the Lord.

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