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“The *Why* of It All”

In the church, we talk a lot about what we do and how we do it. We talk about our Sunday school programs, our outreach projects, our fellowship gatherings, and our worship services. We talk about how we support these ministries with budgets, policies, committees, and staff. But in the process, we sometimes lose touch with the why.

Why do we drag our kids out of bed to go to Sunday school? Why do we do community outreach? Why do we gather for fellowship? Why do we show up for worship? What happens when ministry just becomes another thing on our already long to-do list? What happens when we forget the why?

When we lose touch with the why, we are in danger of losing touch with our mission and vision. And when we lose touch with our mission and vision, we forget that our programs and ministries are not the end in themselves. They are meant to order the rest of our lives. They are the means to a greater end—to know Christ and to make him known by our love for all.

When we forget the why, traditions have the tendency to turn into idols—false gods. We worship the thing instead of the One the thing points to. Like cats chasing a finger, we get fixated on the sign instead of what it’s pointing toward. And we end up saying: “But we’ve always done it that way.”

In today’s lesson from Luke, we meet a synagogue leader who forgot the why behind the commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” The Ten Commandments were not given in a vacuum. They weren’t just random rules God felt like giving to see if we’d follow them. They have a greater purpose. They have a why.

The commandments appear twice in the Old Testament—once in Exodus, once in Deuteronomy. The first comes after Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. The second comes forty years later, as a new generation prepares to enter the Promised Land. The words are almost the same, but the emphasis shifts. Exodus points to God resting on the seventh day of creation. Deuteronomy points to God freeing the Israelites from slavery and a seven-day work week.

If God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, took a day off, then surely those made in his own image need a day off. That day off is a gift—a day to delight in the wonder and beauty of creation, a day to rest from hard work, a day for the mind, body, and spirit to find renewal. God never meant the Sabbath to be a burden, but a gift.

But when the commandment is disconnected from the why, it can become a burden. That's what happens with the synagogue leader. If he had remembered the why, he would have seen that this healing doesn't violate the Sabbath. This healing actually fulfills the Sabbath—it embodies rest and renewal in mind, body, and spirit.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer saw this danger when he wrote the preface to the first English prayer book: "There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted." For centuries, worship was done in Latin. At first, this made sense because most people spoke Latin. But as languages like English, German, and French became more common, the Church continued to lead worship in Latin. Why? Because that's what they'd always done. They worshiped the tradition instead of what the tradition pointed to.

For these church leaders, doing what they'd always done was less about preserving the traditions of the Church and more about preserving their own positions of power and control. We, too, should check our motives when we start to say, "But we've always done it that way."

In light of the corruption born out of a church who forgot her why, Reformers like Cranmer, Luther, and Calvin echoed today's words from Jesus: "You hypocrites! Your religion has become less about freedom for the oppressed, and more about personal gain on the backs of the oppressed." Whether the synagogue leader was ignorant or had an agenda, we don't know. But either way, he forgot the why. And forgetting the why turned God's command into a burden instead of a gift—into a means to maintain control instead of a means to relinquish control to God.

It seems we too have forgotten the why of the Sabbath. We don't necessarily see the Sabbath as a burden. We see the Sabbath as optional, even as we see other commandments as essential. Picking and choosing which commandments creates a slippery slope toward judging people for sinning differently than we do, which is our favorite mode of self-justification. God help us stop the hypocrisy!

Sabbath literally means "to stop." And we've forgotten how to stop. We live in a world that has convinced us that the world will stop spinning if we stop. We believe the lie that it is all up to us to make the world go 'round. But if we stop long enough, we realize we are not in control. And that scares us. But that is exactly the point of Sabbath: to remind us we are not in control. And yet, the world still goes 'round even when we stop.

Friends, this is the good news of the Sabbath. You are not in control. The Sabbath reminds us: there is a God—and it's not you. The world will not stop spinning if you rest for a day. In fact, when you stop, you are likely to discover a whole new world—not built by human hands, but by the grace of God in Christ. A world that is complete in and with and through Christ—a truth we discover when we find our rest in God.

I read an article recently that asked, “Am I living for God, or from God?” In light of today’s lesson, we might ask: “Am I living for rest, or from rest?” The difference may sound trivial, but it isn’t. Living for God can lead to a religion that is performative. Living from God leads to a religion that is transformative. Living for rest works from the outside in. Living from rest works from the inside out.

The outside-in approach obsesses over the how and the what. It values appearances over transformation. It blinds us to others’ needs. It drives us to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves with others. And finding our identity that way is exhausting. God does not want us to live this way. God wants us to find rest in him—where our true identity is found.

The inside-out approach keeps us centered on the why. Living from rest keeps us God-focused. And when we are God-focused, we see the world as God sees it. We notice the ones the world overlooks—like the woman in today’s lesson who suffered for eighteen years.

When we see with God’s eyes, we learn to love like God and live like Jesus. We stop defining people by their brokenness. We start defining them as God defines them—as God defines us: beloved sons and daughters. That was true for the woman—a daughter of Abraham. It is true for us—children of God by adoption through baptism.

At staff meeting this week, Ashley shared a story about a teenage boy who craved going to church on Sundays. In a world where church is optional, a teenage boy wanted to go to church! Why? In the boy’s own words, church was the only place where he didn’t have to prove himself. At school, he had to prove himself academically, socially, athletically. But at church, he was loved simply for who God made him to be. He didn’t have to perform. He could just be.

If it already isn’t, I pray that our programs and ministries, our hows and whats, create space where we can come and just be. On the surface, there are as many reasons for being here today as there are people in the pews. But deep down, I believe we’re all here for the same reason. We long to be seen—not as the world sees us—but as God sees us. God sees us with a love that wants to transform us from the inside out. A love that gives rest to the weary and wounded. A love that opens our eyes to see as God sees and to love as Christ loves.

A love whose why is this: to help us stand up straight with joy and confidence in the person God made us to be through Christ Jesus. Amen.