

It's Lent, time to make a special effort to recognize our sin and repent of it, to admit the gap between our ways and God's ways, our thoughts and God's thoughts. Today we're called to do that in the most basic way – in regard to our relationship with God. So, let's try to tell the truth about ourselves and God.

The most basic truth we can tell is that the Bible has it right, in what it says in Genesis (when the serpent tells the man and woman that if they eat the forbidden fruit they'll be "like God," and they eat it) – we want to be like God. Or, what we think God is like. Since, we're not God, we get it all wrong. We think of God as powerful, autonomous, independent, free to do whatever God wants. So that's what we're always striving to be-powerful, autonomous, free to do whatever we want, doing all we can to deny that we're creatures, created by God, unique in our goodness and calling to be God's image to the world, but creatures none-the-less.

We're encouraged in this desire, this striving, because today's world pitches basically the same "lie" as the serpent – "you can be like God." You're the center, the focus, the measure of all things; those are the assumptions we're taught to live by. So, more than ever we grasp for power, seek autonomy, reject dependence on God, arrogantly strive to do what we want. And make a mess of the world.

History is full of examples of that mess. One that's about to unfold, is that we'll soon be able to "design" our children – choose every physical trait. That's just another example of our efforts to take a God-given gift, and instead of accepting it with gratitude, trying to turn it into something we can use for ourselves.

It all began with distorting our identity as creatures created in God's image for the special responsibility of caring for the world, into one where we use every gift, including one another, to lift ourselves up, be like God.

God knew we needed help to resist that tendency. That's why the Ten Commandments begin as they do. The first four focus on God, on our responsibilities to, our relationship with God. They begin there because what we need most in order to be truly human is to remember that we are not God. That's why the first says, "You shall have no other God's (including yourself) before me." And why the next one says, not to worship anything we make (no matter how impressed with it we may be). And why then next says not to use God's name lightly (which we would only do if we've forgotten who is God and who is creature).

That's why the last of the first four calls us to set aside and honor a special time to focus on God, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." "Holy" means special, separate, set apart for God. God even tells us how to do that, "Six days shall you labor and do all your work. But the 7th day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son, or your daughter, your live-stock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it (set it apart for a holy purpose).

God gives us a great gift in this commandment. The gift of rest: because we can trust that God's abundant providing will not cease when we stop working, we can rest. But also the gift of relationship: because God loves us and wants our love in return, if we remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, as a day to remember God's blessings and give thanks and praise for them, we'll share in God's holiness and God's divine purpose, we'll come to know God's goodness and love. As we do, we receive another gift, the gift of identity - who we are as creatures, unique in all creation, able to be God's image, God's partners in caring for one another and creation, as God intended us to be. We'll accept what we've always resisted - that we're not God but creatures, and celebrate our status as ones uniquely blessed and called by God. In learning that we're dependent on God and not ourselves for life, that we belong to God, not ourselves, that life's not about getting what we want but giving God what God wants, we'll learn how to find true life, and freedom, and joy.

So, Sabbath is God's great gift, one that holds blessings of rest, relationship, and identity. The mess we've made because we've refused to rest and ceaselessly striven to be and acquire more, resisted relationship and pursued autonomy, and rejected our identity as creatures and sought to be "like God" instead, shows us how important the Sabbath is. The life and future of our souls and of the world are bound up with how we "remember it and keep it holy." Sabbath is no little thing, some option God's given, to do with as we please.

But like every other gift God gives - from our unique status as the "image of God" to all creation, which we've sought to twist into being God instead, to the gift of life in our own children, which we've often distorted in trying to make them in our image, so we'll see ourselves affirmed in them, and which now we can go even further with, designing even their appearance into what we want - we've tried to make the gift of Sabbath into something for ourselves, something focused not on our relationship with God, but on us and what we want.

That's why all four Gospels tell of Jesus' anger at what he finds in the temple. Here he's no gentle shepherd carrying a lost lamb, no quiet healer cleansing a leper, no playful teacher sitting with children. Here his anger burns hotter than anywhere else. Why? Why did worship matter so much to Jesus?

Because a place of worship, a place with a holy purpose, a place set aside for people to gather to give God thanks and praise, to hear God's word of love and grace and challenge, and struggle with it's meaning for their life with God and each other, had been taken over by a very selfish human agenda - profit!

He was angry because what was at stake was much more than the injustice of the poor not being able to afford animals for sacrifice, or of those exchanging money or selling them making huge profits. What was at stake was God - people knowing and loving the one, true God. By "using" the Sabbath for themselves, the people were turning away from their relationship with God and the gift of life God sought to give. If the Temple became just another place for people to focus on themselves, be it for profit, popularity, security, power, good feelings, then it was just one more place where the serpent's lie was in control.

That lie has always been appealing and today it's promoted by our culture. So, even if we don't make the Sabbath a day like any other we keep the focus on ourselves in other ways, making it the day we can be most "like God," like our false image of God, and do what we want: shop, play, hang out, or hang with. And even if we don't work, catch up, or do things for our pleasure somewhere else, what we do even here, on the Sabbath, still gets distorted because the focus is not on God but on us, on what "I'm getting out of it."

Just getting here is not enough. Remember, Jesus got angry not at people who weren't in the Temple but those who were. Angry because God gave the Sabbath as a gift and commanded us to keep it as a treasure, and in the temple neither was being done. Angry because they'd shifted Sabbath's focus from God to themselves.

The early church sought to recover what Sabbath was meant to be, to shift the focus back to God. So the word they used for worship was "liturgy," which means "work of the people." "Work of the people," done for someone else - God! Done together - not alone! Shared start to finish - not dropped in and out of as interest or time allow. That's our work, our first, fundamental task as God's people, because God is worthy of it, because we need to do it, so our view of God and of ourselves, doesn't fall prey to the, "you can be like God" lie we're so eager to believe.

A lot of time has passed since that recovery. What would Jesus think of what he'd see today?

Let's not be too quick to congratulate ourselves because we don't take advantage of people's needs to sell them things at high prices. Just because we're not here for financial profit, doesn't mean we're not here for some other kind. What **do** we come for? To share in the work of the people - give thanks and praise, hear God's word, be challenged and inspired by it, renew our commitment and give our gifts, all of which teaches us, reminds us, shows us, who God is, who we are as a child of God, and who we are as God's people? Or, do we come, in one way or another, to get something for ourselves? We reveal the truth about this all the time:

In our openness to newness in worship forms and music, which are meant to help our "liturgy" our work together, be something people of all ages and backgrounds can share.

In our welcoming the sharing of children in our liturgy, so that they may know that we're grateful for them and their gifts, and that they, too, are a full part of our faith family.

In support for those who share about a mission trip, our celebrating their passion and commitment for the people and the work, even if we've heard similar expressions before.

In commitment to do the rest of the work of church, all of which is secondary to what we do here, be it meal preparation, committee work, bulletin boards or displays, fellowship, hanging with friends, during one of the other 167 hours of the week, as well as the courage to call others to do the same.

In our recognition of the need to deal with our egos even here, so that we see our sharing of special talents as a gift we can give to our shared "work," not an opportunity to be lifted up as a performance.

In our willingness to give whatever gift we have, to stick with it, even if we have difficulty with a person or a group, because we have that gift to give.

We're awash in the world's "you can be like God" lie, and the "what's in it for me," assumptions it produces, and thus in danger of losing the Sabbath, and work of worship, it calls us to. In danger because in wanting to be "like God," lord of our own life, we've lost the zeal for the Lord, Lord's house, Lord's day, that consumed Jesus and ignited his anger. We're content to keep quiet, never remind each other that the focus of our faith, the focus of the Sabbath and worship, is to be on God, not us, on giving to God, not getting ourselves. We keep quiet, even though our worship and learning, are diminished, distorted, by this individualistic, self-focus.

The serpent's lie has always sought to turn worship away from the true and living God and toward us. We're always in danger of making golden calves of ourselves and becoming a people of self-obsessed idols. We hunger for selfless love; but if all the church feeds is the love of self, we and the world will remain hungry.

The word Gospel means good news – good news of God's love, come to us in Jesus. The word Gospel also means truth – truth of how God loves us in Jesus. Today we proclaim the Gospel, the good news and the truth that comes to us through Jesus anger, his cleansing the Temple. Today, we must see, he was angry with us.

Lord Jesus, give us the grace to hear your word to us today day, as we walk behind you toward your cross.
We don't like to be told the truth and we will avoid the truth and evade it any way that we can.

But here we are, in the house of God, gathered under the judging and transforming Word of God.
Help us to hear, and hearing to do your word, even when its truth is hard to hear, and even harder to do.

With you we give thanks for the gift of the Sabbath –the opportunity to rest from work,
... so that we can give you thanks and praise and come to know and serve you better.
Help us to receive this for the gift that it is – by remembering it and keeping it holy, dedicated to you.

We thank you for your passion, your zeal, for your Father, his house, and his worship,
... and, yes, for your anger, at those who distorted what was meant to honor him with thanks and praise
...into a way of serving themselves.

Help us to see how much true worship matters, about God, ourselves, and life itself.
Help us examine our worship to see how, we too, in our own ways may distort this precious gift and work
...into something focused on us, that serves us,
...rather than what it's meant to be a holy time, dedicated, focused on you,
...with thanks and praise, with learning and growing in faith,
... seeking always seeking to love and follow you more faithfully.

We thank you, too, for the foolishness of the gospel,
...which proclaims that the cross, the way of self-giving love, is the way to life.

Help us to resist the lies of the world
...that say we must focus on ourselves, accumulate power and wealth, in order to have life.
Help us to trust that your cross how relationships are restored between heaven, humans, and all creation.
Help us trust, as you did, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
... and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

In gratitude and praise we look beyond the cross to the empty tomb and the promise of the resurrection,
...and pray that you will be our guide as we pick up our cross and follow.

These things we pray, sure of your mercy and guidance.

For those who are mocked, those who are ridiculed, those who are marginalized and dismissed.

For these we pray, recognizing their often unseen pain;
... help us do more to reach out to the homeless, the friend-less, the ignored, and forgotten.

For those so enmeshed in the things of this world that they have dismissed the cross,
... along with any notion of self-sacrifice or responsibility to those around them.

For these we pray that your might inspire compassion in those who have forgotten the least of these.

And we pray for ourselves, that we might come to recognize our need for worship,
... owning the ways we focus on ourselves rather than God,
... the ways we worship ourselves rather than God, anguish, and apathy, the ways we trust the world's
wisdom rather than the foolishness of the cross.

As those who seek to be faithful to your Father and ours we pray for those known to us with special
needs

We pray in your name and for your father's glory.

