



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JUNE 3, 2018
FOUNDERS DAY

Are They Still Watching? Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

Do you ever feel like someone is watching you?

Late one night, a burglar broke into a house that he thought was empty. He tiptoed through the living room but suddenly froze in his tracks when he heard a loud voice say, "Jesus is watching you."

Silence returned to the house, so the burglar crept forward again. "Jesus is watching you," the voice boomed again.

The burglar stopped dead in his tracks. He was frightened. Frantically, he looked all around the room. In a dark corner, he spotted a bird cage and in the cage was a parrot. He asked the parrot, "Was that you who said Jesus is watching me?" "Yes," said the parrot. The burglar breathed a sigh of relief, then asked the parrot, "What is your name?" "Clarence," said the bird. "That is a dumb name for a parrot," sneered the burglar. "What idiot named you Clarence?" The parrot said, "The same idiot who named the rottweiler Jesus."

Do you ever feel like someone is watching you? It may not be a rottweiler, but someone is. It may well be Jesus, but most assuredly it is someone who is watching you through the lens of a camera. Cameras are everywhere! They are mounted on buildings, telephone poles, overpasses, and even in our doorbells. If they are not permanently fixed, they are in the hands and pockets of just about every person we meet.

It is estimated that In New York City there are around seventeen thousand public and private security cameras watching people move about the city. London, England, however, beats all other cities for the highest ratio of cameras to citizens at something like one to fourteen. That means that there are in the neighborhood of half a million security cameras watching the citizens and visitors of London at any given moment. Be assured that our fair city has its share of lenses focused on you. Smile! Someone is watching you!

There were no cameras in Jesus' day, but there were lots of eyes and many of them were focused on him. We just read Mark's account of the time Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grainfield on the sabbath. Some of them were hungry and began plucking heads of grain and munching on them. Immediately, some Pharisees burst on the scene accusing Jesus of violating the sabbath law against work. Have you ever wondered what the Pharisees were doing in the grainfields on the sabbath? Were they hiding in order to set a trap? Were they disguised? I have this image of two or three bundles of wheat toddling up to the disciples and yelling, "Gotcha!" Whatever the Pharisees were up to, it sounds like work to me!

On another occasion, Jesus walked into a synagogue just like you walked into this sanctuary today. He entered and immediately the Pharisees watched to see what he would do. There was a man with a withered hand in attendance and they knew that Jesus had a penchant for healing people. Had they made certain the man was there that day? Was it another trap? It certainly looks like it. Not to disappoint them, Jesus asked the man to come forward and then asked one of his famous rhetorical questions: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Of course, not a soul spoke up. Yet, no sooner had Jesus healed the man than the Pharisees rushed out to conspire with the Herodians about how to destroy him. I'm not certain, but that sounds like work to me too!

The Pharisees were watching Jesus, but so were a lot of people. Regular folks like you and me were watching in amazement at the ways Jesus took on the Pharisees and challenged their rules about the sabbath which were increasingly restrictive and seemed to cut off all breath of the Spirit that might breathe upon them on that holy day.

People watched Jesus as he traveled from town to town healing people and teaching people about the liberating kingdom of God. They watched him closely as he reinterpreted the prophecies and stories they had heard all their lives. They watched him as a fresh understanding of faith blossomed wherever he went. People were watching Jesus.

It is true that the Pharisees were strict about Sabbath laws and for good reason. After their escape from Egypt, God gave the Hebrew people sacred guidelines for living. They called them the Ten Words. We refer to them as the Ten Commandments. As you know, these ten principles of our faith have to do with how we are to get along with God and one another. The fourth one—the one about the sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11)—is all about remembering

where you are from. It is about the importance of rest and the need for re-creation. It is about taking time to renew self, to let the body rest, to let other people rest, to remember what life is all about. The fourth commandment reminds us that just as God created the world and then rested, so should we. When God gave the Hebrews the Ten Words, they had just been freed from slavery where they had to work all the time. God offered his people the gift of rest and renewal of body, mind, and spirit. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that the sabbath is a liberating gift to humanity instead of all humans being enslaved to the sabbath.

Of course, there are always those folks who ask, "What does that mean?" If I have to rest, does it mean I cannot take a walk? If I can take a walk, can I take a long walk? If I have animals, do I attend to them or leave them to themselves? Do these kids have to sit here all day? Can they get out and run off some of this energy? What if my ox falls in a ditch? Can I get it out? Someone is always going to push the boundaries, so boundaries were put in place. Some of those boundaries felt pretty tight.

The rabbis and priests took it upon themselves to help people know where the lines of the sabbath extended. There were (and still are today) thirty-nine categories of activity that are considered work if done on the sabbath. Consider a few of them: carrying, burning (which includes lighting a fire to cook or even lighting a match), extinguishing (you can't put the fire out if you do start it), writing, erasing (in case you make a mistake while writing), cooking, washing, sewing, tearing (because you cannot sew it back together), knotting (including the thread), untying (because you tied a knot), plowing, planting, reaping, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, (farmers beware!), smoothing, or marking.¹ You get the idea. Some of you thought you had it rough when you could not play cards or watch a movie on Sunday! Because they plucked grain on the sabbath, Jesus and his disciples were accused of violating the reaping and harvesting prohibitions of sabbath laws. A few hundred years before, they would have been stoned to death for breaking the sabbath law.

Why were the Pharisees so intent on catching Jesus in the act of breaking the sabbath law? Were they spiritual score keepers wanting to make sure the people stayed in line? Or was there some other reason Jesus caught their attention?

¹Orthodox Union, "The Thirty-Nine Categories of Sabbath Work Prohibited By Law," (July 17, 2006); online: https://www.ou.org/holidays/shabbat/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/

Jesus was worth watching, to be certain, but not because he occasionally bent the traditional rules about the sabbath. I suspect most people found their way around the restrictive rules from time to time. Watching Jesus, the Pharisees realized that he was doing something far more “dangerous” than rule breaking. They could see that Jesus possessed a power and purpose unlike anyone they had seen before. They could tell that he was not your ordinary itinerant teacher or even like the many false messiahs who popped up from time to time. Jesus was up to something earth-shaking!

Jesus did not simply reinterpret the sabbath law, he completely reset it. Instead of setting aside the last day of the week for quiet and an extra nap, Jesus pointed out that the sabbath is given as a gift to us to provide not only for our refreshment, but for our re-creation. The sabbath is a gift of renewal of body, mind, and spirit. The laws were given to the children of Israel soon after they were liberated from Egypt. Before, as slaves, they never had a day of rest. As God’s free children, they were given this gift. And they were reminded that just as God was generous with them, they must also be generous with others. Everyone was supposed to enjoy the sabbath, not only the Hebrews.

The Pharisees saw firsthand what this generous power of freshening and re-creating could do. People whom they believed were punished by illness because of their sin were healed. People who were cast out of community were welcome back. Common sinners were afforded special treatment. Strict rules that limited the freedom of God’s children to live and thrive were bent to allow people who were hungry to be fed or people who were ill to be healed on the sabbath or any other day of the week. Compassion powered the renewing energy of the sabbath. If this rabble-rouser from Nazareth was allowed to spread his dangerous heresies, there would be no limits to what he might do! In the Pharisees’ minds and hearts, Jesus must be stopped. He must be destroyed. Isn’t that an odd impulse on a day that is focused on re-creation?

They were right because there was no limit to what Jesus might do. Jesus did not stop with the sabbath laws. He challenged their bloodthirsty and hypocritical traditions of capital punishment for all sorts of infractions from gathering wood to heresy. He exposed false piety in favor of humble honesty. He treated all people with compassion and courtesy regardless of position or supposed power. He insisted that the most vulnerable members of the community—widows, orphans, the stranger and foreigner be treated fairly in

all circumstances. He dared to suggest that God might claim as his children people of the world other than his chosen Hebrews. He talked about a re-ordering of common life so that all people enjoyed the gifts of God. He spoke of resurrection, not only after death, but a resurrection of the spirit here and now.

The Pharisees were watching Jesus, but so were the rest of the people who were hoping for a re-creation of their own lives and a healing of the diseases of hopelessness and despair. They saw in Jesus a clear connection between their faith in God and their ordinary lives. In Jesus, they experienced a sabbath freshening of their lives. They discovered a re-creation of life in the life of faith. The people were watching Jesus. They discovered that our faith, the call to love God with our entire personalities and our neighbor as ourselves, is a gift of re-creation which the sabbath represents. People were watching Jesus.

Sixty-three years ago a group of people felt the swirling power of God's Spirit freshening their faith. They felt a need to re-create their experience of church on the growing edge of the city. They experienced the connection of life and faith as never before. People were watching them, wondering what was going to happen. Would this bold adventure succeed or fail? Was this desire of God or of themselves? Is this what God wanted or merely what they wanted? Some of their discussions took place on Sundays. That might have been considered work by strict adherents of the sabbath laws. Perhaps they did need to rest some from the labors of their work weeks, but they also were energized by the Spirit of God to be a part of the re-creation of the people in our city. People were watching.

Lakeside was a sabbath-vision, a Sunday labor of love. Our church was founded to help re-create the lives of the people who felt the touch and nudge of God. Over the last sixty-three years, that is what we have been about: re-creating life for all of God's children. God placed us here to witness to and work for the liberating power of God's salvation for all people, salvation that concerns not only our souls but our minds and our bodies as well.

Are we still being watched? In some ways it would seem not. Churches are not at the center of our communities as they once were. Fewer people find it important and necessary to worship God and fellowship together. Blue laws, which once made it almost imperative for people to be in church because they had nothing else to do, were dispensed with long ago. Opportunities galore are offered on Sundays which draw people out of church

and into a multitude of activities. The Pharisees would sneer and say, "We told you this Jesus was dangerous. Now the sabbath is anything but sacred." It does sometimes seem that Jesus' experiment has backfired to the point that most of us do anything but finding sabbath rest for refreshment and re-creation. People do not appear to look to churches for guidance and support as they once did. They don't seem to be watching us anymore.

Are we still being watched? Is the Church still needed and relevant today? I think so because there are still just as many people out there who are looking for meaning and purpose in life. There are still a lot of people with a multitude of questions and nowhere to ask them. Are we still being watched? I think we are because hopelessness and helplessness are still rampant. People are still looking for God . We are being watched and we must find fresh ways to share the Gospel with a world that rarely takes a breather. We must discover new ways to share God's love with people who often watch one another and but rarely take a look at themselves.

Yes, people are still watching because deep down we all hope that Jesus is watching us, not to pounce on us like a violent rottweiler, but to welcome us home. Our calling today, as it was sixty-three years ago, is to tell them that Jesus is watching and to offer the sabbath gift of refreshment and re-creation of life within the family of God. May it continue to be our calling for many years to come. Amen.

June 3, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How good it is to be here today, O God. This sanctuary holds so many memories for us some very good, some stinging with sorrow. We enter here and the words spoken, the hymns sung, the lives changed, and the Gospel experienced all swirl around us and we are grateful. We are indeed thankful for this congregation, O God, and for all that you have done for it and through it.

We are certainly thankful for each of the energetic souls who felt the nudging of your Spirit and became a part of this ministry in our community. We are grateful for each person who, through the years, has opened mind and heart to the teachings of Christ and the whispers of the Spirit. We thank you for everyone who has served this congregation faithfully and for all who have been touched with the Gospel through our ministry.

We admit that there are often times when we want a sabbath, a day of nothing but rest and renewal. Sometimes the needs in our own lives and the demands of our world feel almost more than we can bear. Then we realize that the renewal you bring comes even in the midst of work and play. You do not stop caring for us even though we may not stop to attend to you. Thank you, O God, for the resources you provide for our well being. Continue to heal us in body, mind, and spirit, we pray.

As a congregation, we also pray that we will continue to remain open to wherever you will lead us. Our needs and the needs of our community and world are so great and often we feel too small to meet them. Remind us that we do not act alone but minister through the power of your redemptive love. Guide us to the people and places where you need us. Give us the courage to serve and the strength to serve well. And teach us the art of taking care of ourselves through the gift of sabbath renewal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.