In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Martin Luther’s preface to his *Large Catechism*, he says that there was “horrible vice,” and a “secret, evil plague” that was spreading throughout the churches that had committed themselves to the Reformation.¹ But he wasn’t talking about the bubonic plague; Luther was talking about churches and their pastors neglecting the catechism. About this neglect Luther said, “Many regard the catechism as a simple, trifling teaching, which they can absorb and master at one reading and then toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again.”² Now, when Luther warns against dishonoring the catechism, he is not talking about the catechisms that he wrote. He has in mind what is called “the church’s catechism.” The “church’s catechism” is the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. These three together are the foundational teachings of the church. To neglect these three is, according to Luther, a “secret, evil plague.” This is no small criticism coming from someone who actually saw the bubonic plague ravaging his home city, and even lost family members to it.

But Luther says this of himself, “I am a … doctor and a preacher [of the Church], … nevertheless, … I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.”³ Martin Luther, a great teacher of the church, never moved beyond the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, but daily returned to it as a little child. Well, I think we would do well to follow his example this morning in which the Third Commandment comes up in our lectionary, trusting that even though we may have known this commandment since we were little children, there is yet more for us to learn from Jesus Christ about the good human life that he desires us to live.

So, first to our Old Testament lesson. Forty years before Moses said these words to Israel, Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt. But because of that generation’s unfaithfulness, they could not enter into the land that God had prepared for them. But now, a new generation had arisen, and they were going to be led into the Land

² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 380.
by Joshua, Moses’ successor. But this put Israel into a crisis. When the Lord led Israel out of Egypt, it was through Moses that the Lord did it. When the Lord gave the Law, it was through Moses that he gave it. When the people of Israel thought they would starve in the wilderness, it was in response to Moses’ prayers that God gave manna from heaven. And when Israel sinned against the Lord, it was Moses who prayed to the Lord that they would be spared, and they were.

And so, Deuteronomy, which means “second law,” is Moses once again delivering the Law over to Israel. Israel is about to enter the land of promise, and what they need most is to be recommitted to the Law that the Lord had given to them. Though Moses does not go with them, the Law does.

And our reading is the giving again of the Third Commandment, where Moses instructs the people of God to keep the Sabbath Day holy. In six days God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in it, but on the seventh he rested. The Sabbath is a day to remember God’s creation, and is therefore a weekly reminder for Israel that God created all that is, that Israel was given life by God.

And when God created humanity, God made them in his image; we are created to be like God. God created and saw that his work was good. But then God rested, and his rest too was good. So too for us. We are put in this world to work. Adam and Eve were given the work of tending to God’s act of creation, and of offering their work up to God as a sacrifice, as a life lived for God. We too are given certain work to do, to offer the work of our hands and our minds up to the Lord as a sacrifice, as a life lived for God. Work is good for us.

But, as with God, it is not just our work that is good. It is not just work that we were created for. We were also created for rest, for ceasing from our normal labors. But this ceasing from labor is not secondary to living a holy life, living a good human life. A good human life has rhythms of work and rest, of laboring and ceasing from labor. We are created for work, and for rest.

Way back in Exodus, while Israel was journeying in the wilderness on the way to the promised land, God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel. One of the times that God commanded Israel to keep the Sabbath, he said this, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘Say to the people of Israel, “You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you’”” (Exodus 31:13 RSV). The Sabbath for Israel existed as a sign, not just that it is the Lord who created them, but also that it is the Lord who sanctifies them; it is the Lord who made them, and it is the Lord who make them holy. If life was nothing but work, it would be too easy to think that it is we who make ourselves holy. If life was nothing but work, even work for the Lord, it would be too easy to forget that we are created by God for rest. But we are not just created for one day of
rest per week; we are created for eternal rest with him. We are created to be with God, and to be at perfect rest with him.

But, if life now was nothing but rest, that would not be good either, that would not be holy. If life was nothing but rest, we would forget that we are not yet at eternal rest. Both through our work and through our rest, the Lord is making us holy. In both work and rest, God is accomplishing his purposes in us.

But it is not just any kind of work or rest that makes us holy. This is what we see in our Gospel lesson. On one Sabbath day, Jesus was in a synagogue. There was a man there with a withered, crippled hand. There were some present who wanted to see if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, if Jesus would do work on the Sabbath. Jesus shows that they misunderstood the Third Commandment, and misunderstood the Law. It is not simply abstaining from work that keeps the Third Commandment. On its own, refraining from work is not rest, nor is it keeping the Sabbath day holy.

And so Jesus does work on the Sabbath: he heals the man with the withered hand. After he heals, there are some who go out and do precisely what Jesus had said, and what everybody knew, was not lawful to be done on the Sabbath: they go out and they plot how they might kill Jesus.

But it is important that we do not hear this story and think that Jesus is breaking the Law. Nor should we think that in the first half of our reading Jesus defends the disciples even though they had broken the Third Commandment by plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Jesus did not come to Israel to show that the Law was no longer valid or good. Jesus did not come as a Lawbreaker. He did not come to abolish the Law, He came to fulfill the Law. So, when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, he is not breaking the Law, he is fulfilling the true spirit of the law. On the Sabbath, Jesus does the good work of God, he heals, he saves life.

And in this, Jesus is doing two things for us. Jesus is showing the good work of God, and also the good work of humanity. Jesus heals on the day of rest. As Israel was to rest in order to be reminded that it is God who sanctifies, who makes holy, Jesus heals on the day of rest to show what Jesus is doing in our rest. In resting from our labors, Jesus is healing us, body and soul. But Jesus is also showing us what is the work of a good human life. The work that we are created for is to “do good” not “to do harm,” to “save life,” not “to kill” (Mark 3:4). The work that we are called to do on this earth is to serve our neighbor, to do good for our neighbor, to do all that we can to promote the life of our neighbor. As God, Jesus shows what he is doing on our behalf, healing us in body and soul, and as man, Jesus is showing us what we are to do. In our rest, Jesus is at work healing us, and in our work, we participate in the work of Jesus, doing his good work in the world. So, both in our rest and in our work, we are coming to participate more and more in Christ’s work, and to receive his work on our behalf.
And Jesus has not given up this work of healing body and soul. Jesus is yet doing this work of healing and saving in the midst of this very gathered assembly. I think it is of great significance that it is a withered hand that is healed. In Jesus’ time, there was not much that a man could do for work if his hand were withered, if his hand were useless. On the Sabbath, on the day of rest, Jesus restores this man’s ability to work. On the day of rest, Jesus gives work back to this man. So too with us. We gather here together for Jesus to give the good work of a human life back to us. He restores to us the work that he called our first parents to do: to be stewards of all of God’s creation, to live a life in service to the Lord and to our neighbor, until we enter into everlasting rest with our Lord.

And so now we have arrived at how the Church from the beginning, and Luther included in this, received the Third Commandment from Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Third Commandment perfectly on our behalf. So we do not need to gather on the seventh day, on Saturday. But we yet need to go on receiving the fulfillment of the Law, and the fulfillment of the Third Commandment as part of the Law. We yet need to have our own withered hands and hearts and souls made whole, restored. The Third Commandment is received as the command to gather together as the Body of Christ, to gather around Christ’s Word, which sanctifies us with all of our work and all of our rest. Luther puts it this way in the Small Catechism, “we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.”

It is precisely in the hearing of this Word that Jesus is healing our withered hands and healing our withered hearts and souls, it is precisely in hearing Christ’s words to us that all days are made holy for us, and we are prepared for the eternal day of rest in which we will see, as our Epistle Lesson has it, in which we will see without ceasing “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Until that day when we called forth from the grave to have our withered bodies and souls finally made entirely whole, until that day when we see Jesus face to face and know him even as we are known by him, we are given this table to come to, and Jesus tells us too to stretch forth our hands, and to know that Jesus is doing good for us, that he is healing us of all that plagues humankind, that he is saving us.

And to him be all the glory and honor, all of our work and all of our rest, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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