

The Intent of the Law

King of Glory Lutheran Church

Year B: Pentecost 2: Mark 2:23-28, 3:1-6

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One sabbath he (Jesus) was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The Sabbath is meant to bring life and healing to all. Institutions, including religious ones, at times take the most holy of things and turn those things against people. When we understand what Sabbath is and Sabbath means, then we can more easily live it out for ourselves and others.

A blessed Sabbath to you!

Anyone anxious today? Anyone tired? Stressed? Have a need to escape or take a break?

Today is Sunday, the day we Christians call Sabbath.

What is Sabbath anyway? 3rd Commandment. “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” You and I honor the Sabbath by coming to worship God; through prayer, hearing the Word, and partaking of Holy Communion. A day of rest. A time of renewal for our spirits. Moments to stop...on purpose and be with God.

Is that it? “Remember the Sabbath.” Check! Yes? Maybe? Let’s dig a little deeper into the story before we come back to our modern-day experience of Sabbath.

God’s people Israel were stressed. They were enslaved under Pharaoh. Hard work and hard labor each day. They couldn’t escape, there was no hope. God instituted the command about the Sabbath so that God’s people Israel, the formerly enslaved people, could literally have a day to rest. Forever. They had toiled long and hard. Now at least they would have one day per week to recover. It was commonly understood that keeping the Sabbath meant praising God for life and God’s liberation from slavery.¹ Therefore, there was also an understanding that allowed for not keeping the letter of the Law of Sabbath, when life and wholeness could come to another.

We come to church for worship and prayer and a day of rest. “Remember the Sabbath.” Is that it? Have we experienced Sabbath in these 60 minutes together? Can we go home to cross it off our lists? Check! Yes? Maybe? Let’s dig a little deeper into the story before we come back to our modern-day experience of Sabbath.

“But your disciples cannot snack on the grain of the fields as you walk through them! It’s just not right.” For the Pharisees, this was truly a matter of life and death. Working on the Sabbath by plucking grain was tantamount to harvesting and preparing a meal. But what they were truly angry about was the disciples should have prepared their snacks the day before...not on the holiest day of the week.

Jesus quickly gets to the intent of the Law regarding Sabbath day. He cites the story of David – not yet king – eating the bread that belonged to the priest. But the priest gave it to David to sustain him in his flight from King Saul and so that David could live into his calling to become King. The intent of the Law could be overridden when the forbidden thing brought life, healing and wholeness.

The Pharisees, were teachers of the Law, some more strict than others. But they don’t approve of Jesus’ teachings and are already, only 70 some verses into Mark’s Gospel looking for a way to take Him down. So they’re sitting in church, watching Him closely.

There is a man with a withered hand. Jesus knows, that the Pharisees know, there is an allowance in keeping Sabbath for bringing life and wholeness to another

human. Thus, before Jesus does any act of healing he turns to the Pharisees and says, “is it lawful to do good or harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

Jesus heals the man's withered hand. In doing so the man likely will be able to work again. He will surely have the chance to provide for his family and benefit the village with his crops or goods for sale. Jesus hasn't just fixed what was ‘wrong’. He looked at the intent of the Sabbath law and chose to ‘promote life and human flourishing.’ⁱⁱ

Institutions, well intentioned ones, including religion, can take the most holy of laws or pieces of worship, or people’s offerings of time, talent and treasure and mis-use or abuse them out of fear that stability will surely fail. ‘Women can’t wear red or go dancing otherwise she’ll be courting the devil.’ You’ve heard that one, yes? Really? What is the intent of the Law? For Jesus, people were more important than the Law.

Back to what Sabbath means for us. What’s the intent of Sabbath? To remember God, praise God, to give thanks for God’s power to bring healing and wholeness through rest.

Does Sabbath mean none of us should do any work on Sunday? We’re beyond the Blue Laws of early American Puritans,ⁱⁱⁱ which closed businesses even into the 20th century. I’m working. Doctors and policemen are working. The wait staff at your noon restaurant are working. And getting home from church to mow the lawn might be work for one and a real luxury for another. What brings our spirits rest and life? What brings another healing?

If there is an emergency on our SafeLot and one of our guests needs assistance, but it’s Sunday, are we not going to help? Of course we are! We go beyond the letter of Sabbath Law to the spirit of Sabbath. For Jesus, people were more important than the letter of the Law.

For ourselves worship feeds our spirits. And we need more rest than just 60 minutes. Ever tried to work seven days without a day of rest? The more we work, the less effective we become. When we do stop? How do we stop? I’m not certain what it is for retired people. Although I got an idea during my time of recovery in January. I went to Donut Haus and you all were there! Every one of you! I went another day, and there you were again. Donuts. Coffee. Talk, talk, talk. When do we do nothing...on purpose? What are those activities for each of us that renew our spirits?

Our world is so busy and so fast...even for retired people. Sometimes we find our spirits running simply because our bodies do. But mind, body and spirit are connected. We need to listen for that deeper calling to rest. What is rest for you, in addition to being with God? An author wrote a chapter in a book titled, 'come apart, before you come apart.' God rested on the 7th day. Jesus went into the hills to be by Himself. Take Sabbath. Enjoy Sabbath. Amen

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-09-2/commentary-on-mark-223-28-31-6>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/blue-law>