

## Sabbath Keeping

I can't recall ever hearing any of the preachers that I've listened to over the years explain their process for choosing passages on which to base their sermons and so I'm not quite sure why I've felt compelled to share my process with you over the years. Maybe it's a left-over from my school days when I would get dinged on tests for not showing my work. Maybe it's to reassure you all that I do have a process. Maybe it's to reassure *me* that I've got a process! Or, maybe, I feel that if I tell you how my thoughts have come together on a particular sermon that you'll find an easier way to hook on to how I'm thinking and where I'm going so that we can arrive together at the destination I have in mind. At any rate, today's sermon comes from the confluence of at least three streams of logic. First, this is a passage from which I've never preached. As you all know, I am committed to the idea that all of what has become canonized into our Bible has something to say to us, even thousands of years after it developed from oral tradition or was composed or edited. As is often the case with passages from the Synoptic Gospels, this passage in Matthew has a parallel in Luke and both are derived, scholars believe, from an older passage in Mark. Neither the version in Matthew nor its parallel in Luke are in the Revised Common Lectionary. The Markan passage is in the RCL but for some reason I've missed it except to mention the second half of it when it came up in the lectionary set suggested by Bryan McLaren's [We Make the Road by Walking](#), two years ago.

That I should be preaching on the passage in Matthew today is also a bit of an oddity. It's the Gospel suggested in the volume I've been mostly following since Advent, [Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals](#), but for next Sunday, not for today. When I knew that these sermons in September would be my last for you, I moved last week's sermon and this week's up the calendar by one week because I wanted something different for next week, my last among you, and I didn't want to lose the opportunity to preach on God's maternal love for humankind or today's topic, "Keeping Sabbath." It's been some time since I preached on the importance of the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." I think that the concept expressed by that command is still important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and I wanted one last opportunity to share with you my thinking on the topic.

We begin with yet another story about Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees, those religious leaders in first century Judaism who taught that the path to the righteousness that God demanded was to be found in scrupulous obedience to the laws handed down in the Books of Moses, in Torah, the five books that start the part of the Bible Christians and Jews share: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. We do well to remember that the motivation of most of these leaders was pure. They were not consciously setting out to gain power over their co-religionists, the vast majority of them, but trying to help their neighbors live the best lives they possibly could. Jesus was hard on them (and vice-versa) but both Jesus and the Pharisees were trying to guide Israel to the best possible relationship with God.

The conflict we find in Matthew 12 and its analogues is all about how to keep the Sabbath day holy. In the first half of the pericope, the conflict is about how to deal with food on the Sabbath. Jesus and his disciples are traveling, which they did constantly. Along the way, they pass through a wheat field and the disciples grab ripe heads of wheat as they walk along and eat the seeds. In the U.S., that might get them arrested for stealing but the Law of Moses stipulates that the poor be allowed to take what they need to eat from such fields and orchards. The Pharisees, though, with their desire to "set a fence around the Law," see this as reaping, doing agricultural

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work of the sort forbidden on the Sabbath by Exodus 34:21. To Jesus, it's merely the act of hungry people eating available food. He compares the actions of his disciples with the action of David in a story from I Samuel 21. In order to feed his hungry band of fugitives, David demands the "showbread" from the Temple. The showbread was twelve loaves of bread, one for each tribe of Israel, "on show" for one week at the Temple. At the end of the week, it was to be eaten by the priests but during the week, it was dedicated to God. Jesus' point is that if hungry people could be fed by this holy bread, then feeding hungry people on the Sabbath would fall into the same category. He also points out that through quirks in certain regulations for the priests in Numbers 28, certain work they did on the Sabbath, which would have been forbidden for anyone else, was blessed.

"I tell you," said Jesus to the Pharisees, "that something greater than the Temple is here." This is a strong Messianic claim by Jesus, but it goes beyond that, too. For Jesus, an act of kindness, the feeding of hungry people, is more important to God than the rituals of the Temple, or the rituals of a church. We should be willing to pause in whatever we are doing, even worship, to help someone who needs help. Jesus then quotes from the word of God to Hosea, our friend with the "mothering God" passage we looked at last week: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Jesus wraps up this confrontation with the Pharisees with this remark: "For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." Again, there are layers of meaning to consider here. Is Jesus claiming that *he* is "lord of the sabbath," in charge of deciding what can and cannot be done on the seventh day? If so, this is another strong claim of Messianic identity, as "Son of Man" is often understood to be a Messianic title from its usage in Daniel. But "Son of Man" is also used in the Old Testament as a generic title for a human being, much like C.S. Lewis uses "Son of Adam" and "Daughter of Eve" in The Chronicles of Narnia. If Jesus is using the term in this latter way, then this is the Matthean equivalent of Jesus' statement in Mark's version of this story: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." I'll address this idea further in a few minutes.

But first, another story of Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees over the meaning of Sabbath, which in all three Synoptic gospels makes a unit with the story just told. Jesus proceeds to the synagogue and there, waiting for him, is a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees ask Jesus, without obvious provocation, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" If you're a "Star Wars" fan, you may think of the fish-like Admiral Ackbar's famous line in "Return of the Jedi," "It's a trap!" But, as usual, Jesus is ready for the argument. "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So, it is lawful to do good on the sabbath."

Again, I want to make sure we understand the Pharisee's viewpoint, completely valid to them. As Ben Witherington points out in his volume on "Matthew" for The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, "The normal Jewish rule was that deeds that were not urgent could be postponed until after the Sabbath was over." The man with the withered hand was not, like the sheep, in immediate danger. His healing could have waited until sundown. But, Witherington continues, "Jesus... as the incarnation of the mind and intent of God interprets "Sabbath," which means "cease" or "rest," to be the perfect day to give a man rest from what ails him, in this case a withered hand." To Jesus, Witherington writes, "Things that amounted to good deeds that could

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be seen as a fulfillment of the intent of the Sabbath to give rest, restoration, refreshment were appropriate.”

The Pharisees, outraged by what they see as Jesus flouting the Law of Moses, begin to plot Jesus’ destruction. Their motives, of course, may not be completely pure. In their online commentary on this passage, Catherine McElhinney and Kathryn Turner write: “the healing of the man cannot be seen as doing evil on the Sabbath. But the reaction of the critics is not to think again - to reflect on the meaning of the Sabbath. Rather it is to see Jesus as a threat to good order - and to their position.” Another of the lessons to us in this brief story is to remember that we are not the arbiters of all that is good and righteous, any more than the Pharisees were. We must remember to let God continue to speak to us in this new age with new situations. What we view as holy must always be subject to the interpretation of the good done to others. Our God is not a destroyer, but a healer; not a condemner, but a redeemer. If, as we considered last week, God is the Loving Mother/Father of all, then love must be our criteria for worship and for righteousness. It’s like Bernie Turner said from this pulpit: Love everybody!

From the time of the Puritans in New England until the present day, our dominant culture in the U.S. has been subject to a philosophy of “Thou shalt not...” when it comes to the Sabbath. As late as the 1970s, I remember not being able to buy anything but “emergency” groceries at a 7-11 in Missouri on a Sunday. Grocery stores, and most other stores as well, were all closed. To shop on Sunday, you drove across the river to Illinois. There are excellent reasons to make sure that everyone in society gets a day of rest, but the “Blue Laws” across America had as much to do with enforced church attendance (never a good idea) as they did with true Sabbath. In our passage for today, Jesus urges the Pharisees to see Sabbath as a day for “Thou shall...” rather than “Thou shalt not...” Thou shall be kind to your fellow humans. Thou shall help. Thou shall cease from your usual activities and rest and find wholeness.

In his blog, “Left Behind... and Loving It,” D. Mark Davis writes: “Jesus’ operating principle is that the Sabbath... was created for humanity, and not the other way around. The idea that ‘humanity was made for the Sabbath’ continues to be a wildly popular theology that God created the law and humanity needs to live up to it or else we are lost. In that theology, God is chiefly known as holy, and humans have to achieve a certain level of holiness – through following laws or practicing purity rituals - to be acceptable to God. The alternative theology, which Jesus poses here, is that ‘the Sabbath was made for humanity.’ In that sense, God is chiefly known as love and the laws and purity rituals are for humanity’s own good. Or, even better, they offer ways that humanity can respond to God’s grace with gratitude.”

McElhinney and Turner point out that when Jesus looks at the Pharisees’ understanding of Sabbath, he sees “that a law given for the good of God’s people was actually a burden to them. Instead of enjoying their day of rest and spending precious time in worshipping God, they were concerned not to transgress any of the additional rules imposed on the Sabbath.” But even before Jesus, there were correctives available to this idea. We see a more positive vision of Sabbath in Isaiah 58: “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the

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heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Writing for “The Theology of Work Project,” Grant MacAskill says about these verses in Isaiah, “The juxtaposition of compassion, justice, and Sabbath suggests that the Sabbath is most fully used as a day of worship by the demonstration of compassion and justice. After all, the Sabbath itself is a remembrance of God’s justice and compassion in delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt.”

The Sabbath, in Jesus’ view, is about wholeness. The Sabbath is about blessing. And, according to famed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, the Sabbath is about resistance. In his insightful little book, Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now, Brueggemann writes of how the God-arranged escape from slavery in Egypt for the Hebrews points us the way to escaping the tyranny of demands for 24/7 availability, multitasking, and ever-increasing productivity. Keep in mind, please, as I read this excerpt, the root meaning of Sabbath as rest and the benediction with which we are often dismissed from worship. “The Sabbath,” Brueggemann writes, “concerns the maintenance of a distinct faith identity in the midst of a culture that is inhospitable to all distinct identities in its impatient reduction of all human life to the requirements of the market... we may consider the Sabbath as an alternative to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend... on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly “rest-less,” inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which may satiate desire. Those requirements concern endless predation so that we are a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess. But the demands of market ideology pertain as much to consumption as they do to production. Thus, the system of commodity requires that we want more, have more, own more, use more, eat more, and drink more. The rat race of such predation and usurpation is a restlessness that issues inescapably in anxiety that is often at the edge of being unmanageable; when pursued vigorously enough, moreover, one is propelled to violence against the neighbor in eagerness for what properly belongs to the neighbor.”

Brueggemann continues, “As acute as this is for us in our society, this is not an unprecedented or even a new situation. It is, as Judaism remembers, as old as Pharaoh’s insatiable script for production. It is impossible to imagine that in the system of Pharaoh there could ever be any restfulness for anyone... wherever YHWH governs as an alternative to Pharaoh, there the restfulness of YHWH effectively counters the restless anxiety of Pharaoh.” Rest versus restlessness, market driven anxiety against Paul’s reminder that we need have none through the peace of God, which passes all understanding. I recommend Brueggemann’s little book to you all as a possible focus for Christian Education in the future. It’s an easy read of under 100 pages and has a good study guide in the latest edition.

And if there are any unreconstructed capitalists who are still listening, I can also recommend the practice of Sabbath rest as being good for business. The Harvard Business Review of October 2009 printed a report from a study by Leslie Perlow and Jessica Porter of the Boston Consulting Group titled, “Making Time Off Predictable and Required.” According to the authors, “our research over the past four years in several North American offices of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) suggests that it is perfectly possible for consultants and other professionals to meet the highest standards of service and still have planned, uninterrupted time off. Indeed, we found that when the assumption that everyone needs to be always available was collectively

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challenged, not only could individuals take time off, but their work actually benefited... Furthermore, new ways of working can be found that benefit not just individuals but the organization, which gains in quality and efficiency—and, in the long run, experiences higher retention of more of its best people.” I’ll leave the analysis of the rest of their report to the dedicated economists among us but suffice it to say that the Sabbath as rest and wholeness ethic championed by Jesus should be embraced by even the most bottom-line oriented business-person.

“Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, 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 the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.” “Then (Jesus) said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” My sisters and my brothers, I love it when we gather for worship on a Sunday, even when we have to do it remotely. But let’s keep the deeper meaning of Sabbath in mind. May the Sabbath day remind us to care for ourselves and to care for those who may need us. And God will surely bless us as we bless others. Thanks be to God! Amen.