



**From the pulpit of
North Shore Congregational Church**

“Sabbath What?”

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15 Mark 2:23-3:6
May 21, 2017

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³One 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 [Jesus] 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.”

³Again 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.

Sabbath What?

Do you ever feel as if you are not sure what day it is? Did the weekend come and go, and somehow you missed it...getting things done, doing *all* those things you are supposed to do and just when you think you can slip away from it all for just a moment, someone pops their head

into your office...or school calls and one of your children is sick, or just as you are taking a deep breath the phone rings, or dings with a message or reminder about the next thing on the agenda.

In our reading today, we are near the beginning of Mark's gospel. Jesus has been baptized – called some disciples and has gotten right to work: healing many “who were sick with various diseases and casting out demons” ...and even when he gets up early so he can go off alone and pray, he is hunted down by the disciples, and off they all go again. And before you know it people are questioning Jesus and what his disciples are doing, and arguing about the Sabbath, stirring the pot, in what sounds like a nit-picking way:

Hey, that grain picking your disciples are picking, don't you know it is against the law on the sabbath? And Jesus has replied, something along the lines of, “what are you basing your ideas on...haven't you read what David did - and learned something from that? And then entering the synagogue Jesus seems to know and welcome the critics who are watching him as he turns the table and goads *them* with questions about what is lawful- doing good or harm? And we cannot help but wonder about this law that is raising so much question and tension.

Some of us might remember, and look back longingly on the Blue Laws - those good ol' days when stores weren't open on Sunday and everyone nestled in their home after church, with a good book, good company and a pot roast in the oven.

The Blue Laws have not completely disappeared, but in the states where vestiges of this law are retained they now refer mostly to restrictions on alcohol, car sales and hunting. Did you know that in some places, there was a “7th Day Sabbath” definition stating that for those who followed Blue Law restriction from Friday sundown to Saturday, *they* could be open on Sunday.

Did you also know that in New Jersey, during the late 1600's there was also a ban on the “singing of vain songs?” (which thank goodness we NEVER do!). Never the less, I have a vague memory of stores being closed on Sunday when I was a young child. But I know that for my children and many others, this has *never* been part of their reality, the very idea strange and even unappealing. The idea that there should be restriction to our activities or access to what we deem as necessary makes no sense.

Over time and in different states there was a variety of interpretations of these civil Blue Laws, just as there are a variety of scriptural citations and interpretations for Sabbath. When is Sabbath? What is Sabbath? Why is Sabbath? *Is* there a right and wrong way to go about this?

And it is true, we “church people” struggle and question the place that hockey, soccer, or baseball...or coffee and the news...or our ever-ready phones that ding and bleep and tweet comments, reminders and messages that trigger a response like Pavlov's bell - that there is some kind of reward waiting at the end of that sound.

But after all, there is nothing inherently *wrong* with organized sports, or coffee and the news, and really, these tools we have that bring us information, reminders and even quick communication with each other are also good and helpful things.

What does all of this have to do with Sabbath?

And why did Jesus need to explain that, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

At a recent minister meeting the group gathered began to respond to a paper that one had written about Sabbath, citing Old Testament and New Testament references and observance, beginning with the question “Is the Old Testament Sabbath Still Mandatory for the Modern Church?”, along with thoughts about, when *is* Sabbath...Friday night...Sunday morning...who has that right? And we started to sound like the Pharisees, riled up about rules, and who is or isn’t coming to church on Sunday mornings, and it almost started to sound a bit like...hey *they* need to come and get it (as if Sabbath is a commodity), because Sunday is the day *we* are open for business!

I need to say, here and now, there are a variety of deep, discerning and insightful discussions to be had about Sabbath, and I know that I need to do this as much as anyone else. The other day I asked a good friend of mine who serves a church in South Dakota, “how do you approach Sabbath?” And her reply was, “Oh, I stink at Sabbath!” Basically, saying, I don’t have time for Sabbath.

And I find myself wondering, how it is that something created and given, out of God’s abundance, can be met with such a sense of scarcity when time and place define *what* we do over *whose* we are.

“The Sabbath was *made for* humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

What are we to do with the idea of Sabbath? It is a concept so primary to our being that it is in the creation story as the ultimate activity of God, that within all the creative process there is *also* rest. “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

As noted in our first reading this morning, which is by the way, the fourth of the ten commandments, the importance of Sabbath is *commanded* as a time to rest *and* as a time to remember God as creator and liberator. And that fully embedded in creation is a rhythm that centers us and helps clarify what are necessary tasks, and what is holy, and that sometimes they one and the same.

But in our gospel reading, Jesus isn’t resting, in fact he seems pretty riled up. After all, we heard that he was angry and grieved...and at the end of our reading we also hear that others are so riled up by Jesus, that a plot to destroy him is hatched.

Really? All this fuss over a few plucked heads of grain? Is that really the problem? And couldn’t Jesus have just kept the peace, decided to not rock the boat... couldn’t he just have waited until the next day to heal the man’s withered hand? But Jesus says by his words and actions, there’s something more to Sabbath than some type of strict observance of rules.

“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

In the synagogue that day or in our worship of God today, Jesus answers and draws us toward compassion and mercy even and especially if it disturbs the status quo.

If we hold off Sabbath as this thing we will *try* to do once we get everything on the check list done, once we have every acquisition...we are misunderstanding the fullness of the gift, the fullness of God’s creation that is not finished, done on whatever we decide is our seventh day.

Is the Sabbath commanded to ensure we have an end goal - that we have enough energy to get to it? Is it designed to make sure we have enough time to acquire everything we want, to do everything we want - or think - we are supposed to do. Or is the Sabbath given to us for our

restoration, to be set apart *with* God to experience creation and creativity, to remind us that, as part of God's creation we are meant for abundant life and wholeness. But we cannot be that on our own. For the hardness of heart that so grieved Jesus is the hardness of heart that can stay stubborn and silent even in the light of brokenness in another.

Remember, in our first reading from Deuteronomy, we hear not only about doing and not doing, observing the sabbath, keeping it holy, a time to work and a time for all to rest...we also hear a reminder that *all* of this is FOR God's justice, God's mercy and compassion, God's purpose; that all of creation should be freed from that which enslaves us, binds us in, holds us back from this.

We can contemporize this a bit perhaps when we think about all the studies- or perhaps your own real experience that says...anxiety is on the rise...more and more diagnosis. This does not point to the type of anxiety that moves us forward or is that tension that inspires, but the kind of anxiety that impinges on living life well together, that shuts us down and polarizes us, that can shout out opinions without any desire for solutions. Much of my initial reading for the doctoral program is framed on the anxiety attached to the concept and reality of a changing culture. Is Sabbath lost in this culture? One of the book I have read is titled, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America*. And while I will admit a bit of anxiety about finishing all my papers before I leave on Tuesday, I am also anxious, in a good way, to deepen a conviction, through discussion and listening, about how God is leading the Church in this "age."

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."

The good news of the gospel this morning does NOT reside in congratulating ourselves because we are here, nor do I hope any of us leave here criticizing or even feeling sorry for those that for whatever reason are not here. It *is* a wonderful and holy thing to be here together, to pray and praise God in the beauty of this place through the beauty of glorious music. And when the rhythm of our week brings us together to do so, that in some ongoing way the world is enriched by having done so, it is a good and holy thing.

And I am grateful that we do gather and support *and* push each other, because it is often in the mirror of the others eyes that we see God's work.

But ultimately the Sabbath is not about HERE, it is about the heart, it is about every time and place that we set apart, and most importantly WHY we do so. For according to the fourth commandment, *this* heart is directed toward God, who knows the worlds needs better than we do.

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."

A Sabbath opens us to how we are part of God's ongoing creation, through healing, and forgiveness, through a heart for and acts of, love and mercy that stretch us outside the box of our own limited imagination and decisions.

For the Sabbath was made for humankind...let us hunger to receive it.

Amen.