



Christ United Methodist Church

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Sermon: The Practice of Sabbath

Text: Mark 2:23-3:6

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

Today In the gospel of Mark, we're just 79 verses in...and people are already plotting Jesus' death.

Granted, Mark moves pretty fast. But still, all Jesus has done by this point in his ministry is throw out some evil spirits, heal some people, and eat with some sinners and tax collectors. It hardly seems reason to kill him.

Then again, the evil spirits are screaming, crying out that Jesus is the holy one of God. Jesus isn't just healing people—he's forgiving their sins, something that only God can do. And as a rabbi, you'd think Jesus would know that his friends should be upstanding enough to follow the 10 Commandments, including the one prohibiting work on the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week.

It's no wonder that in Mark's gospel, Jesus is already mixing it up with the Pharisees—who have never seen anything like this.

Today's gospel passage also appears in Matthew 12 and Luke 6. The 3 stories are almost identical, and in

understanding them, it helps to know that an important role for the Pharisees and for Rabbis was to interpret Holy Scripture, and Jewish law, for their people. You see, their scripture, like ours, was rarely black and white.

For example...the commandment to not work on the Sabbath seems clear enough. But only if people agree on what counts as work and when the Sabbath begins and ends—which isn't nearly as obvious in a world without atomic clocks.

Our first story begins when Jesus and his disciples are walking through wheat fields on the Sabbath...and the disciples are picking, or perhaps, picking and eating, grains of wheat. When the Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples are breaking Sabbath law, he brings up a Bible story about David.

The story Jesus refers to is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6...and his point seems be that even David broke religious law when breaking the law was necessary to preserve life.

We might say that while the Pharisees interpreted Sabbath law by rules of “do nots,” Jesus interpreted Sabbath law more in terms of its original life-giving purpose. Jesus doesn't argue details with them. Instead he proclaims, “The Sabbath was created for humans, humans weren't created for the Sabbath.”

Now the Pharisees would have agreed with that statement—their oral tradition said things like, “Break one Sabbath so that a man might keep several Sabbaths.” What was so offensive, in their eyes, was

that Jesus said that he was “Lord even over the Sabbath.”

This early in Jesus’ ministry, the Pharisees would have viewed that statement as Jesus putting himself on par with King David. Which was bad enough. But by the end of Jesus’ life, his critics would have viewed it as Jesus putting himself on par with God. And that was worse.

In our second story, Jesus is back in the synagogue, when he sees a man with a withered hand. The gospel writers tells us that “they” want to bring charges against Jesus if he heals on the Sabbath—so we know what’s going to happen, don’t we? But first, Jesus asks, “Is it legal on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?”

But again, there were already stipulations in Sabbath law that allowed for people to do good, and to save life. In Matthew’s version, Jesus reminds people that the law even allowed them to save livestock, like when an animal wandered into a ditch or a well.

Was healing this man’s hand this an emergency? Couldn’t Jesus have waited a day? Or was Jesus simply making a point.

All we know for sure is that Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand—and then the withered hand is made whole. One commentator says that, apparently, Jesus broke Sabbath law...without doing anything to break Sabbath law.

So what do we know about Sabbath law?

Well, honoring the Sabbath is either the 3rd or 4th of the 10 Commandments, depending on whether you’re

reading from the OT books of Exodus or Deuteronomy. The lists aren't the same. What the two versions have in common is that no one is to work on the Sabbath—not men or women, their children, their animals, or even their slaves. And the command applies not only to Hebrews, but to the immigrants living with them.

What differs are the explanations for *why* people are to keep the Sabbath, or the reason it's holy. Exodus says it's because God *rested* on the 7th day of creation. But Deuteronomy says it's because God brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt—in other words, the Sabbath is holy because God *gave them rest*.

As NT scholar Matt Skinner says, these people were slaves for 400 years—and now they're finally getting a day off. Who wouldn't want to keep the Sabbath! But as we all know, times change, and it's easy to see how Sabbath went from something the people *got* to do, to something they *were allowed* to do, to something they *had* to do.

And for most Christians, that's where we are today. Keeping Sabbath is one of the 10 Commandments most people don't think twice about breaking.

Have you ever thought about how our lives, our communities, or our world might be like if everyone spent one day a week resting, spending time in worship or with family, contemplating God's love for humanity and all of creation?

In the Spring of 2016, our Foothills District brought in Dr. Matthew Sleeth for a retreat centered around his

book *24/6*, which is all about helping us to reclaim the practice of keeping the Sabbath holy.

Jesus was teaching the truth—that the Sabbath is a gift. But it’s hard to keep Sabbath in our culture. When we used Sleeth’s book for an Advent study, we heard comments like, “I think we need a support group to do this,” and, “Well, at least now we’re not doing any laundry.”

Even Sleeth doesn’t see a return to blue laws. He shared that because of his lecturing schedule, he’s often away on weekends. But if he has to eat out on Sundays, he leaves his wait staff a note, something like, “I’m so sorry you have to work on the Lord’s Day. Thank you, and God bless you and your family”—and he tips 100%, the full cost of his meal.

Our District Superintendent encourages clergy to take at *least* one Sabbath day a week—which obviously can’t be Sundays. My day is Monday...and I get grumpy if I have to work. That said, I’ve been talking Mondays *off* for a long time now, but taking them *as Sabbath* involves planning and intentional commitment.

During our Advent study, I tried not doing any work whatsoever one Monday—and honestly, it was one of the worst days of my life. I’m just not wired that way. So instead, I’ve learned to use Sabbath to do what I enjoy, think about work as little as possible, and be present to God as much as possible.

For me, the real benefit of Sabbath is that it allows me to hear God’s voice, just as Samuel heard God calling him in our first reading. Maybe you can hear God in the noise of

everyday life. But I can't, and I don't think Jesus could—even in Mark's gospel, which flies, Jesus finds time to sneak away for prayer.

West Ohio Conference's Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church begins tonight. I think the highlight of Pastor Don's leave this summer was that he would be excused from Annual Conference. And I totally understand why.

If you've been there, you know that the worship is great, but the business meetings can go from good to bad to ugly. The conference finishes up Wednesday or Thursday, depending on how much we have to get through.

Many of the pastors and delegates stay up to a full week, using the few extra days as much needed Sabbath. Which I think is great.

Still, I'm starting to wonder if we've got it backwards. I wonder if Annual Conference wouldn't go better if it *began* with a full day of Sabbath, if we *began* by hearing God speak to us individually, and as the Church.

At Lakeside, I'll be missing *my* Sabbath because I'm in meetings all day tomorrow. But this evening, Annual Conference will begin with worship and Holy Communion. That's something we can all celebrate.