

Sabbath Living

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He 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." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

^{3:1} Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then 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. ⁵ He 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. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

When I came up with the title of Sabbath Living I was thinking about numerous women and clergy retreat, instructions from spiritual directors and advisors, and what I often tell you: "Be gentle with yourself." "Take time to rest, relax, enjoy yourself, spend time with God. Make Sabbath a set time of quietness and meditation. One of the Ten Commandments even teaches us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy! The principle is for us to do our work in six days and spend one day in quietness, meditation and reflection, trusting God to supply our needs with that six days of work and one day of rest.

In Jesus' time, in the history of the people of Israel, and even in modern times, there are many rules and regulations about Sabbath Living. In our scripture, the religious leaders were concerned that Jesus and his disciples don't live by these established rules. First they confront Jesus about his disciples doing work on the Sabbath. Jesus' response was: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (2:27-

28). In this brief statement we see at once the pitfalls and possibilities of religion as an institution intended to facilitate and enhance our relationship with God. It was the religious leaders who provoked Jesus' words, this time by wondering how it was that Jesus' disciples could pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath. "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (2:24). Paraphrasing Jesus' answer, "Because they are hungry." As in the time of David (2:25-26), providing basic human necessities, food in this case, trumps religious practice. As in Matthew 25, true righteousness is associated with feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner (25:35-36). The unavoidable revelation in today's reading from Mark, even more powerfully emphasized in 3:3-6, is that keeping the Sabbath may deepen our awareness of God and thus heighten our awareness of human need and our own role in meeting that need. The more fully our actions are in response to God, the more fully those actions will benefit our hungry neighbors. On the other hand, keeping the Sabbath in a legalistic manner may inhibit that very divine-human interaction. As with any religious practice, what was meant to enhance our relation with God and neighbor can become idolatrous and inhumane.

Later, maybe that same Sabbath, or maybe another, Jesus went into a synagogue to worship and there encounters a man with a disability. The man had a withered hand. We are not told whether this was from a birth defect or maybe he had a stroke. The religious leaders watched him to see if Jesus would break the Sabbath laws and work by healing the man on the Sabbath. So the remainder of our scripture is a searing indictment of the religious leaders and a window into the humanity of Jesus as one utterly responsive to God. They remained silent in the face of Jesus' question as to whether it was lawful "to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill" (3:4). Their use of the Sabbath law to sustain their monopoly on religious authority and the power that came with that authority

blocked any human sympathy they might have had for the man with the withered hand. When the man stretched out his hand in response to Jesus' command to do so, and his hand is restored, the religious leaders went out and conspired with political leaders against Jesus, on "how to destroy him" (3:6). **Jerry Irish**

With Jesus as our model and support, we are to live in a different manner. From Mark's perspective, the Pharisees in their zeal to maintain Sabbath laws actually violated the spirit of God's original intention. Sabbath commands were not to be understood as rigid and legalistic obligations, but instead, Torah was a gracious gift to establish the covenant relationship. Regardless, the traditions of the Pharisees had become traditionalism—the dead faith of the living—and were not to be challenged.

Marva Dawn suggests, "Our Sabbath keeping puts us more firmly in touch with the comprehensiveness of God's grace." Sabbath practices for Christians and Jews are not only means of faithfulness and worship, but also expressions of grace. For our post denominational, postmodern worldview, perhaps our equally legalistic but opposite tendency is not to practice Sabbath at all. We get enmeshed in the spiritual vs. religious tension where spirituality becomes individualistic and eclectic, rather than being spiritual *and* religious. Sabbath practice requires discipline and is with and for the community well-being. We do not keep Sabbath—Sabbath keeps us!

Our human need to control through rigid law keeping or through external busyness discourages intentional reflection and is symptomatic of our basic mistrust and lack of devotion to God. Maybe it is Jesus looking at us as He looked at the Pharisees. For the scribes and Pharisees, there no longer was any amazement toward Jesus, only increasing hostility. The kingdom of God brought healing and forgiveness for others but conflict and the cross for Jesus. Jesus also was fed up

with their stubborn, closed minds, hardened hearts, and lack of compassion. We can almost see and feel his penetrating gaze.

Religion was being replaced by nationalism, and rules took priority over reality. While the purpose of the commandment was to celebrate God's creation and redemption, the Sabbath became dehumanizing. Mark tells us the Pharisees could not, would not mingle with the masses and become unclean. But in their zeal for the law, we wonder if they were not jealous, resentful, perhaps even lonely and too far removed from the people. Was there something about this Jesus that they in their deepest core truly desired? Even the most ambitious career climber has moments of regret at the loss of relationships sacrificed for the job, the promotion, and the power they bring. Perhaps fear is also an underlying motif. We do not know how to be fluid, nimble, open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

We each find our own way to create control, erect boundaries and prejudices. We decide to whom we will minister and when and how and to what degree. Even worse, instead of emphasizing acts of missional kindness toward poverty and sustaining the earth, we too often debate sexuality or survival tactics, rather than repenting for our lack of faithfulness! There is some Pharisee in all of us. **AI Masters**

Mark's Pharisees represent the religious elite who, along with the secular authorities, lorded over the Jewish population. They mirror those religious leaders of our own day who favor the particular beliefs of their religious organization over the humane treatment of some of their neighbors. The church has a tendency to sustain the status quo and, however passively or unwittingly, give credibility to the idea that might makes right, war brings peace, and violence saves.

The numbing effect of the religious leaders' domination system is evident in the religious leaders' insensitivity to the man with the withered hand. Ironically, it is their religious perspective that clouded their awareness of God and, in turn, their

capacity to affirm and celebration the restoration of the man's hand. Their mistaken allegiance to a fallen power led them to dehumanize others as they were themselves dehumanized. Jesus "looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart" (3:5). They could only be so callous toward a fellow human being because they had succeeded in closing off their own spiritual resources. **Jerry Irish**

So this scripture was not about the Sabbath Living that I imagined six months ago. It is about spending time with God and lining up our priorities and actions with what is important to God. People always “trump” our rules and laws. We can so easily get caught up in the status quo. We live in a country of immigrants who came to this country looking for opportunities, or to escape war, or because there was no way to live a prosperous life where our ancestors came from. But we have supported the ideas and rules that denied full citizenship or rights to other groups. Where would we be if someone has barred the gates of immigration to our ancestors? Many of the stories of how we treat people are shameful and ungracious! But what about us...good Christian people...do we see people with different sexual orientation, people with disabilities, those who are poor and hungry as the “other,” and we don’t even tell them about God’s grace! Have we bought the lie that there is not enough to go around? Are we like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day that had rules for which days the poor could ask for bread or when someone with a disability could be healed? Jesus was concerned about the hungry and the poor and those with disabilities. He spent time with them and met their needs. Sabbath Living is getting in step with Jesus. Let our actions show that we are Sabbath Living People!