

It was not quite two years ago that I broke my left wrist in three places, falling backwards off a boardwalk while birding in the Sax Zim Bog. Surgery followed, as did months of rigorous and vigorous occupational therapy. Prior to this experience, I hadn't given much thought to broken bones, and I might have thought that breaking a wrist didn't seem like too big a deal; since that experience, I know without a doubt breaking any bone is painful and debilitating. After my break and surgery, I developed stiff hand syndrome, which sometimes happens, and this prevented me from doing two crucial life activities: word processing, which is integral to my writing and work; and playing musical instruments, which is integral to the health of my soul. Moreover, the most basic and elementary of tasks were beyond me: I couldn't drive. I couldn't open a jar. I couldn't pick up my ancient mini-dachshund to carry her up and down stairs. I couldn't wash my hair. I couldn't put on my socks or zip a zipper or button a button. It was a very humbling and difficult experience, even rather mortifying, and it gives me some insight into the unnamed man we meet up with in our Gospel lesson today, the man we just know as "a man with a withered hand". We don't know why this man's hand is withered; was it the result of an illness or an injury? We don't know how long he's had a withered hand. But we do know this: it was beyond a doubt debilitating and painful. He may not have played a musical instrument, and he certainly didn't do word processing, but a whole huge assortment of daily tasks would have been difficult to impossible for him-- long term, as they were for me-- short term. True, his condition wasn't life-threatening, but it mattered hugely and negatively to him. Whatever mortifying feelings of helplessness and dependency I briefly experienced could be multiplied exponentially for him, both in impact and in duration. The Pharisees in our lesson lacked compassion for this man, seeing him merely as a pawn, as a means to entrap Jesus in breaking a Sabbath law. Jesus, in contrast, knows that this man's hearts desire is to have a restored hand, and that's exactly what Jesus provides for him, even if *it is* the Sabbath. So, what does the *Sabbath* have to do with anything, anyways?

Our lessons today obviously focus on Sabbath. The lesson from Deuteronomy commands us to observe a Sabbath, a day set apart for rest and reflection, for connecting with God and other people. A day in which we do not work or stress about work. This is not, by the way, a *suggestion*---it's a *commandment*. And while Sabbath began on Friday at sundown for the ancient Hebrews, most Christians observe Sunday as the Sabbath. However, Sabbath can be flexible, and it may be that our Sabbath time happens on an altogether different day or in a different way. Nevertheless, keeping a Sabbath holy is crucial.

Our Gospel lesson explores what it means to *keep* the Sabbath holy; what is and is not an appropriate way to observe Sabbath time, honoring the spirit of the Sabbath without being rigid and legalistic about it. Jesus is pushing back at the inflexibility of how Sabbath was observed, but make no mistake....Jesus and his disciples and the early Christians *all* kept the Sabbath and thought it important to do so. Which most certainly challenges us to ask ourselves how adept we are at Sabbath keeping.

Consider these words from author Wayne Muller, written nearly two decades ago:

"In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between action and rest. The more our life speeds up, the more we feel weary, overwhelmed and lost. Despite our good hearts and equally good intentions, our life and work rarely feel light, pleasant or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: "I am so busy." We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath – this has become the model of a successful life."

Muller continues, "Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that show

us where to go. We lose the nourishment that gives us succor. We miss the quiet that gives us wisdom. Poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through tireless effort, we never truly rest.”

Do his words ring true for you at times, as they do for me? All too easily, we forget the importance of keeping the Sabbath. And that is precisely what the commandment from Deuteronomy, also found in Exodus, forbids us to do. “Remember to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy”, God instructs Moses. Again, not a suggestion, but a command. “For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” Here’s where it gets really interesting, because who is to observe the sabbath? Here’s the list of those who are NOT to work on the 7th day--- “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.” That’s a radical listing of those who are to rest rather than work! Not just the rich, who can afford to, but the poor. Not just men, at the top of the hierarchy, but women. Not just free people, but even those who are enslaved. Not just Hebrew people, but resident aliens. And not just people only, but working animals. *Everyone* is to keep the Sabbath! And why? Because *everyone* needs the benefits of Sabbath keeping----the de-stressing, the deep breath, the connection with God, and the world, and others, the wider perspective. The *whole community* is healthier when everyone has a day of Sabbath observance. We struggle with these issues to this day, don’t we? If convenience stores stay open on holidays, those workers don’t get a holiday. And how do our regulations about labor apply to immigrants or migrant workers, or in the bad old days, to children? It’s actually somewhat impressive how we can turn something as simple and straightforward as a mandatory day of rest from work for everyone into a morass of rules, exceptions, and problems. But that’s human nature---part of original sin, perhaps---we seem to struggle to freely and easily accept gifts from God, like the Sabbath, and somehow get all entangled in regulations to protect them. It’s understandable that we seek to protect sacred gifts, like the concept of Sabbath, but all too easily, in doing so,

we become rigid and inflexible; we turn a gift into a problem, a blessing into a burden. Which is what has happened to Sabbath keeping by the time of our lesson in Mark this morning, an event that happened over 1000 years *after* the original giving of the Sabbath keeping law.

Looking at our Gospel lesson, we can see how the Jews struggled to keep the Sabbath at this point in time. We understand their struggle; all civilizations wrestle with how to protect boundaries between work and rest. At one time in *our* history, we had “blue laws”, which attempted to enforce the keeping of the Sabbath by closing down businesses on Sunday. Some may remember traditions like Sunday family dinners after church that provided opportunities for connection or Sunday afternoon drives that provided a relaxing time to be unavailable for other tasks. Of course, someone cooked that meal on Sunday, and someone provided gas for the car and did the driving; there is never a perfect way to create a space of rest for everyone, but these blue laws were an attempt to do so. For better or worse, those laws are mostly gone now. But they paled in significance when compared to the body of rules and laws that the Jews had evolved over all the time between the original giving of the law and Jesus’ time, in order to protect the Sabbath. And that *was* the intention----a *positive* intention to obey God’s command and preserve and honor this need for rest for all. The Pharisees, who get an unfairly bad rap in our Gospel lesson, are religious lay people of a seriously devout nature who are trying to protect what they see as sacred. Just like we may do in our day, when what seems sacred to us comes under threat from others. However, the protective rules *themselves* became burdensome, weighty, and needlessly restrictive. They were much easier for the well off to keep than for the poor majority of peasants. And Jesus, although he honors the Sabbath, pushes back against the pharisees and their legalism in regards to Sabbath keeping. In the first section of our Gospel lesson, the scribes are unhappy with the disciples, whom they discover walking through grain fields and plucking off heads of grain to eat. The issue is not one of private property or stealing, but rather of Sabbath keeping. The number of steps one could take on the Sabbath was restricted; observant Jews did not travel on the Sabbath.

Nor did they prepare food. The idea was that in order to preserve this Sabbath day, any necessary travel and food preparation was done the day before. For this reason, they criticize the disciples, and Jesus responds by noting that the Sabbath is a gift from God intended to bless humanity, not a burden God is imposing, particularly, again, on the poor, who were less able to observe a strict Sabbath than the wealthy.

The second section of our text relates to what kind of activity is appropriate on the Sabbath. Not only activity related to travel or food that is needful, as the first story suggests---but *also* activity that is life giving in general. Such activity is always lawful, even on the Sabbath. *Especially* on the Sabbath. In this instance, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, another action considered to be unlawful “work” by the pharisees. The man in question is that “man with the withered hand” mentioned earlier. And it’s a set-up, isn’t it? The pharisees perceive Jesus as a threat to their Sabbath keeping traditions, and so they are all eagerness to see how Jesus reacts to this man in need of healing. Will he or won’t he? If he does, then they’ve got him! The nuance to know here is that it *was* lawful and permissible to save a life on the Sabbath---but this man’s withered hand was *not* life-threatening. In the minds of the pharisees, the healing of this man’s hand can wait; it doesn’t rise to the level of urgency that would provide an exception to the no-work clause on the Sabbath. But they aren’t living with the withered hand, are they? Which, as we earlier reflected, was tremendously significant for the man who suffered with it. How do we feel when we call our overly-busy clinic for a matter of urgency to us, only to hear that the first appointment is in over a month? Our condition may not be life-imperiling, but it still matters to *us*; every *day* that one suffers from pain or disability is significant when you’re the one suffering. Jesus gets this. He knows he’s being entrapped, but He doesn’t care; compassion overrides regulation. Jesus points out the obvious, that the Sabbath is precisely for doing good and bringing restoration. And so Jesus calls the man forward, asks him to stretch out that withered hand, and gives him the restoration that will bring healing to his entire life. Which we applaud! But what about those pharisees? They are a perfect example of how, even with the best of intentions, our religious rules and

rituals can become ossified; rigid; inflexible in a way that defeats the spirit of their original intention. But here's a caveat to keep in mind—rather than pointing our fingers at these pharisees and scribes, we ought to be pointing them at ourselves. They were simply trying to protect what they perceived to be sacred; we do that too. Where does *our* zeal for protecting what we value get in the way of our being compassionate? And who are the people with withered hands in *our* lives that we assume can wait a while longer for their help or healing, because it's not really *that* urgent—at least from our perspective, whose hands are whole? This text is an opportunity to challenge *ourselves*, not to critique others. Any of us are vulnerable to overlooking original positive intentions and getting ensnarled in regulations and legislations about any number of things.

And in regard to the Sabbath, what again was that original and holy intention? It was to provide a much-needed opportunity to step back from regular work and routine, to take a break and a deep breath, to connect with God and nature and dear ones, to gain a broader perspective. Doing so enables us to not be reactive out of stress and busyness when making important decisions or relating to other people. It enables us to find peace in our souls and foster peace in our families and communities. Keeping the Sabbath creates in us a *Sabbath keeping perspective*: we can see the rhythms of work and rest, and we can understand the need for balance—not only for ourselves, but for others. We become better versions of ourselves, more compassionate, more gracious, when we keep Sabbath. As Christ models for us. It's a blessing, not a burden; a gift, not a problem. Amen.