

Sermon - Sabbath
Proper 4, Year B
6/2/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The law from Deuteronomy that we hear in our first reading proclaims: “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.” Observe the Sabbath, keep it holy. Refrain from labor, and ensure that the rest of your household does too. By the time Jesus and his disciples are traveling through the grainfields near the sea of Galilee, the law of the Sabbath has been subject to some commentary. Indeed, by the first century, the teachings regarding the sabbath specified that there were thirty-nine distinct types of labor that were forbidden: carrying, burning, extinguishing, finishing, writing, erasing, cooking, washing, sewing, tearing, knotting, untying, shaping, plowing, planting, reaping, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, selecting, sifting, grinding, kneading, combing, spinning, and...so on.

It is important for us to remember that as specific as these instructions might be, the law concerning the Sabbath is a *law of freedom*. It always was, and it remained so at the time of Jesus, and it remains so now. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the Law is given to the Jewish people who had been slaves for hundreds of years. The Law was a healing balm offered in mercy to a people who had spent centuries without rest from toil under the tyranny of others. The law concerning the sabbath is a gift, not even restricted to the Jewish people alone, but to the slave, the child, the foreigners, and the animals too. Everyone deserves rest and refreshment.

The sabbath is so precious that we don't even need to make it all the way to Deuteronomy to find it. In the very first chapters of Genesis, we find God luxuriating in the act of creation, day by day – light, stars, seas, creatures – and then on the sixth day, God creates human beings in his

image. And on the seventh day, God rested. In the Jewish calendar that we inherit in our Christian tradition, a day begins at sundown. So the Sabbath day begins on the evening of the sixth day and continues through sundown the following evening. So God creates human beings, and their very first day of existence is a sabbath day. The first act of humanity itself is not to toil or to protect or to build or to strive, but to rest. The first people in the story of the universe spend their very first day at peace, tasked with nothing but the work of enjoying God.

This freedom for refreshment comprises the heart of the law of the sabbath. It is given to people – all people and all animals – that they might be liberated to recall the beauty of who they are and the joyful purposes for which they are meant. This is the wisdom at the center of Jesus’ assurance that “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”

This was true when the Law was given, and it was true when Jesus walked among the fields and through the temple, and it is true now. The 39 specifications were articulated to help understand this. They are meant to make things a little easier. Indeed, there are specific provisions in the teaching that clarify that life-saving acts are permitted. The law isn’t meant to imprison. The disciples are not actually breaking the spirit of the law as they glean pods for eating. It might have depended on the teacher you spoke to in the first century, but there is a strong argument that Jesus was not actually breaking the spirit of the law when he healed the man with the withered hand in the temple.

What we find here is a profound question about authority. The Pharisees and the Herodians considered themselves guardians of the law. The Pharisees were the authoritative teachers in the temple. They resisted any collaboration with Gentiles and the wider Roman Empire. The Herodians were collaborators. Herod was the Jewish king that Rome had set upon a sort of puppet throne. The Herodians received their power from the very same Gentiles that the

Pharisees loathed. In fact, by all information that we have, the Pharisees and the Herodians were enemies. They were united by a single commonality: they believed themselves to be in charge.

And so Jesus, teaching in the true spirit of the Law that was given to liberate and make whole, is a threat to both of these authorities. The Pharisees and the Herodians unite around their hatred for a person who seems to disregard their power. Who is this stranger to declare that he is the Son of Man, “lord even of the sabbath”?

This is the radicality of the Law and of Jesus himself. Each of them disregard the authorities of this earth that work to manipulate and control. The Law was given to set people free, and Jesus came to complete that liberation. **The Law was given so that people could enjoy God, and Jesus came to ensure that this joy would be stopped by nothing, not even death.** Rest and refreshment are no mere suggestion for the few or some prize for the powerful. Rest and refreshment are in fact the very first thing that human beings were meant for at the creation of the universe. It is easy to see how this truth could be a threat to those who seek to dominate and oppress. It is easy to imagine how a person of quiet confidence and divine grace could speak of this refreshment, peace, and mercy, and be met with hatred.

Yesterday evening, I confessed to my husband that I feel hypocritical preaching about the importance and the beauty of sabbath when I am so bad at honoring it myself. I don't think that sabbath is an easy idea or an easy reality for most people. Every parent knows that you don't get to control what times you rest. Every employee knows that the boss sets the schedule. Even in retirement, there is always something to be done or someone who needs something. Who has time to take a rest?

The scriptures appointed for today speak to all of us – certainly to me – with the resounding call to remember that the sabbath is never merely about rest. It is first and foremost

about enjoying God. It is about remembering who we are in God's image. It is about being liberated to recall the beauty of who we are and the joyful purposes for which we are meant. On the sabbath, we do not just rest from work, but we open our hearts and our imaginations to the delight of the One who made us and loves us, simply because we are his creatures. It is here in this knowledge where we find that we stand on solid ground.