

June 3, 2018
Second Sunday after Pentecost
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Today we are beginning what is known as the *long green season*. This is to differentiate it from the *short green season* which happens between Epiphany and Lent. The long green season, the Sundays after Pentecost, starts today and will continue until the end of October.

It's the time of the year when our gospel texts turn away from the narrative of Jesus' life and look to the teachings of Jesus from a particular gospel. This year we're hearing from Mark and in our gospel for today we get two stories that are important for setting the scene for the rest of Mark's version of the story. They help to explain why some of the people who met Jesus found him offensive and thought his ministry was dangerous. In Mark's telling of the story there is no "honeymoon period." Things get complicated before he even gets to chapter three.

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The first story is about Jesus' disciples. As they were making their way from one town to the next, they passed through a farmer's field. The grain was ripe and the disciples were hungry and so they picked some in order to make a snack to share.

In our day and time, this might be seen as stealing. If you saw some strangers hiking through the back of your property stopping to pick some corn or tomatoes or beans as they made their way—you might give a shout. "Hey you! What do you think you're doing?" You might even walk out to where the strangers were standing depending upon your courage and how tough they looked, but the disciples weren't stealing. Jewish law said that when you harvested your crops you were supposed to intentionally leave something behind to be gleaned by the poor, the hungry and the stranger who might come by.

Now the Pharisees, who somehow managed to be present while the disciples were wondering about the countryside on the Sabbath picking grain, got pretty riled up about what the disciples had done. The Pharisees knew the law, and they were pretty sure that on Friday evening, when the sun went down, the disciples should have pitched their tents and stayed put, until the Sabbath ended on Saturday night. And while they were resting in that place, they shouldn't have done anything constructive or productive, including picking grain and making snacks.

Jesus told the Pharisees to back off and then he laid out his case. He argued that human needs were more important than keeping the letter of the law. Then like many a good lawyer, he began to cite precedent with a story about King David.

In the days after David had been anointed by Samuel to be the next king, but before, King Saul had died, Saul spent a lot of time trying to kill David. Jesus' argument was that since David was a fugitive who was being wrongly persecuted and because his future was a key to God's plan for the people, the priest at the temple did the right thing by giving David the blessed bread. He provided hospitality for a stranger in need and he helped make it possible for the Lord's anointed one to become king of Israel.

Jesus effectively made the point that sometimes the demands of a law need to be set aside in order to insure the greater good or the more significant need. It wasn't a new argument or even very controversial. Rabbis from before, during and after Jesus' time had basically made the same case. "The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it" and "Profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths."

Everyone there-- Jesus, the disciples, the Pharisees and any onlookers who might

have stuck around to listen— they all knew that the Sabbath was meant to promote life and freedom for all creation and in return people are to take time for thanks and praise. The Pharisees knew all about the Sabbath. They knew the rules, the stories and the exceptions, so their problem had to be Jesus.

And it was.

By saying that the Son of Man was Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus didn't just equate his needs with that of the great King David, he was saying that the sabbath was created so that people could serve Jesus. And that was the big problem. Jesus was presenting himself as no ordinary teacher. He was special and when it came to the rules of God, Jesus was the authority. In this particular case, he wasn't the lawyer or the teacher, he claimed that he was the judge with the final word.

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In the second story, once again, the Pharisees weren't really concerned about the obvious issue. They didn't care if Jesus healed the man's hand. Their problem was with Jesus' intentional disregard for the sabbath law. When he asked them whether it was permissible to do good or evil on the sabbath— to save life or to end it—he let them know that he thought their whole argument was messed up. Jesus didn't actually do anything that can be considered "work" according to the sabbath law, but in telling the story, Mark is trying to make the point that Jesus is honoring the purpose of the sabbath.

Mark wants us to understand that for Jesus, the whole point of the law is to save and preserve human life. So how could there be a better time than the sabbath for restoring a man's hand?

The Pharisees didn't have a problem with Jesus helping a dying man, but in their eyes, this guy was in no grave danger. He wasn't on death's door, but Jesus saw things differently. Healing the man's hand did so many things. It allowed him to work. He wouldn't have to beg. He could provide for a family. He could HAVE a family. The miracle Jesus performed wasn't just about fixing the guy's hand. It was about his whole life. The miracle gave him a wholeness and a dignity that he may never have had before and that's Jesus bringing life from death. It's a preview of the resurrection that is to come.

And the Pharisees would have none of it.

From that moment on, they were set to destroy Jesus. Only 79 verses into this gospel and the Pharisees and the Herodians were looking for ways to get rid of Jesus.

It is the beginning of the end.

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As we read the stories from Mark this summer, remember that from the start, Jesus is on his way to the cross. And he's thinking about people the whole time. Everything he does brings him closer to crucifixion but it also brings him closer to Easter.

Also helpful, is to remember how Jesus responded to the Pharisees. He gets angry and Mark says the Pharisees actions caused him grief. The fact that they think that there is anything more valuable than removing suffering and pain- that they fail to understand that the Sabbath is meant to enrich our lives and renew our spirits—that they couldn't see that the commandment to observe the Sabbath was meant as a gift, not a restriction or a punishment- it made Jesus angry and caused him grief. The Pharisees missed seeing that God's chief concern is to let us know that we are loved and that God's love can change lives.

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I have been wondering this week, what Jesus might think of the ways we treat the command to honor the Sabbath. As Americans we have a cultural memory of what Sunday used to be like "in days gone by." Two hundred years ago Americans had very

limited choices of what they could legally do on Sundays. It all started with the Puritans who said that Sunday was a day for church going and then created blue laws which made almost everything else illegal. There was to be no frivolity. No fun. Nothing simply for pleasure. There were laws that said you couldn't kiss your baby. You couldn't tell a joke. You couldn't play music outside of worship. You weren't supposed to work or think about work. Sunday was somber and silent and just plain gloomy – or so it sounds.

In the last century, our culture began to create a different version of Sunday. In the 20th century we began to have Sunday drives, Sunday dinners, a big Sunday newspaper and of course Sunday sports to watch on the television but I'm pretty sure those things aren't any more connected to Jesus' idea of the Sabbath than laws about kissing babies.

Many folks of my age or older, lament for the Sundays when nothing got scheduled. No Sunday soccer games for the kids. No Sunday retail jobs keeping folks from church. Somehow Sunday was still set aside. But as much as we may long for that sense of the culture considering Sunday as "special" and set apart – I'm not sure it was about sabbath.

Matt and I compared notes yesterday and agreed that our memories of Sundays were going to church, having some kind of special meal and then lots of sports on the television. How many Sundays did my Dad watch the Wide World of Sports until he nodded off and napped in front of the TV until something woke him up.

The Sabbath that Jesus was promoting was counter cultural in his day because it placed human needs before the rules. And it is counter cultural today because it also exists within the rules, within the commandments. *Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.*

Honor the Sabbath and honor God.

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What does it mean for us to keep the Sabbath? And are we doing it?

Can we do it? I want to believe that it is possible, but I am sure it requires intentionality. Lutheran writer Marva Dawn insists that the Sabbath is "not only a festival day but also a new social reality that is carried back into days one through six. People who keep the Sabbath live all seven days differently." The act of setting one day apart from the others restores shape, rhythm, and deliberateness to what otherwise remains, "homogeneous, empty time" - a succession of apparently interchangeable (and therefore in and of themselves meaningless) units.

Christian Wiman says that, "To be truly alive is to feel one's ultimate existence within one's daily existence." The disciplined, rhythmic alteration of work to rest, offered by Sabbath observance permits the higher or deeper commitments it signals to, permeate the rest of life, the day-to-day "sludge" that can so easily edge them out.

On paper it all sounds so wonderful and I think that our souls long for this Sabbath that is being described. I also suspect that if we were to really observe the Sabbath it would be counter cultural in ways beyond our imagination. No sports practice on the weekend? No games or races or contests. No required appearances. No weekend homework that would require hours of extra work. No working holidays. No catching up on the laundry. No looking at emails or texts or anything else from the work days that might seep into your life on an electrical device. In fact, you might just have to do without the electrical device altogether.

Do we have any clue at all about how to keep the Sabbath?

It is to be a day set apart. Without work. Because God said so. It means that even when things are as bad as bad can be at work – there is a buffer against work that keeps it from becoming your whole life. Or from taking up more time than it should.

It's a resting spot on the calendar. And it's not a treat. Or a reward. Or an incentive.

It's simply a part of the whole. It helps to give perspective on the work that we do.

Marva Dawn, has also said, that for those whose initial reaction to the idea of Sabbath is "but I have too much to do," she respectfully submits that as the very reason they need one:

"I can promise you that if you develop a lifestyle in which you spend one day as a Sabbath day without wearing a watch, you will be more able to accomplish all that you have to do on the days that you wear one."

Here's one more thing to consider about taking up some new or recovered Sabbath practices.

Jewish tradition teaches that the Sabbath can include reading and talking about the Bible. It's a time for prayer with family and with your religious community. It is permissible to have family and friends come to your home for a meal and you are encouraged to sing together as a part of the meal. And then there are two other permissible things on the list. Marital relations and sleeping.

The Sabbath is about demonstrating love and taking a break. If you remember anything at all from today – Remember that. Keeping the Sabbath is about sharing love and resting. And it's a part of God's plan for our lives.

It's so easy to forget.

It's like when the doctor tells you that you're anemic and that you should start taking an iron supplement. You didn't know how bad you felt until you start to feel better. You didn't know what you were missing or even that you were missing anything until you have that missing thing.

God made the Sabbath because God knew we needed it. We needed the rest, the recovery, the recuperation. We need the love and the joy of those closest to us and those who are a part of our larger community. I can't claim to be any good at setting a whole day aside for Sabbath rest, but I'm trying. If nothing else, I aim to get in a sabbath nap. And I hope that you will as well.