**June 3, 2018 Second Sunday after Pentecost**

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**GOSPEL Mark 2:23 – 3:6**

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the second and third chapters.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

23One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” 25And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He 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.” 27Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”
 3:1Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” 4Then 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. 5He 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. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Today Jesus is in an argument…again. It may seem quite removed from our lives (unless we are…or are close to…people who keep the Sabbath as a part of their spiritual practice). Indeed, Sabbath-keeping is the presenting conflict between Jesus and his adversaries today…though, as with most conflicts, there is probably something else under the surface. It might be about more than the Sabbath…but to know that, we’d have to truly understand the Sabbath. And that may be a tall order.

What is the Sabbath, really? Does it matter to those who claim the name of Christian? Should it?

Today, in Mark…when Jesus defends his disciples who are seen picking grain on the Sabbath…and when he later heals a man with a withered hand…Is Jesus saying that the Sabbath doesn’t really matter? Or is he saying something a bit more complicated (as is so often the case with Jesus)…and suggesting that the Pharisees are *using* the Sabbath and its rules for their own purposes?

It *is* one of the Ten Commandments, keeping the Sabbath…But it goes back even further than that, of course. The Sabbath is instituted before any other single fencepost of the law is sunk. The seventh day of creation – God begins the practice of Sabbath-keeping.

Put another way, there has not been a single week in the history of Earth that the Sabbath has not existed…so maybe it does matter…even to us…still today.

So, what really is it? And what is it for? And where do Jesus and the Pharisees (and maybe us) disagree?

The Sabbath is the day when God rested from work after the six days of creation…and so then God commands humans to rest from work, too. The rabbis have written volumes upon volumes over the centuries about what technically constitutes work and what does not, to help people observing this law. You can read a great deal about those details with some google searching, if you’re interested. I would suggest, though, if you want to read something about the meaning of the Sabbath from a Jewish perspective, you couldn’t find many better places to start than the short work entitled simply “The Sabbath” by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

So, what do we think the Sabbath is for? I’ve found that the purpose of the Sabbath is often described in one of three general ways – as existing for the purpose of restoration…or for preparation…or for demonstrating prioritization.

So, is the Sabbath for restoration? To refill what is depleted in us after a week of work and life?

Some people will say that Sabbath rest is a replenishing of our spirits and bodies and whole selves from what the world has taken out of us. And the world takes out a great deal sometimes…and it doesn’t take equally from each of us, either…so some of us might need Sabbath desperately…while others of us trudge along…thinking…for now…that we’ve got enough gas in the tank to keep going…for awhile anyway…we’re fine…we don’t need a break.

Perhaps the Sabbath is God’s way of telling us we all have to stop and be restored whether we are too proud to admit we need it or not.

But if this is its purpose, then wouldn’t it need to be available in measures proportionate to our need to be restored? Though many of us who are tempted to serve the gods of productivity and busy-ness probably need Sabbath more than we would admit…there are also some among us who need it desperately more…the under-paid…the enslaved…the trafficked…the abused…the grieving.

So maybe it’s not just about restoration?

So maybe…the Sabbath is for preparation? To allows us to find the energy for the work we will be called to do?

Perhaps this is another side of the restoration coin…But some people will say the Sabbath rest is what makes us able to go out into the world to do God’s work. It is an act of preparation.

But if this were true…wouldn’t God have made the first day the Sabbath, not the seventh? And why would God need a Sabbath? God is able to do whatever God needs to do already. And does this explanation still allow us to worship at the altar of productivity and ability…? What about those of us who are not able to “work” in any sense that the world recognizes as valuable? Are we suggesting that those people are less in need or less deserving of participation in the Sabbath?

Or maybe…is the Sabbath to show prioritization? Is it about showing how God matters more than everything else, so we put everything else down to honor God above all?

This feels closest to what the Pharisees seem to be saying in Mark’s gospel…that somehow disobedience to the letter of the Sabbath law is a demonstration that God is not receiving the obedience and priority that is due in the lives of God’s people.

Jesus seems to reject this view…in saying that saving a life and nourishing our bodies are important enough to God’s purposes that those acts can trump the provisions of Sabbath law. (Incidentally, most modern rabbis agree with Jesus on this point.)

The Sabbath is an expansive gift and time God gives us…and within it we might find ourselves restored, prepared and reoriented to our true priorities. But those things are not the full purpose and meaning of the Sabbath that we need. What we need is much more revolutionary than that.

The Sabbath is about joy….and enjoyment. God may have rested because God was tired…but God also rested for the pure joy of looking over everything in Creation and drinking it in.

The Sabbath is the crowning act of creation…it is the fullness of all things. That’s why it doesn’t come first but after six days of work is done…

Whether or not we are already tired…and whether or not we will end the Sabbath restored and ready for more work…within the time of the Sabbath, we are given over to rest and joy. It isn’t “for” those other times…it is the time when we are truly dwelling with God.

Sabbath may very well be one way to glimpse heaven.

Heschel described the Sabbath as an architecture in time instead of space. Religious folks often create architecture in space to make sense of God and the world…great cathedrals, labyrinths, monasteries, beautiful and holy things…but the Sabbath is made from sacred time, not sacred space…and it is when we come close to God.

This seems like something we could learn in the Christian tradition, too, especially in our culture. Perhaps you have come closer to the Sabbath in this way than you realized or intended at the time. Or maybe this language is another way of naming something that has been meaningful to you.

But, today Jesus is impatient with the Pharisees in Mark, as he probably is with all of us. Jesus is impatient because as often as we stumble upon the holiness of sacred time with God…we also try to wrap our own priorities and self-interest in the language of spiritual purity or faithfulness to justify doing what we are doing already…whether we are talking about Sabbath rest so we can justify even more depleting labor for ourselves or others…or whether we are talking about preventing someone from being healed because “it’s just not the way we do things here.”

Jesus is angry today because he see the Pharisees using the Torah as a trick and a trap for him…and a justification for denying the needs of others. This is, in itself, a horrible offense. Jesus is offended not because he doesn’t care about the Sabbath, but because he loves it. If Jesus didn’t respect the law and the Sabbath…he wouldn’t care so much when they are wielded as weapons…but they are not weapons. They are God’s tools for healing a broken world…for connection…for love.

After creation fell in the garden…God didn’t establish a law as a punishment or a test…He gave it is a prescription. The law is a medicine to heal the wounds we have inflicted on the world and on each other.

So, no…the Sabbath does not exist to gas up the tank, prepare us for more and more work, or to prove to God that we’ve got our priorities in line. The Sabbath exists to create a space for joy, and freedom that the world does not offer.

This is a gift…and it is also a challenge…It is a gift because it gives us the architecture in time where we can breathe deeply, love fully, and be free, if we learn how to recognize and live in it. It is a challenge because it shows us that the suffering and imprisonment of others is not something we can justify setting aside…even on a day of rest. That architecture in time is not truly what God intends if it is not for everyone.

I wonder how we might better honor these Sabbath intentions in our lives?

Because one thing is clear: Jesus has come to tell us that freedom and life are what God wants for us and for all people.

May the sacred time where you can live in this truth come to you…as the gift and challenge that is truly is.

Amen. Thanks be to God.