

## Honoring the Sabbath

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“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath. . . ?” – Mark 3:4a

I have taken as my text this morning a rhetorical question, that is, a question for which we already know the answer. Jesus asks it of the Pharisees in the first half of the fourth verse of the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, in which he asks, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath?”

The answer, of course, is that it is lawful to do good on the sabbath, and so Jesus heals a man's withered hand. In response, Mark tells us, the Pharisees “went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”

In Jesus' story, we're only three chapters into Mark's gospel, and the conflict between Jesus and other religious authorities has already reached the point where the opposition wants to kill him. The Pharisees and the Herodians want to destroy Jesus because he healed a man's hand – really? Most of us would look at such a situation somewhat squinty-eyed and we'd say, What's really going on here? Is this a dispute about honoring the sabbath or is the sabbath is being used as an excuse to find fault?

Let's start unpacking this confrontation by doing what you should always do to learn more about a passage of the Bible, which is to compare other passages in the Bible that may offer some illumination of the passage in hand.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is a story about Jesus healing a woman on the sabbath, over the protests of his religious opponents, and he defends his actions by saying, “Doesn't each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:15-16).

In this dispute about what is and is not permitted on the sabbath, Jesus uses another rhetorical question – about untying an animal to make sure it doesn't suffer thirst – to make the point that honoring the sabbath does not mean that we should allow suffering, even of animals, let alone people. If someone is suffering and you can do something about it, you should, regardless of the day of the week. This was standard Jewish teaching of Jesus' day and it's standard Jewish teaching to this day, even among the most observant Jews. If their schedule calls for it, orthodox Jewish doctors and nurses work on the sabbath, even if they don't actually treat a patient, because the very possibility that they might relieve someone's suffering justifies their working on the sabbath. They don't deny that they're working, but it's work to relieve suffering, and to relieve suffering is always permitted. This is standard Jewish religious teaching.

So why do Jewish doctors and nurses get to work on the sabbath but Jewish stockbrokers, say, or bricklayers do not? Because making money for someone or building them a new patio is not the same thing as relieving their suffering. Not only can building up your portfolio or increasing the resale value of your home wait for another day, but the fees you'll pay your stockbroker or bricklayer can wait,

as well. Work that advances self-interest or the interest of others is prohibited on the sabbath. That's the kind of work that God says we may not do on the sabbath.

Why? we ask. We in our self-absorbed culture ask, why shouldn't we be allowed to advance our own interests or the interests of others every day of the week, without exception?

Because, the Bible responds, for at least one day a week, you need to get away from yourself. For one day out of seven you have to stop advancing your own interests. You have to stop thinking about what's in it for you. You have to forego looking out for Number One. That's what the sabbath is intended to do – to free us from our obsession with ourselves.

And what's one of the best ways to escape the tyranny of self-interest? Worship. Worship – focusing our attention on God and God's world – is one of the very best ways that human beings have come up with to draw themselves away from the relentless demands of self-pursuit.

That's why we worship on the sabbath. We set aside one day of the week that we start by going to church or to synagogue so that our attention is focused not on ourselves, but rather on God. That's what worship is for; it's to help us re-calibrate our lives by seeing them in the largest possible context, which is God.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California, used to say that it drove him crazy when people would say after a worship service, "I didn't get a thing out of that service." He says he always wanted to reply, "That's because it wasn't for you, it was for God."

We've become such consumers in our acquisitive society – in our pursuit of stuff for ourselves – that we don't even know how to interact with God in any other way. I had a conversation with a colleague not long ago who used to work in social services and is now studying for the ministry, and one of the things she mentioned to me was that the folks who used to be called her "clients" are now called "consumers." Really? People who need help getting through a difficult time in their lives are consumers? If every interaction we have with one another consumes us in one way or another, is it any wonder that our society is disappearing? In our 24/7 consumerist society, we're literally eating ourselves alive.

So let's return to our text and Jesus' question of whether it's lawful to do harm on the sabbath. No, of course it's not, but many of us can't see the harm that comes from not turning off our consumerism. Many of us can't see the damage that we inflict on ourselves from being on 24/7. Many of us can't see the toll that perfectly good work takes if you don't get away from it on a regular basis.

Psychologists tell us that the average teenager today is showing the symptoms of stress and anxiety that patients displayed fifty years ago in psychiatric hospitals. We're literally driving ourselves insane. Homework, sports, extra-curriculars, extra tutoring, too much texting and not enough exercise – it all has taken its toll on our kids and that means it's taken its toll on our future.

Honoring the sabbath is a way of saying no to that kind of world. It says no to self-consumption. The sabbath is a way of getting your self back in the way that God intends for you to be a self, which is to bear in the world the image and likeness of our creator. We are co-creators with God, and Genesis tells us that the creator par excellence rested on the seventh day and made it holy. Rest, according to scripture, is as holy as communion. Rest, according to the Bible, is an essential part of creation.

Everyone who has created anything knows that one of the essential elements of creating is not-creating – you have to stop in order to start again. You have to take a break from the task at hand in order to be able to do it right. You have to step back and look at it. You have to examine it from this angle and from that. You have to wonder if this is really what you're trying to get at. Stopping the creative process allows us to start it again in a new and better way. Sabbath is that blessed weekly re-

start that allows us to be creators in the image and likeness of the pre-eminent creator.

So honoring the sabbath really isn't about whether this or that qualifies as work. Honoring the sabbath isn't about getting ourselves lost in the weeds of religious details. Honoring the sabbath is a lifestyle choice – it's to live as God lives – which is creatively, not compulsively; generously, not graspingly; and confidently, not anxiously.

Jesus said that in order to inherit God's realm, we must become as little children. When, on the sabbath, we give ourselves a break from being our grown-up, working selves, we have the opportunity to return to our true, creative, child-like selves; and that return to the spontaneous joyous life of the child brings healing and repair to both ourselves and the world. The sabbath requires us, in the best sense, to be kids again. As adults we get to be childlike again and go out and play. And when we do that, we are doing good and not harm on the sabbath. We are living according to God's law.

The world wears you down; sabbath builds you up. The world takes and takes and takes; the sabbath gives you back yourself. The world demands, the sabbath offers. For one day, when we are free again to do nothing more than enjoy, the sabbath offers us a foretaste of the world that is to come. And you know what we call the world that is to come? We call that heaven. The sabbath offers us a little piece of heaven every seven days. So I ask you the obvious question: Why wouldn't you honor that?