

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Luke 6:1-16

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Sabbath Redo

It's a good thing that we have the lively reminder of Good News in our worship service today – two anthems sung like bookends – because today one of the scripture messages is that discipleship following Jesus can get you into trouble.

A few weeks ago Reverend Don Remick joined us, was our guest preacher for a day. His text was the story of Jesus homecoming from Luke, chapter four. If you'll remember, things got decidedly tense when Jesus started talking about God bringing blessings, even favor, to outsiders. The hometown fans turned on him, were about to throw Jesus off a cliff, if you recall.

Now, some time later, Jesus is upsetting people again but this time, it's a different crowd. Religious leaders, the Pharisees, see Jesus disciples threshing grain with their hands, and accuse them all of breaking Sabbath rules. Jesus mentions a time David didn't keep the rules, and then says something about being Lord, or Number One Interpreter, of Sabbath, which must've irritated the Pharisees no end. On another occasion in front of all the Pharisees standing there in the temple Jesus heals a man with a withered arm, as if to say there, see here Is there really such thing as a wrong day to help another person? Was Jesus being deliberately provocative, someone asked in bible study this week?

I don't know about you, but that is not my image of Jesus. I don't think Jesus spent huge energies figuring out how to annoy people. I don't think Jesus held retreats for instruction in angering the authorities, or spent time coaching disciples on in-your-face-tactics. What I do know to be true is that Jesus was faithful. Faithful to the understanding of God's ways, God's love and justice that burned within his heart. And if someone was standing before him suffering, as was this man with the withered hand, he was going to respond.

When Luke's gospel puts two Sabbath controversy stories together, the point is to show how early on, from the start, following Jesus meant being in tension with the rules the mores the practices the sensibilities of organized religion, that is to say, Jesus was about confronting organized religion where organized religion had lost its way, or forgotten why it was doing the things it did.

Yesterday, in the warm light-filled space of the John Robinson Center, some of us met for a leadership retreat, a time to think together about our church and our mission and where we are going.

Following a brief morning worship, we watched a Ted Talk by a man named Simon Sinek entitled "Getting to Why." Using Apple and the Wright Brothers as examples Sinek spoke of the importance of knowing why a person or company is doing what they are doing. People aren't going to be interested or going to buy your product if you only appeal to the 'what' – as in what the product is, what advantages it offers- they want to know *why*, why you are making it, what motivates you and what you believe. It had business applications for sure, but faith applications as well. Sinek, for instance, reminded us that back in a hot August in 1963 250,000 people came to the March on Washington not specifically to hear Martin Luther King Jr but because they believed what he believed, namely that the time had come to bring full rights to all American citizens.

The Ted Talk was shown to us yesterday to have us think about why we do what we do here in church. The Ted Talk was to encourage us to become a place where not just leaders but pretty much everyone who comes to worship, everyone who takes part in our common life everyone who sees this church as their faith community can articulate why we do what we do. Hmmm we all said. We may have some work to do. Good work. Exciting work. (More on that later.)

For today, I want us to think about Jesus breaking Sabbath as an instance of Getting to Why.

So why do we have Sabbath? Why did it become religious practice in the first place to mark a day as different? I bet if some of you raised your hands, you would say rest. Sabbath is about rest, for God rested on the seventh day and all creatures – human beings and animals alike -- need rest from their work. You might also add Sabbath is for worship, for pausing to remember who we are, and to whom we belong. Okay. Fair enough. In bible study this week we got truly nostalgic,

remembering how Sunday under the blue laws days did so much to strengthen family ties The nice table cloth and the good china (Spode or Wedgwood) would come out, the chicken or pot roast would be prepared People would go to church and come home for this wonderful meal. And after that...not much else. I was taken back to my early teenage years, lying on the living room floor, the Sunday paper comic pages spread out before me. On Sunday there was food, there was rest, there was, as Mary Chapin Carpenter puts it “cool quiet, and time to think”.

But there is another emphasis to Sabbath, also biblical, that the Pharisees in Jesus time seemed to be losing sight of. Sabbath is about *liberation*. In Deuteronomy: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded You to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deut 5:15) Sabbath is a reminder that we are not to be slaves. We are not to be slaves to our jobs, or to the constant striving of our culture. Sabbath is more than rest – it is more than a pause, it is *a break* from the pace of life, the constant voice that tells you you need to do more, be more, produce more, accomplish more. Sabbath is a kind of unbinding from all that falsely holds you.

Sabbath is also trust: “I am not the one who keeps the world running. I am not God.”

I think about the controversies in our age around ending the blue laws. In Philadelphia in the mid nineties we lived a short block from a liquor store, it was practically in our back yard. There was a huge fuss about there being for the first time Sunday hours. But in Jesus time, the controversy was who do you see, who do you have compassion for. On Facebook I saw a protestor from last weekends march. She was wearing a t-shirt, dark background with bold white lettering. *I met God She's black*. You might consider that “in your face” But what if we met God and found out God was every vulnerable person on earth. A child living in poverty. A Refugee. A person with mental health issues? How would that shape or change us?

Now perhaps we can hear Jesus words about being Lord of the Sabbath not as smartmouth sass or deliberate provocateur but as Jesus having a heart for human beings, human beings who suffer, who need greater wholeness, healing, and human connection. (“We were made for communion” someone said at bible study this week) Remember, in Jesus time any physical flaw rendered a person unclean. They were set *apart*, not as in holy apart but as isolated, cut off apart. On the Sabbath Jesus heals a man so as to free him and restore him to community. So Jesus re-does Sabbath, or rather he *revisions* it, putting the emphasis on compassion and liberation.

It is too easy, however to point a finger at the Pharisees rigidity. But we all of us, each one of us, take our turns at being rigid about something. Yesterday while Don Remick was leading us, teaching us all kinds of foundational stuff about the changing landscape of ministry, about churches and life cycles, about the millennials and how they seek to live out spirituality I found myself shutting down a bit. This is well and good, I thought, but hey, here at our church, we're doing pretty good, aren't we? But

we follow in Jesus steps, serving a Still Speaking God. We can't close our ears and say, no really God, we are doing just fine. In the UCC we speak, as John Robinson did so long ago of the God who has "yet more light and truth to break forth from God's word" which means, at least in part, that things don't stay the same for very long. We means God may have new things, new direction in mind for us.

So it comes to this: The church, Christ's body in the world, was never intended to be a fixed or static entity because God's word, upon which the church finds its mission, is never a fixed or static entity. "We are not the church of the Pilgrims," someone said yesterday. "We are the church of the *Pilgrimage*." Remember ten years ago in this church there was no real outreach to homeless people. But some folks heard God calling, and responded to create Monday Meals and the Overnights program. Ten years ago this church was not Open and Affirming. But some folks heard God urging, the issue was wrestled with, the affirmation made. Just ten years ago this church had not yet been served by a female Senior Pastor. Each of these things caused people to rethink, reformulate what they might have once thought God had in mind.

The Sabbath controversies remind us that sometimes keeping up with God and God's work in the world can leave us breathless. It isn't always easy to "walk in God's ways, known and to be made known to us." But we can do it. And often we are surprised to find this out.

Yesterday at our gathering, we lifted up celebrations, things we felt were important note by way of growth, or new initiatives, or places where we are getting stronger or healthier. Someone said we've been working on communication. By this she did not mean the newsletter, or Sneak Peak, Facebook or our website. She meant talking about things that people don't all think alike on. This was someone who had voiced some trepidation about the church doing this, about our being in these sorts of conversations. Now she was naming it as a celebration.

In these chaotic days, filled with tension and tumult may God bless the church with strength and with flexibility to move forward in Jesus's name.

Amen.