

## **Luke 6:1-16**

Today we have two Sabbath controversies, one deals with plucking grain and the other with healing. It's easy to dismiss Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees, who are generally presented as legalistic and self-righteous. So we tend to situate ourselves on the side of Jesus.

There are two main problems with these Sabbath controversies in our contemporary context: the first - the church's long misinterpretation of the Jewish leaders, who oppose Jesus' activities on the Sabbath, as being stiff and legalistic in their opposition. This has led to many anti-Semitic portrayals of Jews where concerns about the Sabbath issue are seen as "their" issue and not ours.

The second: our lack of care about the issue in today's church. We have not observed the Sabbath - Friday evening through Saturday evening - as a day of rest for thousands of years. In our post-Christian world, we have become comfortable with not even observing the Lord's Day as a "Christian Sabbath." The New Testament portrait of the Pharisees is something of a caricature reflecting tensions between the church and pharisaic Judaism at the time the gospels were written. This caricature tends to obscure the deeper concerns of the Pharisees, who established a reform movement at a time when foreign occupation and Hellenization threatened the Jewish faith and way of life. The Pharisees have been misunderstood and maligned by the church at least since the fall of the Jerusalem Temple, when the church found itself in direct competition with Pharisees, as opposed to the priests,

Sadducees, or Essenes, as heirs to Israel's traditions in a post-Temple age. Pharisees were the liberal, mainline Protestants of first century Judaism. While other Jewish sects claimed the people needed the priesthood and the temple to mediate between them and God, the Pharisees democratized religious experience.

The Pharisees offered the people modes and means of devotional practice that could be followed anywhere by anyone without direct oversight or mediation by religious leaders or clergy. The challenges the Gospel writers faced were sincere concerns about the welfare of the people and the shared ritual practices available to them.

Jesus was a Jew. The conflicts between Jesus and religious leaders are not interfaith debates (Christian versus Jew), they are inner-faith arguments - Jews dialoguing with Jews in a way often done in ancient Jewish circles. Why did Luke include these Sabbath controversies in his narrative in the first place? Luke was not trying to make Pharisees look bad. He included the story because Sabbath observance was an issue for the early church.

As more and more Gentiles were included in the church, the question of the faith's relation to its Jewish roots evolved. Clearly, the early church considered the Hebrew scriptures, which included the commandment to keep the Sabbath, to be its scriptures. What was less clear was how those scriptures, along with its commandment to keep the Sabbath, were to be interpreted in light of the Christ Event.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath day, is grounded in the creation story in Genesis, where God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. Simply put, God's people are to rest on this day because God did. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment is tied to the experience of a people released from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh's relentless demands were that the Hebrew slaves keep making more and more bricks, under harsher and harsher conditions. Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can. So, when they cease working every seventh day, God's people remember that the Lord delivered them from slavery.

When the Pharisees see Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath - an action that constituted "work" - they ask, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus responds by citing a scriptural precedent - the story of David's visit to the priest Ahimelech at Nob. "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?"

David does not simply "take" the bread; he asks Ahimelech for some bread, and Ahimelech offers him the bread of the Presence because there is no ordinary bread available. Feeding those who are hungry, in this case, takes precedence over strict adherence to the law.

Jesus applies the same logic to plucking grain on the Sabbath. Quite simply,

his disciples were hungry and needed something to eat. The Sabbath is meant to be life giving, not a slave master, unresponsive to human needs.

This logic continues with Jesus teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath, where a man with a withered hand is present. Jesus knows the Pharisees are looking for another reason to accuse him. Nevertheless, he asks the man with the withered hand to come forward, then says to the Pharisees and scribes: "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?"

The answer to Jesus' question is obvious. Of course it is lawful to do good and not harm on the Sabbath, to save life and not destroy it. The rabbis agreed that one must act to save a life on the Sabbath, even if it meant breaking a commandment. Some Pharisees may have argued that this man's malady was not life-threatening, so the healing could have been done another day. In Jesus' view, however, there is no reason for the man to suffer one day longer.

That the Pharisees debate with Jesus about what it means to keep the Sabbath shows that they take him seriously as an interpreter of law. Yet, the Pharisees' furious reaction and discussion of what they might do to Jesus seems to be more a sign of their fear rather than legitimate concern for the law.

The attitudes of the Pharisees were significant as they reflected the tendency of people, including those of their own community: to be closed to those they judged inferior, to prioritise external actions over inner meanings, to be reluctant to move on from the familiar and the comfortable to follow their conscience. The God of Jesus

was a liberating, inclusive and merciful God.

Luke portrays the Pharisees as those who, in their attempt to protect the Sabbath, burdened it with restrictions. But, perhaps the important question for us is: Are we more like the Pharisees than we care to admit? How have we managed to turn God's gift of the Sabbath into a burden?

One could argue, that we have gone to the opposite extreme of the Pharisees. There are no restrictions on what we can do on our Sabbath day. Our kids have soccer and baseball and multiple other activities on Sunday. The stores are open, so we can shop until we drop. Or we can catch up on chores and projects around the house. And worship? That becomes one more thing to squeeze into a busy day. We may feel a tinge of guilt if we do not attend worship, or we may attend but find ourselves distracted by the many things we have to do. Instead of feeling rested and renewed, we begin another week exhausted.

Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for humankind. It is meant to be life-giving, not life-draining. It is meant to be a gift, a time apart from the relentless demands of daily life, a time to rest in God's presence, a time to savour the goodness of God's creation and celebrate God's deliverance, a time to do what is good and what gives life.

Luke wrote these stories to teach believers that belief is not about following a list of rules but about a relationship with God that affects your relationships with others. Like Jesus, we honour God best when we affirm relationships with God and

each other rather than imposing restrictions.

So, what is the point that Jesus trying to make here? Is it that Sabbath observance no longer applies? Jesus does not say this. Jesus does not respond to the Pharisees by telling them that the Sabbath is now abolished. Jesus does not say that the Sabbath is now relaxed. Instead, Jesus is attempting to return Sabbath observance to its original and proper understanding.

Jesus points to one of the original intentions of the Sabbath. In Mark's Gospel He says: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sake of the Sabbath." The Sabbath was instituted to benefit us, not to burden us. The Pharisees had shackled themselves and others with a strict system of Sabbath observance that completely blurred the original intentions of the day.

When we hear that Sabbath observance should not take precedence over human need, we might be tempted to think that the Sabbath is all about us. We need to be careful to balance the truth that "The Sabbath was made for humankind " with the truth that "The Son of Man is master of the Sabbath." The Sabbath is concerned with humanity's welfare, but the Sabbath is not about us. The Sabbath is about God. Our allegiance then, is not to a legalistic observance of a particular day; rather, our allegiance is to the "Master of the Sabbath ".

This is where the Pharisees erred. They saw Sabbath observance as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Proper Sabbath observance always points to God. One thing we need to avoid when planning our Sabbath observance is

meticulously legislating what we can and can't do on the Sabbath. This is what the Pharisees did, and this is a trap that even churches today fall victim to. You remember a time when you could not kick a soccer ball on the Sabbath; a time when you could not play cards on the Sabbath; a time when you could not watch TV on the Sabbath. There was a day when many of our churches treated the Sabbath the way the Pharisees did.

So, what has happened? What often is the case is that when the pendulum swings too far in one direction, it eventually comes back to swing too far in the other direction. We do not observe the Sabbath like Pharisees. Most of us treat the Sabbath the way pagans do. We treat it like any other day. We put in our hour at church, then we run around trying to get done those things we have put off all week.

The times may be changing, yes, but God does not change. Jesus did not abolish the Sabbath. He did not even say that the Sabbath was now relaxed. Jesus simply warned against legalistically observing the Sabbath, which often led to neglecting to do what was good and necessary.

The principle taught in this story is clear: It is appropriate to do good on the Sabbath. The man with the withered hand was not in any imminent danger. Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal the man. But by healing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrates that it is always appropriate to do good. Healing, deeds of mercy, are appropriate everyday.

Besides duties of necessity and deeds of mercy, there is one other Sabbath

day activity mentioned in this passage: worship. Jesus "entered the synagogue and was teaching ". The Scriptures have always been central to the Sabbath day. They were central in Moses' day, they were central in Jesus' day, and they should be central in our own day.

It should be clear by now that we don't simply break the Sabbath by engaging in activities that we should avoid, but we break the Sabbath when we neglect activities that are prescribed. Worship, duties of necessity, and deeds of mercy must not be neglected on the Sabbath. Resting, even worshipping, is not easy when there is so much to get done. Some might say that they can't afford to rest for a day, yet the Bible says that you can't afford not to rest for a day.

Shortly after these controversies over the Sabbath, Jesus went out to a mountain and prayed all night. This was a significant moment, a big decision was to be made - the choosing of the Twelve - the twelve who he would call apostles. The details on who these Twelve were, come from the Bible, from ancient church historians, from Messianic Jewish scholars, and from recent scholarship. Most of them grew up around the region of Galilee.

Simon Peter and Andrew who were called in last week's narrative, were Galilean brothers, as were Philip and Bartholomew, also known as Nathaniel. Just as John the Baptizer was Jesus' 2nd cousin on his mother Mary's side, Jesus had other cousins. Mary had a sister named Salome married to Zebedee from Bethsaida, whose sons were James and John. So, James and John were Jesus' first cousins.



Then on the side of step-father Joseph the Carpenter, Jesus had step-cousins, legally cousins, but not biologically. According to an early church historian, a man named Clopas, also known as Alphaeus, was the brother of Joseph the Carpenter. His wife, Mary of Clopas, was sister to Salome and Mary, mother of Jesus. Clopas or Alphaeus and Mary of Clopas had five sons: Levi or Matthew, Thomas, the twin, James son of Alphaeus, Judas Lebbaeus Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot, all Jesus' double first cousins. So among the Apostles, seven were cousins of Jesus: The rest were Galileans who grew up with them, Philip and Bartholomew, Simon Peter and Andrew. Judas Iscariot was a Judean. So all the disciples were Galilean except this one Judean. This may throw some light on his later history and why he might have been pushed out to be a traitor.

Most of these men knew Jesus from the time he was a child. They had watched him. They knew his character, his way of doing, his sinless behaviour. They had played with him, eaten with him, and worked with him. They had a relationship with him. These men knew him and followed him. Their following was based not on their ability to keep the rules, to mind the do's and don'ts, but was based solely on his character and his person. For them, believing was about a relationship with God and played out in their relationships with each other. "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself."

That hasn't changed. Following Jesus is not about how well you can uphold the legalistic demands of religious people. Following Jesus is about having a relationship with him, knowing him, enjoying him, working and playing with him.

When we follow Jesus, when we have a relationship with him, he sends us out to do his will. Every area of life is submitted to him, and we live to serve him, enjoy him, and bring praise to Him in all that we are and all that we do.

Jesus doesn't send his newly minted apostles right out. They will follow him for a while longer, learning the true meaning of Sabbath and all the scriptures, from his life, his teaching, and his healing. It's the same with the church, Jesus has placed us in the world to proclaim and live out the Good News of God's salvation. We see Jesus tearing down barriers. He did this even among his apostles. He chose Levi, or Matthew, who had made his living collecting taxes for the Romans. He also chose Simon the Zealot - an anti-Roman terrorist. On the street, Simon would have tried to kill Levi. Jesus was intentional about tearing down barriers of hate, hurt, and mistrust that divide people. The church would do well to imitate Jesus' example. We need to be the place where barriers between people are torn down and divisions healed.

Jesus knows that the world is already full of barriers and divisions. People grow weary of them. People need a rest from our striving, fighting, and wars. The world needs us as a witness to the Sabbath peace Jesus taught and lived out and even died for. May we be a people of rest, release, forgiveness, and healing.

Amen.