

Sermon 06-02-24

I've reached a point in life where it feels like I've heard every sermon on every text. This is not true, of course; the combinations doubtless exceed the lifespan of the universe, or at least it seems that way. But the passage from Mark is one of the classics, right? Jesus gets hassled by the local authorities for violating the by now excessively elaborate letter of the Sabbath Law, he uses his superior knowledge of the Scriptures and basic moral common sense to make them look silly, and they start plotting his demise, because they're tempestuous children having a tantrum, I don't know. After all, we're sophisticated people and those laws were silly, right?

I'm trained as a scientist and physician, not as a theologian. My mother tells me that even before I remember, when she explained something to me, I'd say 'that makes sense'. Or occasionally 'that doesn't make sense'. My first impulse when I read scripture is to look at biology and psychology first; spirituality and theology second. When I parse something Jesus says, I tend to ask 'why is this consistent with how people are and why might it work for us', as opposed to 'why does God want it this way?'. Though, if theology done by a scientist is anything like science done by theologians... well, I don't preach that often. When you're desperate you get what you get. Ah well.

So, is there a point to the Sabbath? Does it make sense?

In Genesis: "...on the seventh day God ended the work which She had done, and She rested on the seventh day from all the work which She had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it She rested from all the work which God had created and made."

And in Deuteronomy:

"Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any

work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

The Sabbath *reminds us of our place in God’s great Universe*. God made the whole Universe, and when it was done, it was good; and God still had to rest. All that we’ve made and done is a tiny little bit of all there is. The science fiction writer Gene Wolfe, once wrote:

“Indeed, it seems to me that of all the good things in the world, the only ones humanity can claim for itself are stories and music; all the rest: mercy, beauty, sleep, clean water and hot food, are the work of the Increate. Thus, stories are small things indeed in the scheme of things, but it is hard not to love best that which is our own.”

It’s *good* for us to be reminded of that. We get to thinking our work, our lives, are important things. They are important on our scale, but we shouldn’t lose sight that *our* viewpoint is a *very very* limited one; the rest of the universe is unimaginable in both time and space, in the great and small dimensions.

The Sabbath is about *wise use of limited resources*. Overworked animals don’t do so well; overworked people seem not to as well. Some rest and re-creation are essential to our well-being. And what, exactly, are we working *for*? Survival of course; agricultural people were much more aware of that fact that we are, and it’s no less true for us. But if we’re to be anything more than machines for the reproduction of human DNA, we’re living for more than survival; for culture and relationships; stories and songs.

The Sabbath is about *economic justice*. Deuteronomy emphasizes that. Everyone got the Sabbath; even slaves and resident aliens and working animals – all called out specifically in the Scripture. When I was in college I worked Saturdays at Radio Shack, and we had Blue Laws. People my age remember Blue laws; they put strict limits on what you could buy and sell on a Sunday. Back then, Texas was contemplating ending the Blue Laws; my manager talked to us about how we should vote against repealing them. Alas, now people working in retail and other such jobs end up working more days to do the same business. A day off for everyone, as much as we can, makes the world fairer.

The Sabbath is about *building connections* that hold societies together. We come to church to make connections with God and each other. If we don't come to church, we often; not always but sometimes; do something else; soccer leagues, choirs, folk-music societies, book clubs; that create those connections. People; Facebook and Instagram are *not* a substitute for the web of immediate person-to person, group to group connections that turn a bunch of tribes fighting over water holes into a society that can build pipe organs and train people to play them gloriously.

I hope I've convinced you that the Sabbath to some extent makes sense. So why did Jesus push back on enforcing the *Sabbath*? Jesus had to be making a point there, or else you should tune me out entirely. I mean, more than you already are on a beautiful sunny summer morning.

Jesus has a long game of asserting authority in the face of the existing powers, and in an interesting way:

Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

It's well beyond my skill level to parse this one *theologically*, but the phrase "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" resonates with my practical soul.

I think it was back in high school I first saw that sign, I'll bet you have too, it says 'when you're up to your (billyow parts of your anatomy) in alligators, it's hard to remember that you're there to drain the swamp'. So one thing Jesus is saying here is just; you're enforcing the Sabbath but you've lost track of the point of it. When you hassle hungry people for picking up leftover grain on the Sabbath, maybe the economic justice piece, so clearly delineated in Deuteronomy, has gotten lost. If you're dubious of healing a withered hand on the Sabbath, maybe you've lost track just a wee bit of using resources wisely, let alone of your place in the wide Universe.

On the other hand, those seem like obvious points for someone like Jesus. And also, following rules that don't make sense makes sense sometimes, right? If that makes any sense. Laws and rules, like everything else we do, are compromises between conflicting values; a law that's simple enough to comprehend isn't particular enough to handle every case, but if you allow for a bunch of special cases then you might as well not have a rule at all. It's not a slam-dunk either way.

I think I could make a solid counter-argument to Jesus on *both* his particular challenges to the Sabbath laws. Were the apostles gonna starve to death if they didn't glean the grain? It sounds a bit less compelling if Jesus had said 'Shouldn't there be a right to *snack* on the Sabbath?' And as far as healing the man with the withered hand goes, what, you're too busy to come back on Sunday and do it? It wasn't exactly an emergency.

Let's look for both a simple message, and a more nuanced message from this passage. The simple message is 'remember laws are there to serve people, not the other way round'. But I'm wondering if the other message comes not from Jesus' challenge to the laws, but from the authorities' response to it. Jesus put them in the wrong, and they went *bats*.

Just why *did* the leaders get so upset? A country preacher violates a couple of the edge-cases of the Sabbath laws and makes some obvious points about why it shouldn't be a problem. Sensible leaders might laugh that off, or just ignore it.

But: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.'

As laws are made for people, not the other way round, so leaders are supposed to serve their people, not the other way round. But in this case the authorities were deeply insecure, or loved their status and power, or something; and seriously overreacted to a minor, frankly disputable challenge. And perhaps that's the real point of this passage of Scripture; even the real test Jesus was posing to the authorities.

Jimmy Carter once wrote: 'A strong nation, like a strong person, can afford to be gentle, firm, thoughtful, and restrained. It can afford to extend a helping hand to others. It is a weak nation, like a weak person, that must behave with bluster and boasting and rashness and other signs of insecurity.'

Jesus' challenge to the then-authorities was a test, not of the Sabbath laws, or of their theology, but of their fitness to lead; one which they failed spectacularly.

Where does that leave *us* on a sunny summer morning? Perhaps; instead of placing ourselves with Jesus; or even the disciples in this one; we might place ourselves with the ... Pharisees. We all have to be leaders in some aspect of our lives; as teachers, or parents, or children of aging parents, or... use your imagination. When Jesus challenges us; and it seems like he does with disconcerting frequency; we should try to remember who we're here to serve and what the laws are for. And, whether we're right, wrong, or as usual, somewhere in-between, we are but small in the scheme of things, yet with God's help, can afford to be gentle, firm, thoughtful, and restrained.