

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.” This is such an important part of who we are as children of God that it makes the Top 10 Chart. From the first creation story in Genesis<sup>1</sup> all the way through Revelation, we are urged to take the Sabbath day seriously. But what is the Sabbath, and how, exactly, are we to keep it?

In Genesis, we learn that God created all that is in six glorious days, and on the seventh day, God rested and declared that day a holy day.

A passage in Exodus explains, “...The Israelites shall observe the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel ...”<sup>2</sup>

Sabbath-keeping was hard in those days. “Work” didn’t just include tasks like tallying numbers on a spreadsheet, or sweeping the front porch. All the water needed had to be drawn from the well at least a day in advance, all food consumed would need to be prepared ahead of time, clothes to be worn to worship were to be donned prior to sundown the evening before, and so forth.

That said, there were clear boundaries around some specific duties: any work that is necessary for life was permitted ~ mid-wives helping birth babies, for example, or preparing food for a sick relative, and yes, even priests leading worship in the temple were all considered necessary for life.

God recognized the need for restorative rest and recreation after the business of creation. As we are created in God’s image, we too need

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:2-3

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 31:12-17

rest and recreation after the effort we expend on the busy-ness of being human – time to recharge and reconnect with our Divine Source; time to be attentive to the activity of God in and through our lives.

In Mark’s Gospel reading this morning, we are presented with what were revolutionary ideas as to what Sabbath is and how we should approach our practice of Sabbath-keeping.

In the first part of our reading, the disciples are plucking grain as they travel through a field on the Sabbath day. The laws regarding harvesting grain on this day are such that one can gather grain with one’s hands but not use a sickle.<sup>3</sup> The implication being that the amount of grain being harvested determines what is work or what is necessary for self-care and self-preservation. The Pharisees clearly feel that the disciples are violating the Sabbath laws. So in response, Jesus, as Jesus is often wont to do, turns their expectations and their narrow understanding of Scripture around. He references David, casting himself in a Davidic role ~ a bold and likely offensive move to make in the face of this particular crowd. He did this to justify that the disciples’ self-care wasn’t a violation of their covenant with God.

Jesus then makes a pronouncement: “The Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.”

This assertion attempts to disconnect Sabbath-keeping from an oppressively strict practice. Arguably, the effort expended to keep the Sabbath according to the laws and customs of the day was far more work than if they had no day of supposed ‘rest’ at all. Pointing out that the Sabbath was created for humankind also invites the Pharisees to reflect on the creation story ~ whereby God established a sacred day for restorative recreation and holy time set aside to

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 23:25

recognize and reflect on God's activity in the world; a sacred time to realign one's priorities. Making this point calls the Pharisees back to the best of their tradition and highlights the legalistic, dogmatic practice that had evolved which in no way reflected the intention of the sacred day.

The scene shifts suddenly to Jesus entering the synagogue. Jesus notices the man with the withered hand. The man's life was not in danger, so technically, Jesus performing a work of healing would not be permitted at this time. But nevertheless, he asks those nearby if it is lawful to hurt or do good on the Sabbath: to kill or to heal. It seems his challengers remain mute, indicating that they are more concerned with the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law, and Jesus gets angry. He is exasperated that their need to follow what had become legalistic mandates to practice their faith in only one specific way had gotten in the way of the divine mandate to put love of God above all else.

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Sabbath in its full sense, is holy time set aside to reflect on God's activity in the world and joy-filled effort set apart to cultivate one's own life in Christ. The biblical narrative tells us that Sabbath is intentional time taken by individuals and faith communities to integrate the Holy with the created order ~ to align our human priorities with Divine intentions.

We see in the Gospels that Jesus models how to keep Sabbath both inwardly (through prayer, solitude, silence, and meditation) and outwardly (through communal ritual and acts of justice). When we keep the Sabbath, our inward movement toward a life centered in the Spirit honors the reign of God within us. Informed by indwelling of the Holy, we are then propelled outward toward works of service, reconciliation, and justice.

As we see here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus embodies the depth of Sabbath-keeping experiences through outward action to those he encounters who have specific needs. Sabbath-keeping is not an endeavor that feeds just one person, it is not centered on oneself ~ that would be self-care. As Jesus makes clear when the Pharisees confront him about plucking the grain, self-care is important, and can rightfully be a part of one's Sabbath observance.

There is no one right way to observe the Sabbath. It might very well be sitting on a mountaintop away from the distractions and the demands of everyday life ~ that certainly was one way that Jesus observed Sabbath. For some it might be walking a labyrinth, playing the piano, or cooking.

Yet Sabbath-keeping creates a ripple effect to all those we encounter in our daily orbit, because it is centered on **God's work** rather than our own. Sabbath is a time when we're actively and intentionally engaged in taking stock of our own spiritual inventory, open to insight and transformation, cultivating a deeper awareness of God's activity in and through us. God is calling us to *show up*, and do our part to continue God's work of creation and restoration, which in turn feeds the holy connection we share with our Creator.

Now that summer break is starting this week, I encourage you to set aside time with God. Find a regular time to unplug and get away and hang out with the One from whom you came and to whom you will one day return. We make dates with our partners, with our friend and our children. So perhaps consider making a date with God. Plan ahead and prepare accordingly. Show up, be yourself, have fun, and when it's over, make plans for another. It's beautiful, holy, covenantal work.

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