

One Sabbath while Jesus was going through some grain fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ³ Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ How 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?” ⁵ Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

⁶ On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him. ⁸ But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand in the middle.” He got up and stood there. ⁹ Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” ¹⁰ After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Last week we heard the frightening and surprising story about how the people who grew up with Jesus turned on him in an instant because he dared to suggest that God’s love was bigger than they could imagine.

Today we have the same song, second verse. Instead of neighbors, we have religious authorities, and instead of immediately trying to harm him, they start plotting against him, but the gist is the same. Jesus is making enemies. They’re angry because he’s challenging the norms, and we judge them for being wrong.

This is a scripture that can preach itself. You don’t need me to tell you that the religious authorities are missing the forest for the trees. Jesus is preaching love and mercy

healing and grace. He's saying to them that they're focused on the letter of the law, but they should be focused on the spirit of the law. All they see is custom-crumpling, tradition-tossing, law-breaking revolution. But as we heard MLK say only two weeks ago, Jesus may be a radical law-breaker, but he's doing it out of radical loving, not radical hate, and sometimes the laws are legalistic and not humane. I mean, what kind of sense does it make that you can't heal on the Sabbath? But for some people, rule breaking is rule breaking. Change of any kind is bad. Questioning authority and tradition is bad. They think it's better to resist change and remain in control than to accept change and lose control.

I want to give us the benefit of the doubt and assume that we're all not just okay with Jesus healing someone, we're cheering it on. Of course it's good to heal someone whose hand is withered. Jesus did a good thing. A miraculous thing. A thing which forever made the man's life easier. And we don't care whether it was on Friday night or Saturday or Sunday. We dismissed Sabbath rules a long time ago, right? Just practically speaking, none of us spend a whole day resting, without using electricity or cooking or exerting ourselves unless of course we're really sick. I was sick earlier this week, but even then, I had my phone, laptop, cable tv, and most of all, a sweet partner who took really good care of me and managed the kids and house at the same time.

But do you realize that we still live with rules based on the idea of resting on the Sabbath and don't even realize it? Most obviously, the traditional work week and school week is based on Sabbath. We get Saturdays and Sundays off. For the Judeo/Christian culture, that works pretty well.

But there's more underlying Sabbath culture than just having a weekend.

When the search committee brought me here to interview in-person, I had a great time, and on the last night, I was invited to an impromptu dinner. I stopped by the grocery store to buy a bottle of wine for the hosts. I couldn't find the wine section and asked an employee. Turns out, Connecticut is weird. No wine in grocery stores. No liquor stores are open on Sunday either, but you can buy beer. Hm. I pivoted and found some hard cider. At 6:04, I stepped to the register with my ID, feeling hurried to make it to the house on time.

“Sorry,” she said, “alcohol cannot be sold after 6 p.m. on Sundays.” What!?! No wine ever, but not even the hard cider after 6? Sorry, ma’am. That’s the state’s rule.

Well, what about Rhode Island? Can I go two miles down the road and get some? Sorry, ma’am. It’s after 6. Same rule applies there, too.

I ran to the bakery section and picked up some sugary pastries, and when I arrived, I sheepishly grumbled about New England rules I wasn’t used to and handed the hosts their box.

Now, let me tell you, I don’t drink wine. I don’t drink beer. I have had one alcoholic drink in the last twelve months, and it’s been a crazy year that called for a drink more than once. So, I’m clearly not a big drinker, nor am I familiar with all the liquor laws, but I knew that Texas had looser laws than New England. It turns out, in some respects, that New England still has more Puritan influence than the Bible Belt of Texas.

You see, all these rules about what happens on Sundays are called Blue Laws, and many of you can testify that there used to be even more, but that’s just the name they use to hide what they really are. They’re the Christian version of Sabbath law. Sundays are different. Not because the government wants you to be sober and have a good night’s rest so you can be ready for work on Monday morning, but because Christians have legislated how people can behave on Sundays.

I didn’t want to drink the wine. I wanted to follow the social norms of showing up to a dinner with something for the host, but no. The government says that’s taboo. I can’t be trusted to be good on Sunday night. Any other day of the week, sure, but not Sunday.

Jesus was also not trusted to behave on his Sabbath day. Do you notice how the religious authorities are observing him? And Jesus realizes it. He knows he’s being watched. In verse eight it says he even knows what they are thinking. So he makes direct eye contact with them as he heals the man’s hand. A deliberate, fully intentional law-breaking.

Again, remember the MLK speech from two weeks ago. King spoke about just and unjust laws. About honoring the law, and breaking unjust law for the right reasons, and being willing to accept the consequences in hopes that the law will change? Jesus acted in civil disobedience, breaking the law in front of the authorities. And he understood the consequences.

Now, I want to stop for a minute and give my full-throated support to the idea of Sabbath, both the Jewish tradition and our contemporary Christian tradition. First, there's an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi named Moses who lives in Florida with his wife and kids. I give most of the credit to his wife for producing the short videos for social media, but she films him and asks him questions about what being an Orthodox Jew is like. He talks about what he wears and being kosher and there have been lots of questions about what they can do on the Sabbath. Consistently, he says that life is precious, and Sabbath is designed to enhance one's life, so medical professionals can work on the Sabbath to save lives, people can receive medically necessary care, and people in emergencies can break Sabbath rules. Life trumps rules. Health trumps rules. That is such a positive way to look at Sabbath.

And Christians should understand sabbath the same way. Sabbath is designed to enhance life, not restrain it.

American Theologian Dr. Marva Dawn wrote beautifully on contemporary worship and Christian tradition and sabbath. She authored many books including one called *Keeping Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*. She implores modern Christians to practice sabbath in meaningful ways. Intentional ways. Carving out time, not just stumbling into it or being forced into it. To practice good self-care. To not be ashamed to rest but to rest as an act of stewardship of one's body and mind and spirit. To embrace spiritual practices that we find helpful, like worshipping with a community of believers, or meditating, or journaling, or joining a Bible Study. Embrace those opportunities. And to joyfully celebrate what God has given us. To break bread with others. To not withhold from oneself but to lavish and make special. She makes sabbath sound like something we should want to practice. Not something that we dread practicing.

Sabbath is not about unplugging from the grid and being bored for the day. It's about recharging yourself. Sabbath is not a sign of weakness. Keeping sabbath means to deliberately build restfulness and renewal into lives which are much too busy. To embrace this practice means to fill time with just the right amount of people and activities to refresh and restore your soul.

For extroverts, sabbath can be showing up for a Cribbage and Pizza night and laughing with people you didn't know until then. You've put a pin in your normal routine, set aside time to be very present, engaged your mind, and shared in fellowship. That qualifies as sabbath.

For introverts, sabbath can be a quiet walk in a state park alone or with a trusted friend. Crafting in your corner of the house or baking in the kitchen. It can be listening to music in the car. It can be a nap or indulging in a meal of your favorite comfort foods.

For all of us, worship on Sunday morning can be Sabbath time. I hope worship is sabbath time. Introverts and extroverts can be comfortable here. You're carving out the hour. Putting distractions away. It's just an hour, not a day, but you're choosing to be here, or to log on and to be present. There are loads of other things you can be doing, but you're choosing worship, and I hope it recharges you. I hope you feel like you are intentionally pressing pause on the fast paced, never-done life outside these walls. That you're resting your body. Embracing God and your family of faith, and feasting on communion, fellowship, fellowship hour snacks, music that moves you, and the love of God for you.

And I hope that the reason you keep coming back is because you realize it is recharging you. It fuels you. It engages you. Sabbath is not boring. Sabbath is life-giving. Sabbath is joyful. Sabbath is fun. Sabbath is worship, but not exclusively worship. Sabbath can be what you need it to be.

There is a lot of heaviness in the world. War and natural disaster and financial strains and disease. Lots to worry about, and part of me says that I should be preaching with more attentiveness to the despair and anxiety of the world, but part of me is sure that for this moment, the main purpose of church is to give us a time and a space to be very

present and draw deep from the wellspring of hope and remind us that we serve a God who is concerned about our well-being and does want us to remember that love wins and that a little rebellion in the name of love is a good thing, a godly thing. African-American poet Toi Dericotte famously wrote, “Joy is an act of resistance.” For me, leading worship requires a ton of work, but it’s also energizing and life-giving. Planning worship is sabbath, too. Reading scripture and commentary on scripture, listening to hymns to find the ones that fit best, writing liturgy. I have sabbath moments all week.

So, the final question is, what would Jesus do? Break a few rules in the name of love? Stare authorities in the eyes and make them choose between human kindness, compassion, and legislation? Declare that God’s love is for those considered foreign or weird or outcast? Friends, the ironic thing is, Jesus came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. He healed, loved, and worked on the sabbath. He feasted while the authorities fasted. He laughed while they legislated. He healed while they hurt. So long as the first commandment is to love God and the second commandment is to love neighbors as ourselves, we can break the laws that get in the way of love, but don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Sabbath is a good thing. Amen.