



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 2, 2024

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15; PSALM 81:1-10; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-12; MARK 2:23-3:6

SABBATH AS RESISTANCE

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 *[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.]*

Mark 2:23-3:6 *[One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” 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.” Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.]*

The final clinical rotation of my third year of medical school in 1990 was pediatric surgery, arguably the most intense and demanding month in all four years of medical school. My wife was pregnant with our first child, due a week after I would finish this last rotation,

with some time off planned and a gentler schedule to begin my fourth year.

Our daughter was born three weeks early, which is to say, right in the middle of my surgery rotation, which involved 14-hour days, and in-house call every fourth night. A

few days before Jane was born, the attending surgeon called me out on rounds one morning saying that med students who were serious about their careers would not miss any work, even for the birth of a child.

I was 25 years old, fully immersed in the culture of modern medicine which he and others had crafted across the 20th Century, and I took it as an order with implications for my grade and therefore my future as a physician. So when Kathy went into labor in the wee hours of a Friday morning in late June, I took her first to Arkansas Children's Hospital, leaving her in the call room while I made rounds at 4am, to check out to the chief resident when she arrived at 5am. Only then did we head across town to the hospital where Kathy would deliver our baby at 4:30pm that day.

In what I can only say in retrospect was a blundering and idiotic concession to the attending whose sneering words wrought their intended fear in me, I took Kathy and sweet Baby Jane home the next morning, helped settle them in, and left them a few hours later for call Saturday night and rounds into Sunday midday.

Let me just say that Kathy and I have considered this series of events countless

times since with at least three conclusions: 1) with gratitude, that the medical education system no longer condones such bloviating arrogance for attendings to demand such things, 2) with regret, that I did not have more courage in the moment to do things otherwise, and 3) with a wife whose ferocity is rarely seen publicly, but 34 years later I can attest with great esteem that the ferocious woman to whom I am married is very capable of defying stupidity when it presents in the course of life.

No, just no, with the next delivery, and many times since. And I am the better for that wisdom...

I share this story because it describes in rather hyperbolic ways what our society has fallen victim to—namely, that we have become a commodified society that specializes in control and entertainment, what Walter Brueggemann calls the “bread and circuses” of our time, and that anxiety and violence are by-products of that system. Brueggemann suggests that keeping sabbath, in whatever forms that takes, is an act of resistance to the commodified existence we have in a “rat race of anxiety.”¹

I will be the first to admit I am not terribly good at keeping sabbath, if by that one means

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of NOW*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

setting aside one day in seven for rest. The demons of a commodified self-esteem arising from a workaholic medical system still haunt me, as does the anxiety of work left undone even today. I am often inclined to filling my day off with errands and some emails and mind-numbing entertainment that presents on the television.

I don't think I am alone in that regard, which is why I belabor it here. It is a deeply seated part of the American psyche, to produce, to compete, to consume, and then to numb out.

Which is why we speak of Sabbath so incisively in the church today. All the guard rails of cultural wisdom in this regard have been jettisoned, and our scriptures are inviting us to consider an alternative way of being. And more than that—an alternative way of seeing ourselves in light of the God who liberates us with ten commandments in mind, one of which is to keep the sabbath holy. What does that really mean?

Yes, scripture says that because God worked for six days creating the world and then rested, we should adopt that pattern, too.

Can we agree that we are speaking in the realm of mythic meaning here—that we are not bean-counting days of creation, nor are we talking specifically about one day of rest a

week, as if it is somehow abstracted from the rest of life.

Sabbath can take many shapes, but at its core, Sabbath is about setting aside time to be marked as sacred, holy, which is to say, to be understood in the context of God's time, of God's story, which is not linear, but is insistently uncommodifiable.

The biblical narrative which helps us understand this and integrate it in our lives comes from the Exodus story in which God liberates the people from Pharaoh's commodified system of slave labor.

Keeping sabbath becomes a sign of that liberation, that a merciful and steadfast God claims us and invites us then to an economy of neighborliness, of right relationship with God, and others, and ourselves. In this alternative way of being, a restful God is not anxious about maximal functioning of creation, and the well-being of creation is not dependent on endless work.

So the question becomes how do you keep sabbath time sacred, and what makes it so?

If you want to read about how to do that, I'd recommend two books: Rabbi Abraham Heschel's seminal book, *The Sabbath*, and Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance*, from which I've drawn heavily in this sermon.

Or if you prefer, just reflect on the gospel for today where Jesus has a go with the Pharisees about what makes sabbath sacred. The rabbinical basis for this interaction is *pikuach nephesh*, Hebrew for saving a soul. Jesus asks, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, or to save life or kill? To save a life: *pikuach nephesh*.²

By healing the man with the withered hand, Jesus enables him to work again, to be productive, a way of saving his life, we might say, which is a good thing, right?

Rest made possible in the freedom of sabbath time is not the same as passive inertness; it is a meaning-making endeavor, orienting to

God with gratitude or compassion, ascribing value to the flourishing and wholeness of all. Ultimately, sabbath is the aid that enables us to frame the whole of a grateful life in light of God’s liberating love—seven whole days, not one in seven, as the poet suggests.

Keeping sabbath holy is an act of resistance that says the act of saving a life is worth the effort, even on the sabbath, precisely because it is a source of blessing, and it might just be your life that is saved.

So try it on this week—this marking sabbath time as sacred, as being connected to God’s story, and to Jesus’ story of neighborliness, and see what happens.



² This line of thought comes from an essay by Nanette Sawyer in [The Christian Century](#), accessed May 27, 2024