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Mark 2:23-3:6  
Deuteronomy 5:12-15  
Psalm 81:1-10  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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June 3, 2018  
The Second Sunday after Pentecost

How many of you were excited this morning when you heard our Gospel reading about the Sabbath? If you are like me, you are running around most days, exhausted, worn thin, overcommitted and in great need of a really long nap. So, talk of the Sabbath – that ever elusive weekly day of rest surely caught your attention. Maybe you are wondering how it works. Is it even possible? Are you required to do it? Can you pencil it in on your calendar just in case a better option comes along?

But, the nap...you really need that nap. So maybe you will put the Sabbath down in ink (at least this week).

I grew up with one concept of the Sabbath...boredom. As a kid it was awful. When we got home from church and if it was football season, my dad was always in front of the TV (usually snoring...he liked to nap) while I had to entertain myself. I remember long hours of nothingness. I became very good at finding things to do but I couldn't wait until the day was over and life could get back to normal - away from those rules to keep quiet and walk softly so the adults could sleep.

The grocery store was another story. Under the Blue Laws of the South I remember the hardware aisle was literally chained off. And next to that aisle was the beer aisle – it was chained off, too. And not only chained off but the lights above these two aisles were turned off. It was clear what you were and were not allowed to do on the Sabbath. In no way did it include buying WD-40 or Budweiser. I often wondered who made all of those rules? Who were they helping?

In all of its beauty, don't we often think of the Sabbath as one big rule? After all, it's part of the 10 Commandments – what bigger list of rules is there?

This morning, I want us to rethink the rules, to challenge how we understand them, and gain insight into what Jesus had in mind when he said that the Sabbath was made for humankind. Certainly it's a rule for our well-being but maybe not the rigid rule you once thought.

Let's start with some context. We are probably all familiar with the Sabbath guidelines in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Exodus chapter 20 tells us to *"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 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, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day..."*

That's the first context. The Sabbath was a day of rest and, with God as our example. Everyone was to rest. All people. All animals. Everyone and everything. No exclusions.

The second bit of context is from Deuteronomy 5 where Moses tells the people, *“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy....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.”*

From these verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy the Sabbath was understood as a multi-faceted observance. First, it was something meant for everyone; and second, it was an act that held in holiness the Israelites freedom from enslavement and highlighted the responsibility that comes with such freedom. Keep this context in mind. Rest and Responsibility.

The next bit of context is this...in our Gospel reading when Jesus walks into Capernaum he immediately draws criticism for his disciples who, on the Sabbath, were gleaning bits of grain as they walked. It's important to know that this isn't the first time Jesus faces criticism for things he or his followers were doing. Directly before our Gospel reading, Jesus had already been creating rifts with the religious leaders. He has been healing and preaching, casting out unclean spirits, and forgiving people's sins. He had already created a great deal of uneasiness with his teaching. Rules had been broken. Systems were being shifted. The power dynamic was changing and that made some folks very nervous.

And today's Gospel is just another push against the glue that had held this particular society together. Then, notice what Jesus does next...he heals the man with the withered hand, something the Pharisees turned away from.

From this story in Mark, we usually begin to think of the Sabbath as a rigid set of rules – what Jesus should and shouldn't do, what we can and can't do. We begin to think of the Pharisees as strict task masters of religious observance so much so that they would ignore a suffering man in their midst. But this is simply a misguided interpretation.

The Jewish leaders understood one very important thing that is often overlooked in this story. They understood very clearly that no life was to ever come to harm on the Sabbath. Remember our first two points of context – they understood from Exodus that everyone – slave or free, human or animal deserved rest. And they understood from Deuteronomy that the Sabbath was to be an integral part of how they honored their own freedom – by helping others to live into the same type of wholeness. This isn't the debate going on.

The conflict in Mark is about something different. Jesus was simply reminding those in leadership (who were nervous about Jesus' growing influence) that in their unease, in their preoccupation with worldly distractions, they had forgotten the core principle of the rule - that our rest is useless unless we can work to create that same kind of rest for everyone. Therefore, we need to refocus and allow our greater values to emerge when it comes to fulfilling someone's greatest needs.

And then Jesus says these critical words, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” In other words, the commandment to honor the Sabbath is not about rigidity but about well-being – for everyone. And with it comes responsibility.

Are you getting the idea yet that we aren’t going to talk about napping? Good. Because a true Sabbath perspective isn’t just about your rest. It’s a reorientation of your life so that come Monday, you are renewed and restored and as a result are better able to find ways to help renew and restore others around you. But, life is so busy ( I know what you are thinking). How can I ever slow down?

Wayne Muller in his book, *Sabbath*, tells the story of one individual, who commented in response to the daily frenzy she found herself in, *“I am so tired. I am with people all day and night, but I still feel so lonely. My soul feels dry.”*

I was struck by the statement that her soul felt dry. What a sadly perfect description of what happens when we stop taking time to rest and feel and grow and respond, when we stop taking a Sabbath. Something within us dries up.

But Jesus wants to heal our dried up souls. That what he means when he says, “The Sabbath was made for humankind.” Yes, it’s a rule but a rule meant to sustain and strengthen, not a rule to restrict and reprimand.

Muller states it perfectly...

*“Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true. It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us.”*

Those are the moments he says when we cultivate the deeper values within ourselves that create a good and worthy civilization. Values that uplift all people – things like honesty, courage, kindness, civility, wisdom, and compassion. Values that help us look deeper at the needs around us so that we can more effectively respond to what we see. Values that care for our dried up souls.

When looked at Sabbath through this lens, the Sabbath becomes a beautiful opportunity to rest and to serve. That’s God’s love shining forth in and through each of us. That’s God’s love poured out for God’s creation. We are given rest to heal our souls and we are given rest to heal our broken world.

So, take a nap this afternoon and let it renew something deep within you. Let it remind you how to love and how to care for this world we are given. The Sabbath was made for you. Amen.