

Sabbath Rest

Mark 2:23-3:6 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Think back about four years. 2020. The year that needs no other reminders, because it was that year. I don't expect we'll let it slip from our memories any time soon. At this point in the year, we were almost three months into quarantine, or isolation, or whatever you want to call that time frame when we tried never to leave our houses. We all had adjustments to make in our personal lives and our family lives and our work lives. We're all changed because of it. Churches had changes to make, too, drastic ones. All the sudden, all of my colleagues and I became tv preachers, when we'd never expected to do anything like that. Screens and zooms and cameras and microphones and video editing programs. We were all in over our heads.

We figured out how to do church in a new and weird way. It was as satisfying as we could get in those days, though it certainly wasn't the same. Soon, in those first few months of bleary and weary stumbling, a theological question arose: what to do about communion? Our theology and practice of communion had always centered on a physical table with real bread and real juice and, for heaven's sakes, real people. Literal stuff, tangible elements, people gathered together, as for a shared meal.

But that wasn't safe, especially for the most vulnerable among us. So communion as we knew it was out of the question. What to do? Our rules and regulations had no provision for such an occasion, because who could have foreseen a global pandemic? Some pastors, good and faithful pastors who I trust and admire said, well, we'll just have to wait until we can gather together again in person to share the Lord's Supper. It's a shared meal, meant to be celebrated together, not individually. Our tradition has long held that communion isn't a private affair. For instance, at a wedding, if the bride and groom want communion, then it needs to be served for everyone. So these pastors said, let's wait. When we can gather again to share the supper, it will be all the more sweet and precious and sacred.

Some others of us said, well, that's all true. But our people are hurting. They're lonely and scared. Our people need some kind of assurance of God's presence that they can touch. I don't need to remind some of you of this, but if you were a person who lived alone in that time period, you probably went for months and months without touching or being touched by another human. We needed something concrete. We needed some spiritual sustenance. So, this other group of pastors said, we say in the prayer of thanksgiving at communion that we join together with Christians in every time and place to celebrate the sacrament. That's a phrase that we say, but do we really mean it? If the Spirit can unite Christians from all over the world, and from centuries before us, then surely the Spirit can unite us on zoom. And so we went ahead, boldly telling you to gather something that resembled bread, whatever you had. And something that resembled grape juice. Some of you went so far as to use actual wine. Some of you, I know because I saw you in your little squares on my screen, used the special crystal, to make the ordinary holy.

So, did we break the rules? Maybe. Probably. Did we do so for a good reason? Yes. The very best reason: to care for people who needed grace.

I like to think, though I try to be careful about making such claims, that we were doing what Jesus would have done in our situation. Today's passage is a good example of why I think we were. There are two situations in this passage from Mark that depict Jesus deliberately, consciously breaking the rules about Sabbath.

Now, Sabbath rules and regulations were set out clearly, and there were a lot of them. Sabbath was important because it was a commandment—that's what the reading from Deuteronomy is telling us, and there's another version of the commandment in Exodus. Sabbath was also important because it's one of the things that set the Jewish people apart from their neighbors. Sabbath made them different, and was a crucial piece of their identity as a religious people.

The Sabbath rules and regulations had been thought out and argued over and refined for centuries at this point. They were a way to ensure that the people honored God and God's commandment. They were also a way to protect the vulnerable. We see that in Deuteronomy's version of the commandment—Sabbath rest is explicitly tied back to their history of slavery, when they couldn't rest because someone else controlled them. And Sabbath rest is extended to every person, even to animals. Everyone is deserving of rest. Everyone needs rest. Sabbath rest was a gift of grace, and they worked very hard to ensure it was protected.

And then along comes Jesus. Allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. Healing a man with a withered hand he'd had his whole life on the Sabbath. Claiming to *be* Lord of the Sabbath. With these actions and words, Jesus was attacking Jewish identity and theology. For what reason?

Well, for the very best reason: to care for people who needed grace. Hungry people. Hurt people. People who needed food and people who needed healing. Sure, they could have waited another day, but why? Why make people wait any longer than necessary when we have the means of grace to share with them right now?

The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath. It's lawful to do good, to give life, on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made both to honor God and God's commandment, and to protect the vulnerable. When those two beliefs, equally important and equally held onto, came into conflict, Jesus chose to protect the vulnerable. The vulnerable who belong to God. Caring for the vulnerable, for those who need grace, is in itself a way to honor God.

When rules and regulations—even church rules and regulations, even well thought out, faithful, important rules and regulations—tell us to deny grace, or delay grace, or turn away from people who need grace, then it's time to rethink the rules and regulations.

Erring on the side of grace, on the side of feeding the hungry, and healing the hurting, is a way of following Jesus. And it might get us in trouble with the authorities, like it did Jesus. But honoring God by caring for ourselves and our neighbors is embodying the grace we find at the communion table.