

“Lord of the Sabbath” GPPC 6-3-18  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Mark 2:23-3:6

This morning we see Jesus in not one but two encounters with the Pharisees about observance of the sabbath. Now at first glance, the issues raised by these encounters may appear simple and not all that important for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But if we look more closely, we may find that sabbath issues are complex and vital for our lives and the life of the world today. And ultimately a gift is being offered. How will we respond?

In the first encounter, Mark says the disciples of Jesus were walking through some grainfields, picking heads of grain to eat as they went. The Pharisees said, “Why’re you doing what’s not lawful on the sabbath?”

So who were these Pharisees and what were they upset about? As one scholar says they were “a group of specially observant and influential Jews, mainly in Palestine, from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D.” (Anthony J. Saldarini writing in *Harpers Bible Dictionary*, 782.) Was Mark talking about all Pharisees here? Probably not. Was he talking

Jeff Paschal

about all Jews of his time? No. Was he talking about our Jewish brothers and sisters today? No. Watch out for anti-Semitism. The argument that took place was between Jesus (who was a Jew) and a group of other Jews of his time. We are all their descendants. We Christians are “Honorary Jews” as one theologian put it.

What were these Pharisees upset about? Jesus’ disciples breaking the sabbath. What exactly were they doing wrong? They were plucking the heads of grain, and, (in the Pharisees’ opinion) this constituted reaping, and reaping was work. Exodus 34:21 says they (and we) are not allowed to work on the sabbath.

It sounds as though the Pharisees may have had a case, doesn’t it? But notice how Jesus responded. He did not argue about whether his disciples were reaping or not. Instead, Jesus made reference to a story found in 1 Samuel, chapter 21. In that story King David and his men were hungry. They went into the temple and asked the priest Ahimelech (not Abiathar—Mark gets that detail wrong), they asked the priest Ahimelech for bread, but all he had available was holy bread, consecrated for the priests which he shared with David and his men.

Jeff Paschal

So Jesus' argument seemed to be that human need overrules regulations about not working on the sabbath. Judaism already allowed for working on the sabbath in order to save a life. The tricky thing here in this story is that Jesus' disciples were not in imminent mortal danger. So plucking the heads of grain could have waited, right? But Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." That statement is key for understanding the whole passage. So we'll come back to it.

Jesus had a second encounter with the Pharisees about the sabbath. Mark says Jesus entered the synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand, some sort of injury or paralysis of his hand. Mark also says the Pharisees watched Jesus. As one Bible expert says, "The [Greek] verb implies a sense of hostility, almost a sense of 'lying in wait for'..." (C.S. Mann, *Mark*, 241.) The Pharisees watched Jesus closely, waiting to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath so they could accuse him of breaking the sabbath. And as Exodus 31:14 warned, "You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy to you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people."

Jeff Paschal

So the stakes were high. But Jesus had the man come forward so that everybody might see him. And then Jesus asked the Pharisees a question, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

But the Pharisees were silent. Why? Because they already knew the answer to the question--it was lawful to good, to save life, on the sabbath. And the answer also convicted them of what was already in their hearts on that sabbath, to do harm and to take life.

Jesus looked around at them and he did something that is not specifically named about him anywhere else in the four gospels. He got angry. This is the only place in the gospels where it says Jesus was “angry.” And that’s a challenge for us, isn’t it?

Sometimes we need to be angry over something important, human rights violations, poverty, willful ignorance, abuse, corruption, and so on. Righteous anger is acceptable for a time. But how often are we angry, even enraged over little things, petty things? And how often do we hold onto our anger for months and years?

Jeff Paschal

We suspect Jesus was angry on other occasions. It certainly sounds like it. But here is the only place in the gospels where he is actually *said* to be angry. In fact, Jesus was angry and sad at the same time. Mark says, “He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart...” Angry, but grieving because they were so stubborn.

So Jesus healed the man with the withered hand. But the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the followers of Herod trying to figure out how to destroy Jesus. The religious and secular plotted together how to kill him. There’s a sabbath for you!

Now go back to Jesus’ key statement for understanding both of these stories. “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

This statement has two parts for us to understand. Part one. “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” In other words, God did not create the sabbath just to give human beings more rules to follow. No. Sabbath meant celebration, worship, study,

Jeff Paschal

and a sabbath meal together, and no work on that day. God created the sabbath as a gift for humanity, a gift that is helpful for humanity.

How so? Go back to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-7 or Deuteronomy 5:6-21). Do you remember how they are introduced? God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...” Now maybe this is God’s way of reminding the people to be grateful to God. But I wonder if God is also saying to the people, “Don’t forget I brought you out of slavery. So don’t get yourself enslaved again. Because when you break any of these Ten Commandments, you enslave yourself.”

Maybe that’s why the laws about sabbath were really strict and the penalties seem absurdly harsh to us. Because what was (and is) at stake is a return to slavery. You see slaves can’t have a sabbath. They don’t get a day of rest. Only free people can ever truly have a day off, a day of rest, a day of renewal. That’s a privilege granted only to free people.

Do you and I take a sabbath, a day of rest, a day of worship, study, celebration, and renewal to live as the free people we are meant to be? And do we want to make sure that our children and all people can have a

Jeff Paschal

sabbath too? Of course, some of us have to work on Sundays. Do we have another day for sabbath? Some of us are physically unable to attend church for worship, study, and fellowship. So do we have a discipline of doing those things at home when we cannot get out? Right observance of the sabbath calms the franticness in our lives. Right observance of the sabbath erases the narcissism of our age as we recall who is Lord and who is not. And right observance of the sabbath reminds us of who we are and whose we are—disciples of Christ the Lord.

And then there's the second part of Jesus' statement. "So the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

A New Testament professor explains it this way. "To do nothing is not enough, says Jesus. Rightly to observe the Sabbath is not only to rest and worship but also to do good, to save life; that is, to make life whole, both our own and that of our neighbor. The principle suggests to Christians that Sundays be spent not in self-indulgence nor in self-denial, but in renewal and in service." (Lamar Williamson, *Mark*, 76.)

So the sabbath is not about legalism. It's also not about "anything goes." The sabbath is about a gift God wants to give us, if we're willing

Jeff Paschal

to accept it. How wonderful would it be for families that are so stressed with too many activities instead to choose to simplify and reclaim the gift God gives us—sabbath, a day for rest, worship, study, celebration, doing good, and experiencing renewal? How wonderful would that be?

One of my favorite movies is *The Shawshank Redemption*. It's the story of a man, Andy, (played by Tim Robbins) unjustly convicted of his wife's murder and then thrown into the Shawshank Prison which is run by a corrupt warden, his sadistic head guard and cronies. Add in a gang of inmates who prey on some of the other prisoners, and you begin to see the misery of life at Shawshank.

But misery is not the only story told there. Andy refuses to give in to the awful system around him. Again and again he stands against the brutality and hatred of the prison with signs of freedom amidst his imprisonment. He points to something better, something eternal. At the end of the movie, against all odds, Andy has escaped and made his way to Mexico. His best friend, Red (played by Morgan Freeman), has finished his sentence and is on a bus riding toward the Mexican border to see Andy and begin a new life in Mexico. Red says, "I find I'm so

Jeff Paschal

excited that I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the excitement only a free man can feel. A free man at a start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

I hope.

What Red hopes for is in the future, a longing for a freedom that he imagines. But he also hopes for a freedom he's already beginning to glimpse and experience.

That's what sabbath is, a foretaste of freedom that's coming and a freedom that already is. We're free men and free women invited to accept God's gift of sabbath and to live fully into that sabbath. What changes might you and I and our families make in order fully to accept the gift of sabbath? What freedom and what blessing await us? Amen.

©Jeff Paschal