

Year B Proper 9 2024 Lord of the Sabbath Mark 2 v23 to 3 v6

Lord of the Sabbath. That is what Jesus tells us he is. This is the key to this Gospel story we've just heard. Lord of the Sabbath.

Many years ago, the pastor of a small two-church parish headed out on Sunday morning for church in the neighbouring town – his first stop on this two-stop morning. It was crisp and cold, having snowed through the night. The going was slower than usual but he steadily chugged along in his car when he suddenly came around a bend to discover a police car, turned sideways, blocking the entire road. You can't go this way, the officer told the pastor. There's been an accident – this road is closed. Well, this road was the *only* road into the neighbouring town where he needed to be in order to hold the Sunday morning worship service. In a flash of inspiration, the pastor pulled his car off to the side of the road, took his always present ice skates out of his trunk, laced them up, grabbed his briefcase and boots, and skated his way into the neighbouring town on the icy river that wound its way alongside that only road. Having safely reached the church, and feeling quite proud and exhilarated by his resourceful morning skate, the pastor was taken aback by the surprised and offended reaction of the congregation's elders. "You skated to church?" they asked in horrified disbelief. They could not get past the fact that their pastor had participated in such vigorous physical exertion on a Sunday – the day of rest. "Well, it was either skate or not be here at all," the pastor pointed out. "What would you have preferred?"

The people standing indignantly before that pastor had fallen prey to the exact same thinking as the Pharisees standing indignantly before Jesus. God told us to observe a day of rest each week and there are certain things we are supposed to do on that day and certain things we are not to do. But is that what is meant to

be? Is that what God intended? A list of rules...to do and not to do on that one day each week? What exactly is the purpose for observing a day of rest – the Hebrew word “*shavat*” or Sabbath is not “rest” but is, actually, “cease” or “desist”.

The purpose of the Sabbath runs much more deeply than simply being a day of rest from work. And Jesus, he says, is Lord of the Sabbath. To understand why these words of his are so important, we must understand the purpose of the Sabbath day. This understanding has – or should have – an astoundingly profound impact on our lives as followers of Jesus. It is our “why” and knowing our “why” is crucial.

According to our creation story, God first declared a day of rest after finishing the loving work of bringing all of creation into being. Of course, God does not get tired and in need of rest so why declare a day of rest? “Remember the sabbath and keep it holy” is our command. Keep in mind that “holy” means dedicated to God’s use. On this day, the command continues, you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns (Ex.20). This is key. No one is to do work – from the richest down to the poorest of society. Why? Because the Sabbath is not about doing nothing. It is about doing justice. God’s justice.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. It is not about having a day of leisure or, as in years past, sitting around reading the bible as a family instead of going out having fun with friends. Keep it holy – keep it dedicated to God’s use. Can God use you when you’re sitting around doing nothing? This is a day for instituting and maintaining God’s justice.

We hear in Deuteronomy: “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” (Deut.5:15). Why does God connect the Sabbath to the rescue of God’s people from Egypt? As Walter Brueggemann explains, “the God who rests is the God who [frees] from *slavery* and [therefore] *from the work system of Egypt* and from the *gods of Egypt* who require...that work system...gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production [in which there will never be enough]” (p.2)¹. “All levels of social power – gods, Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves – are uniformly caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production” (p.5). We may not live in that empire of Egypt but we certainly live in an empire – our own “rat race” of anxiety, endlessly driving consumerism, and “me-first-ism”. “Into this system of hopeless weariness erupts the God of the burning bush (Exod. 3:1-6),” Brueggemann tells us (p.5). God resolved to rescue the slave company of Israel from that exploitative system and create for them “a new social reality in which the life of the Israelite economy is no longer determined and compelled by the insatiable production quotas of Egypt and its gods” (p.5).

Keeping a Sabbath day each week is a massive act of resistance – “it is the visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods” (p.xiv). Keeping a Sabbath day each week is an alternative to “the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all our ‘rest time’. The

¹¹ This, and the rest of the quotations are from Walter Brueggemann’s *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of NOW*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky: 2017.

alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are...on the receiving end of the gifts of God. On the seventh day, God showed us how to do it. God is not a workaholic, God is not a worrier. God created all that is, put it into motion, and trusts the continuing function of creation; the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work. Opting in for Sabbath-keeping means opting out of the production and consumption that defines our lives.

And everyone is meant to opt in...everyone. The rich people aren't supposed to spend a Sunday afternoon lounging at the park or poolside while the poor people serve them drinks and snacks. Everyone is to disengage from the rat race for the day and remember the God who desires an end to the rat race completely.

Remember the God who actually instituted multiple layers of Sabbath keeping...a seventh day of no work in the production/consumption system for all people; followed by a seventh year rest for the land so that it would remain able to support humanity relying on its bounty; followed by a seven times seven year Jubilee year in which all property reverted back to its original owner so that there would never be a society separated into rich and poor, haves and have nots.

That is the purpose of the Sabbath – to build and maintain a society of equals in which all people have enough, all people are cared for, where everyone is living the counter-cultural way of life known by Christians as life in God's kingdom. But we strayed from this purpose and Jesus is trying to show us that we have strayed and get us back on track. Humans were not created for the Sabbath he says.

Humans were not made so that we could rigidly stick to religious rules forgetting why the rules exist. The Sabbath was created for humans, Jesus declares. The Sabbath was created so that humans could thrive in the God-given freedom from

the brokenness of the world's way, so that humans could love God, each other, and the planet.

And Jesus is Lord of this Sabbath, he says. Lord of the Sabbath keeping that remembers its purpose, remembers its "why" and lives into it. Twice he shows us the true intent of Sabbath keeping. He and his disciples are out walking on the Sabbath and his hungry disciples pick some grain to eat as they walk. The Pharisees believe that they should not be out walking in the first place and they should have prepared snacks to eat before the Sabbath began. Jesus disagrees. He brings up the story of David, on the run from the murderous King Saul. David convinces a priest to allow him and his men to eat the consecrated bread that normally only the priest would be allowed to eat. Jesus implies that the priest has done nothing wrong in allowing this. He has sustained the life of a weary traveler. Sometimes certain demands of the law are rightly set aside in favour of pursuing greater values or meeting greater needs, especially when those greater needs promote a person's well-being and work to further God's purpose.

In the second instance, Jesus heals a man's withered hand. With the restoration of his hand, the man in the synagogue probably also receives back his ability to work in the Galilean economy. In receiving that ability, the man may recover his ability to provide for a family. Jesus has embraced and honoured the true intent of the Sabbath command. He has not broken the Sabbath command – he has not done any "work" that the command prohibits but he has acted contrary to the additional rules that, over the years, had been added onto God's original command.

Jesus grieves over the inability of the Pharisees to embrace, along with him, the true purpose of the Sabbath. He grieves as they stubbornly stick to their rules in the face of poverty and exclusion. People were not created to follow pre-existing rules. The rules were created to help people become heralds of and citizens in God's amazing, truly life-giving kingdom.

Let's remember our "why" – let us remember the Sabbath and keep it holy and, with Jesus, let us be lords of the Sabbath.