

Luke 6:1-11
Sabbath Gift
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So...how's your weekend going? Anyone do something that was just totally nourishing to your soul? This is not a rhetorical question, I'm looking for a Presbyterian soul brave enough to share in church. Anyone?

We lead busy lives, that is for sure. But the illusion of this frenetic pace is that validates importance on this earth. Here's a bumper sticker I see every now and again. But when was the last time you had an aha moment while running around like a chicken with your head cut off?

If you are here this morning and church is something you've felt obliged to work into your schedule, this morning is for you. Among the many breathtaking jewels of the Scriptures is this idea that we worship a God who rests. Discovering your value and identity is not something you will yourself to accomplish, rather it's a gift you receive when you finally stop long enough to know thyself rightly—and know thy God rightly.

So in an expression of Sabbath rest, I am not going to ask you to stand for the reading, but rather remain seated and settle in to a place where you are open and ready to receive the word of God—letting it wash over you like a warm summer breeze.

On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" And Jesus answered them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?" And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come and stand here." And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

In College, where I studied, they had a thing called J-Term. Are you familiar stroke of genius in higher education? Those of you who paid for kids to experience J-Term are perhaps rolling your eyes right about now. J-Term is a one month term *in January* where college students take one class. Many use this as a chance to study abroad. But, more importantly J-Term recognizes that plowing through your education at a break-neck pace may do the job of forming us as students and as people. That slowing down to rest and explore and inquire is actually a really healthy and necessary thing.

Now in my first experience of J-Term I landed in a course on Russian Literature. Not because I wanted to be there, but because that was the only one that still had openings. But day three was the day that Dr. Robinson introduced me to a man named Fyodor Dostoyevsky, I was hooked.

Tucked in the middle of his great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (I won't say his greatest, because I prefer *Crime and Punishment*), is a short story called *The Grand Inquisitor*.

"Why do you come to interfere?" That's the question that a Cardinal of the Church speaks to Jesus in this short story. Story takes place in the 15th Century within a period called the Spanish Inquisition, an ugly period in which the church was responsible for the death and deportation of thousands of people who did not conform to what was thought to be orthodox faith. And when this story takes place a hundred heretics had been burned at the stake in Seville Spain. And the person most responsible is the cardinal, called the Grand Inquisitor. And on that day Jesus himself suddenly appears, in a momentary visit to his people. Crowds are drawn to his gentle compassion, and as they come he heals them and blesses them.

And at that very moment the Grand Inquisitor walks by. It says that he was 90 years old and had a withered face and sunken eyes. And when he sees what is going on his face darkens; he knits his thick grey brows and his eyes gleam with a sinister fire.

The Cardinal recognizes Jesus, he knows who he is. But he believes that God had made a mistake in giving people the freedom to choose or not to choose to believe. And the cardinal also knows that Jesus' return would ruin all the plans he had for the church. And so, he has Jesus arrested and placed in *The Prison of the Inquisition*. That night he goes to visit Jesus in prison and he leans and asks: "is it you?" And then he says: "Why did you come to interfere with us?"

Hold on to that question for a moment. Why did you come to interfere with our lives?

Our Gospel Story from Luke is about Sabbath. And you already know this, but I'm going to remind you that the word Sabbath means stop, cease, desist, rest. Sabbath is a big octagonal sign that says stop. Not slow down, stop.

The origins of the Sabbath are great, they started with God in the beginning. On the sixth day of God's masterpiece of creation that began with light and darkness, heavens and earth water and land, plants, animals, and finally his crowning achievement you and me, God stops. On the seventh day God rests from his work to admire it, and calls that day holy.

Theologian Karl Barth once said: In resting, God actually declared just how good creation really is. He simply rested and took pleasure in what was made. The Sabbath was a part of the Ten Commandments, to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, and this day of rest was not just for some, but it was applied to people, to their servants, to the land, and even to animals. No work. I believe that by keeping the fourth commandment we are actually helped in keeping the first commandment, because we are a people who easily make an idol out of our work. Keeping the Sabbath helps us remember who God is.

Now I don't have to remind you that we live in a 24 hour age, everything around us takes place round the clock, news, shopping, entertainment, commerce, the world never shuts off. You are well

aware of this, and for some of us we sort of take strange satisfaction when someone asks you how you are doing, you say: “Good, but I’m just so busy.”

This is completely antithetical to Sabbath, because God gives us Sabbath, not as another thing to manage, or work into our schedule, but we’re given Sabbath as a gift. It is a gift that God gives to his people. Think of it: one day that is different from all the rest, one day set aside as holy, one day when you can rest and take pleasure, one day when you can worship, relax, pray, spend time with a friend. One day.

It has been proven time and again that we as human beings actually need time off. Serious athletes cannot train all the time or the muscles break down, you need to build in rest. Farmers know all about this, every so often you need to leave a field lie fallow, and not plant anything in it, so that you will be able to continue to yield good crops. Employers, if they’ve read the research know, that time off actually improves performance and productivity. Slogging away day after day doesn’t actually work.

Sabbath is field tested spiritually, emotionally, physically good for people. Eugene Peterson, one of my pastoral heroes boils it down this way: Sabbath is for praying and playing.

In our day we will be almost ruthlessly intention about preserving this gift. What can get in the way? That’s easy, work, kids schedules, pace of life, having too many options, the relentless bombardment of messages from these tyrannical little dictators we carry around in our pockets.

The last couple of vacations Amy and I have taken to spend with my family in Minnesota I have very purposely and intentionally not checked my emails. Now for a week that was a really that was really difficult. How could the world, how could the church continue to carry on without me checking in? But after a week, it was the very best thing I could have done.

Now, as you are already well aware, our human propensity to take something good and turn it into something bad extends to Sabbath as well. We either ignore it or we turn it into tedious legislation. Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field and when they got hungry the disciples plucked some heads of grain, rolled it in their palm to get to the kernel of wheat, then blow the chaff, at that very moment—almost as if it’s a sting operation—some Pharisees jump out and say “aha, look Jesus, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law. They are reaping, they are winnowing, and they are (blow) threshing.”

The truth is though that the law to which they are referring has much more to do with the traditions of Rabbinical teaching from a text called the Mishna than it did with the Scriptures. Tradition embellished this law into 39 different categories that were prohibited as work, and hundreds of corollary laws telling them what they couldn’t do on the Sabbath. The gift of the Sabbath had become the job of keeping the laws.

So Jesus jumps into this conversation. Where the Pharisees enforce laws that reinsert their interpretation of the scriptures, Jesus enters the conversation with Scripture itself. Haven’t you guys heard of the story of 1 Samuel 21 where it seems as though the hunger of human beings could supersede the temple bread being kept aside? And isn’t it better to offer life, than keep it from someone on the Sabbath, who among you would resist offering healing to a crippled person because it was the Sabbath.

This is why it's so important that we be people who are regularly immersed in reading Scripture AND thinking about what it actually means. What is the heart of God actually being communicated? Mercy and not sacrifice.

Now it's really easy for us to always make villains out of the Pharisees, and imagine that they are like Darth Vader. We forget that deep down they are people who are really trying to please God, but I can't also can't help thinking that what happens here is that these leaders get so far off track because they ask the wrong questions. So maybe: "ah, Jesus aren't your disciples breaking the law?" maybe that's the wrong question. Maybe they ought to be asking a question like this: "Jesus, are your disciples hungry?"

See the religion of human beings was getting in the way of people enjoying and experiencing the goodness of God.

Ross Douthett Many of America's problems are caused not by too much religion (atheists), not by too little religion (conservative Christians say), but by bad religion. That is a watering down of the orthodox Christian faith and an insensitive application of it to our culture. This has paved the way for all sorts of religious heresy. I think this is what Jesus is dealing with here, bad religion.

Jesus goes on from this place to their synagogue. There Jesus encounters a man with a shriveled hand...ok, so what? Jesus never seems to be satisfied in engaging in theological or philosophical debate when there are real lives at stake.

As we follow Jesus into our culture, it is never enough to state the things that you believe and then sit back and be satisfied. If you are going to make a statement about the value of public schools, then you might have to get involved at one, volunteer in support of ours, vote in favor of referendums that would support thriving schools. If you are going to come out publicly in favor of a pro-life stance then it will also be necessary for you to become more actively involved in the lives of young and possibly single mothers facing this tough decision, you may need to consider more actively supporting places like White's Residential or even fostering a child yourself. You see it is never enough to state the things you believe in while ignoring the real life situations and people that stand before you.

Other places Jesus will state—mind you while standing in the temple itself—that he is greater than the temple. Jesus will show in the middle of this crowd gathered at Church, that the man with the withered hand is more important than the needs and practices of the temple in this moment. Buildings and traditions crumble under the spiritual weight and importance of real, living and breathing, ministry that stands before us.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus looks into the eyes of these Pharisees and he knows exactly what they are thinking. He even tells it to them: Perceiving their thoughts Jesus asks **"I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?"** What they should have thought or asked him was Jesus, is there anyway you can help this man?

In Mark's account of this it says that Jesus looked at them and was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. Bad religion.

