

The Reclaiming Sunday Sermon Series Part 3: The Sabbath Was Made for You

Douglas Forrester

Crozet United Methodist Church

Fifth Sunday of Easter - May 2, 2010

Matthew 12:1-13

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

My father has, since before I was born, bred, raised, trained, and competed with bird dogs, specifically with the breed called English Pointers, tall, lean, fast, short-haired, white dogs with spots of brown, orange, or black. He's quite good at it. I have more memories than I can count of being young and walking with him and a dog or two across a freshly cut soybean field, he with a whistle around his neck, and me, a lanky, clumsy boy, carrying a training pigeon in my hands and a blank pistol in my pocket.

My job was to place the pigeon in what is referred to as a launcher, a small, spring-loaded humane cage, and then hide the cage in a thicket, while my father worked with the dogs. The dogs would hunt, noses to the ground for the pigeon, which they thought was a quail, and when they found it, they would freeze and point. If they were properly trained, they would hold their position until after their handler had flushed the birds, which would then fly away. However, since this was a training exercise, I would simply step on a lever on the cage with my foot, which would propel the pigeon into the air, clear of the dog, so it could fly back home. I'd shoot the blank pistol and go and get another pigeon out of the station wagon.

The most common mistake these dogs make is to run too fast. They get hot and out of breath, and then cannot pick up the scent of the birds, or they run so fast that they cannot smell the birds until they are already upon them, and the covey of quail is flushed too quickly, or they

run so far from their handler that they get lost, and a day's hunt or a day's competition is spent trying to locate a lost dog, or they pick up the scent of a deer and run so far, so fast that if they are found at all, it is several days later. This is the trainers challenge: to try to teach a dog who, despite being called an English Pointer, speaks no English whatsoever, how to slow down, how to not get lost, how to find what it is looking for without overrunning it or getting lost.

In this morning's text, Jesus' it is the sabbath, and Jesus' disciples are hungry. It is important to note that they likely were not hungry for a mere snack; these were men who had quite literally left everything behind in order to follow Jesus, and who were genuinely hungry and poor. Matthew even mentions Jesus' own hunger twice in his gospel. They pluck heads of grain to eat, and the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of violating the sabbath prohibition against work. It is worth mentioning that the issue here is not that the disciples were eating grain from a field that they did not own. The Jewish Law, as recorded in Deuteronomy 23, gave permission for the hungry to do what the disciples did here. The question this text raises is whether or not it could be done on the sabbath.¹

Too often, this text is understood simplistically in a way that casts the Pharisees in a negative light. The word Pharisee means "the separated ones;" they were the people who set themselves apart from the rest of the world by their strict adherence to Jewish law. However, due to an often insensitive reading of their religious values by Christians, they are understood as overly legalistic, insensitive, "Pharisaic" people who never seem to be able to see the forest for the trees. Christians need to look no further than the abundance of Christian doctrines and denominations to understand that we are more like the Pharisees than we often care to admit.

For centuries, sabbath-keeping was one of the distinctive practices, if not *the* distinctive practice that marked the Jews as the people of God. In a world of many gods and goddesses, it distinguished them from the Gentiles, it reminded the world that they believed in only one God, the God of Abraham and Moses. In times of conflict, faithful Jews would die rather than profane the sabbath.²

Yet, here is where the Pharisees and Jesus surprisingly agree: the sabbath is to be a blessing and not a burden. Yes, it is commanded and therefore expected, yet it was and is something that those who practice sabbath-keeping celebrate. Kept properly, sabbath can provide us with a little glimpse, a little taste of Kingdom living. From the very beginning, in the Book of Deuteronomy, there has been a justice component to the sabbath. Slaves and servants alike were allowed to receive the rest they needed. The hungry and poor alike joined in the eating and drinking. Fasting was not merely discouraged on the sabbath: it was expressly forbidden.³

¹ *Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 254.*

² *Ibid.* p. 249.

³ *Ibid.* p. 249.

However, there were matters of sabbath law upon which there was not consensus, and in this morning's text, Jesus jumps into the debate, not dismissing the importance of observing the sabbath, but helping its meaning and practice to be reconsidered. Some rabbis taught that an animal that fell into a pit could be rescued on the sabbath, while others rejected this interpretation. Some Jews understood that healing was permitted on the sabbath, others considered it was permitted only if life was threatened, yet there was wide latitude on what constituted a life-threatening illness. For some, hunger, perhaps like that being experienced by the disciples in this reading, was considered life-threatening.⁴

Jesus, of course knows these arguments, and when his disciples are criticized for plucking heads of grain on the sabbath, he lays out argument carefully and completely.

First, he tells them a story from 1 Samuel about a time when David and his men were hungry and ate the Bread of Presence or Shewbread in the Temple. The Bread of Presence was sacred bread that was to be always present before God on a special, sacred table in the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus makes the point that in this situation, God put human need, in this case hunger, above ritual and tradition. So, if David was allowed to overrule a sacred Temple ritual, could not Jesus do that and more?

Jesus' second point regards priests in the Temple. This is an important one, as it explains the biblical justification for how I can work on Sunday. Jesus does not deny that the priests are working on the sabbath. However, he reminds his listeners of Numbers 28 which requires the priests to offer sacrifices on the sabbath. Yet, according to Hosea 6:6, God requires love and mercy above sacrifice. Therefore sacrifice may be greater than the sabbath, but love and mercy are more important than sacrifice.⁵ In the economy of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, love and mercy always win.

Over the course of the last three weeks, I've talked about sabbath as *Law*, sabbath as *commandment*, sabbath as cultural practice, sabbath as a judgment of our personal and cultural priorities. As I conclude this series, I pray that above all, each of us may learn to regard the sabbath as our Lord does, as great, profound, wonderful *grace* given to us by the God who made us, who knows what we need better than we do, and who loves us and wills our happiness.

The catch, however, is that while God wills our happiness, God never forces it upon us, instead allowing us to discover joy and peace on our own. God suggests, but never imposes. God prods, but never pushes. God inspires, but never forces. God leads, but does not drag, and God knows that so often we miss the joyful true abundance of life, or that peace that passes all understanding because we are running without stopping, and we are always running too fast.

There is a traditional tale that says that Rabbi Levi saw a man running down the street, and asked him, "Why do you run?" He replied, "I am running after my good fortune!" Rabbi

⁴ Ibid. p. 253.

⁵ Ibid. p. 255.

Levi tells him, “Silly man, your good fortune has been trying to chase you, but you have been running too fast.”⁶

Instead, our God calls us to stop running for a while, to do so at regular intervals, to look around, to smell the air, to take in this life whose time is passing so quickly, and to do so not in desperate gulps, but in regular, rhythmic patterns of rest, withdrawal, peace, and fasting from a harried world whose only message is “run faster,” patterns of love and service, generosity and grace, mercy towards the other, for the hungry, for the suffering, for the poor, for the needy, for the people who have just gone so long without catching a break, for the sabbath was made for them as well.

And believe; believe that the Lord of the sabbath watches over you and all of the people and things that matter to you, knowing that the God who watches over you shall neither slumber nor sleep.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

⁶ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, Bantam Books, New York, 1999, p. 48.