

"Just as God Intended"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Mark 2:23-3:6 with Deuteronomy 5:12-15
June 2, 2024 — Second Sunday after Pentecost

When I was a student at Austin Seminary, I took a course called "Adventures in Wilderness and Spirituality." It was a travel seminar to the Mountain West that started with time spent at a retreat center outside Santa Fe and ended with an eight-day backpacking trip through the San Juan National Forest. However, when we embarked on our journey, none of us knew that's where we were headed. Our professor hadn't shared details of the itinerary; he'd given us the information we needed to pack appropriately, but nothing more. That was the whole point: We were going off the grid. And the less we knew, the better.

The entire experience was an exercise in surrender. For two weeks, participants were asked to step away from ordinary routines, ordinary responsibilities, ordinary comforts. We were asked to relinquish control.

When students showed up at the 15-passenger van in the darkness of early morn, our professor had already covered the clock on the dash with painter's tape. We'd been told to leave watches behind; for the duration of the trip, we'd mark time by the position of the sun. We deposited our cell phones into a ziplock bag that our professor would keep in case of emergencies and we loaded our hiking backpacks into the van. There was no point in grabbing anything to occupy our time on the long drive to New Mexico because we'd only brought the bare necessities. Besides clothing and equipment, we were each allowed a blank journal and print-outs of two favorite Scripture passages. Nothing more. We were headed into the wilderness, after all. This was time apart to orient our bodies to nature's rhythms, to free our minds from distraction and demand, to set our hearts on God.

Like I said, this travel seminar was an exercise in surrender. This was most evident on a day towards the end of our backpacking trip. After six days of hiking, we were given a day of rest. But not to spend together. To spend alone. We'd come to a clearing in the forest, and — before night fell on Saturday — our guides assigned each of us a section of hillside and, then, sent us up the mountain. For two nights and one day, we would be by ourselves in the wilderness. To commune with nature. To commune with God.

Our professor had intentionally planned our solos for a Sunday, so that each of us could practice Sabbath on the Lord's Day. From the moment I crawled out of my makeshift shelter at daybreak until the lullaby of the forest lulled me to sleep that night, I was free to do as I wished. I was accountable to no one but the Creator; I was responsible for nothing but enjoying creation.

I will admit: When I headed up that hillside alone, I was not looking forward to spending a day by myself in the woods. I found the prospect daunting. *What on earth am I going to do for 13 whole hours of daylight?* I thought. And, yes, by the time dusk fell on that August evening, I did find myself staring at the ridge *willing* the sun to set. But, for the most part, that day was a gift. I spent hours on a

sun-baked rock in a mountain stream, listening to the sounds of birdsong and babbling brook. I filled pages of my journal with words that needed a place to rest outside of my head. I lost myself in prayer. By the end of that day, I felt renewed. Replenished. I actually felt free — unencumbered by the ordinary routines and responsibilities that were waiting for me at home. Because that day was about resting in the presence of God. Nothing more. Nothing less.

In her book *Leaving Church*, Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes:

Stop for one whole day every week, and you will remember what it means to be created in the image of God, who rested on the seventh day not from weariness but from complete freedom. The clear promise is that those who rest like God find themselves free like God, no longer slaves to the thousand compulsions that send others rushing toward their graves.¹

The first Creation account recorded in Genesis tells us that — for six days — God worked to create the heavens and the earth. God separated the light from the darkness, and gathered the seas together to reveal dry land; God set the sun, moon and stars in their courses and filled the earth with living things. And, then — on the seventh day — God rested from the labor of birthing the world. And, so, Genesis tells us: *God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*

The text only speaks of God's activity on the seventh day. But, as far as I can tell, this means the first act of humankind was to rest. After all, God formed human beings on the sixth day of creation. So — before we were able to earn our keep, before we could do enough work to warrant a vacation — we were invited into an experience of holy rest. Told to do nothing but enjoy God's good creation. Encouraged, perhaps, to sit on a sun-baked rock in a mountain stream, listening to the sounds of birdsong and babbling brook.

This practice of Sabbath rest was instituted in the Law of Moses, with God's command to "observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy." And, so, Sabbath became central to Jewish practice, to Jewish identity. It was intended as a day — not only of rest — but of delight. A time to set aside ordinary work and do nothing but commune with the Creator.

Sabbath would have been central to Jesus' identity, as well. After all, he was an observant Jew. A rabbi. A teacher of the Law of God. So, when Jesus confronts the Pharisees in this passage from Mark, he's not suggesting that his disciples disregard the Sabbath commandment. It's *not* that Jesus thinks the practice is trivial or outdated. It's just that he and the Pharisees hold different understandings of what makes Sabbath "holy."

"Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?," the Pharisees scold, when they see the disciples of Jesus plucking heads of grain. No doubt the Pharisees think this is an avoidable infraction. Rather than traveling through the fields on the Sabbath day, Jesus and his disciples should have just stayed put and eaten snacks prepared the day before. But Jesus disagrees, referencing a story from

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 136 (emphasis mine).

First Samuel to make his argument. When David was on the run — fleeing the murderous King Saul — he desperately needed food. A priest took pity, giving David and his companions the Bread of the Presence, which was intended only for the priests. Just as that priest strayed from strict adherence to the law to sustain a weary traveler, sometimes — Jesus argues — mercy requires breaking the strict letter of the law. “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath,” he tells the Pharisees.

Jesus is not saying anything particularly novel when he suggests the Sabbath is intended to serve humankind. In fact, the Pharisees probably would have agreed with him — and Deuteronomy — on that point. What is radical is Jesus’ claim that the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. The Pharisees can’t let such blasphemy slide; so they continue to keep an eye on Jesus. Already — only 79 verses into the Gospel of Mark — they begin looking for an opportunity to accuse him. And Jesus — unflinching in his commitment to proclaiming the Kingdom of God — immediately provokes their outrage.

Jesus enters a synagogue, sees a man who has a withered hand, and summons him to come forward. This unsuspecting man has done nothing to suggest he’s seeking healing or help; he’s simply in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. But Jesus has a point to prove. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” he asks. And the Pharisees say nothing. They simply stand like statues, unresponsive to what Jesus sees as an urgent need.

Jesus looks around at them with anger; he is grieved at their hardness of heart. So he asks the man to stretch out his hand. And, immediately, the mangled limb is restored.

Mark’s description of the moment echoes the story of the Exodus — a story that begins with God looking upon God’s people and observing their misery in Egypt; a story that repeatedly describes the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, which prevents Pharaoh from showing mercy; a story that ends with Moses stretching out his hand to part the Red Sea waters so that the Hebrew people can pass through on dry land. Yes, Marks’ description of the moment echoes the Exodus from Egypt. And that is fitting. Because this, too, is a moment of liberation.

Jesus sees a man with a withered hand — a disability that was probably not life-threatening, but that would have threatened his place in the community. Most of Jesus’ contemporaries were day-laborers — they participated in the economy by harvesting fields or catching fish or working on Roman construction projects. A withered hand would have prevented this man from earning a living, from supporting a family. He would have been denied the ability to work, which — of course — is implied in the law governing Sabbath. If you’re commanded to rest for one day, the implication is that you’re laboring the other six. Yet, because this man has a withered hand, he has been denied his place in the life of the community and, with it, his dignity.

No, this is not a matter of life and death. But it is a matter of human flourishing — of this man being freed to experience the wholeness God intends. Jesus refuses to wait one minute more for this man to

be restored to the fullness of life. So, even on the Sabbath, he heals the withered hand and returns this man to wholeness.

As Jesus understands it, this is exactly what Sabbath practice requires. This is exactly what Sabbath practice demands. Because, first and foremost, Sabbath is time set apart for creation to experience the flourishing God intended. It is a day of rest — not for some, but for all — and *especially* for those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. It is a day to set aside the things that weigh us down or to find release from things that confine. It is a day, as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, for those who rest like God to find themselves *free* like God. And, because of that, Sabbath is a gift. It is not about deprivation or obligation. But about restoration and joy.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, Deuteronomy commands. For Jesus, keeping the Sabbath holy is not about following the letter of the law. It is about faithfulness to God's holy intention for creation. It is about ensuring that *all* creatures — human or otherwise — are invited to enjoy holy rest ... For those of us who are followers of Jesus, keeping the Sabbath holy is not *only* about resting in the presence of God (although, as I think I've made clear, that is important.) It is also about a commitment to human flourishing. Keeping the Sabbath holy means that — when we *do* labor — it is for the world God intends.

I recently learned about an initiative in Southwest Philadelphia that is committed to removing some of the barriers that have kept people from flourishing. It's called The Community Grocer and it started when two graduates of the University of Pennsylvania realized how little access people in urban food deserts have to healthy ingredients.²

In neighborhoods like Gray's Ferry, many people are part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, but there aren't many places where they can use SNAP benefits. The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not allow SNAP benefits to be used to purchase hot food. But — without a grocery store nearby — people are left to use these benefits at the corner store. Which means their options are often limited to packaged foods like chips and soda. Clearly, this diet is not conducive to human flourishing. Quite the opposite, in fact. Lack of access to healthy food is one of the reasons heart disease and diabetes and hypertension are so prevalent in low-income areas.

Well, these two graduates got creative and found a legal work-around ... a way to follow the letter of the law *and* respond to human need. They developed a new business model that would involve two separate entities — one, a traditional grocer; the other, a non-profit kitchen located in the same space. The grocer would stock usual grocery staples, as well as raw ingredient meal kits like chicken with potatoes and vegetables. According to this business plan, customers could purchase meal kits with their SNAP benefits and then take them to the non-profit kitchen, located at the back of the same building. There they can trade the uncooked kit for a recently cooked version of the same meal at no extra charge. The meal kit they just handed over would, then, be cooked by a worker at the non-profit kitchen and served to another customer. An important detail is that the non-profit kitchen would be

² See: <https://www.thecommunitygrocer.org/>

run by a local community partner, so that the neighborhood is invested in its own healing, its own transformation.

This vision is now becoming a reality. With support from Harvard Law School's Food Law and Policy Clinic, these Penn graduates and local partners have broken ground on The Community Grocer. It will open on the corner of 60th and Walton this year.

It is but one example of what can happen when people make a commitment to human flourishing. It is but one example of what can happen when people help others set down the things that weigh heavy or find release from the things that confine. This story reminds us that, when we do labor for the world God intends, others are freed to experience wholeness, restoration, liberation — holy rest. They are freed to remember what it means to be created in the image of God. And — when we commit to the fullest expression of Sabbath practice — together, we all come closer to enjoying the good creation, just as God intended.