



“What Does Keeping the Sabbath Mean?”

Texts: Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Mark 2:23-3:6

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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I've talked before about those WWJD bracelets that were so popular in the 70's. The "What would Jesus do" bracelets proclaimed to the world that, when presented with a choice, we would be choosing to do what we believed Jesus would also do - whether standing up to the bully, welcoming the new kid, being careful about the language we used, or simply being known as a church kid, but even though I wore the bracelet, I didn't always do those things throughout my life as much as I would have liked to. Choosing to do what Jesus would do has consistently proven to be harder than I thought it would be at that young age. I'm sure I'm not alone in finding that. This passage from Mark shows that things Jesus chose to do almost always got him into trouble, and that trouble led to his death. The things he chose to do were often against the law or at least against the prescribed norms of the day and the disciples were often confused or hesitant to follow along.

The world doesn't make it easy to choose what Jesus chooses. Though Sabbath was a requirement for Jesus and his disciples, for us Sabbath is a conscious choice. One that our culture would tell us is not a priority. We have to choose to do something with our time that will be life-giving for ourselves and for our family and/or helps put us back in touch with God.

The Pharisees had set some restrictions around the practice of Sabbath; things people could and could not do; and to alleviate pain and hunger, Jesus chose to break those rules saying, "So the Son of Man" is Lord even over the Sabbath. Jesus is saying that the rules are not God, only God is God. Sometimes following God's call means breaking with the norms that we have set for ourselves.

Because ultimately the problem is not the Sabbath laws, the goal of the Pharisees is to put a stop to Jesus, who is upending the status quo and systems that keep the powerful in their place. The Pharisees and the Herodians, the ones who conspire against Jesus at the end of this text, do not care about keeping the Sabbath, they care about keeping their privilege. They do not care about the man with the withered hand, what he has suffered and how healing might change his life. They chose spiritual death instead.

But what about us? Are we choosing the things that do good or the things that do harm? It's easy for us, for me, to point fingers at the Pharisees and say what they are doing is definitively wrong (in retrospect of course) but how many of us can look back and say that we have always made the life-giving choice? Or that we are even doing so right now?

As a consummate rule follower, I cannot always say that I've chosen breaking the rules over following them when following them was easier. It's hard to imagine that I would choose adhering to the rules over relieving someone's suffering if I had the choice to make... And yet, my actions are not always life-giving, because rarely is the choice as dark and sinister as it is presented in Mark: choosing death over life. Goodness and wholeness versus sin and evil is much less noticeable most of the time. Often, failing to follow Jesus comes in the form of inertia or inaction rather than active rebellion. We may not be plotting to destroy Jesus, but we are frequently oblivious to his commands. Every day we make choices that reveal who we are serving.

Even in the context of the commandments, ultimately we get a choice. The command in Deuteronomy makes it clear what the choice is: to observe the Sabbath or not. Our definitions of what that means may vary (for example your Sabbath day might not always fall on a Sunday if you work on Sundays and certainly the way we define work has changed over many years). But the command remains, keep the Sabbath and remember why.

One big problem the Pharisees have with Jesus was that he is constantly interpreting and reimagining the meaning of the law. Here Jesus is asking us to consider what the purpose of the Sabbath is. Why do we observe the Sabbath? The purpose of the Sabbath is to remember that God gives life. And that we are to honor that life with actions that are life-giving. With the command to observe the Sabbath, there is another command to 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”. The Sabbath has a purpose, to remember the ways God has given life throughout generations.

Jesus is returning to what he believes is the original purpose of the Sabbath law: to promote life, to promote healing, to remove those circumstances that do harm or evil. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees - “is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” - indicates that he disagrees with the premise of their suspicions. By healing the man with the withered hand, he does not break the law in any way (for nothing he does here can be considered “work” that the Sabbath prohibits). Rather, Mark casts Jesus as honoring the purpose of the Sabbath commandment. It is as if Jesus is saying that the chief objective of the law, in general, is to save and preserve life.

The passage from Deuteronomy is a reminder that we belong to God, not our labor. Indeed, what better day is there than the Sabbath, a day meant to promote God’s commitment to humanity’s well-being, for the restoration of a man’s malformed hand? Jesus chooses healing and life. How can we do the same?

Where are the places in our lives, in our communities, and in the world where we are doing more harm than good? And is it because we are convinced that the rules tell us to do things that way? Where are we letting a strict adherence to some sort of code (whether it’s the law or something we’ve invented in our minds) rule over our lives?

Every day we have so many choices that we can make. And usually we are blessed that those choices are not between life and death. But when we take a step back and evaluate the things we are choosing, we can see that often there is one option that is more life-giving than another. The choice to slow down, to say yes to some things and no to others, to laugh more or to pause with a friend, to spend time relishing in God’s beautiful creation,

to give life to someone who is living in pain, whether that be physical, emotional, or spiritual, is what God is calling us to do on our Sabbath day. Jesus is asking the Pharisees to make a different choice, to follow him by giving life, doing good, and by spending time with God. Will we choose the same? Amen.

First Presbyterian Church Staff:

Pastor
Director of Music
Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator
Office Administrator

Anna von Winckler
Robert Nicholls
Carrie Aiken
Lora Blaylock



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.fpcevv.com

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