

# BREAKING THE SABBATH TO HONOR IT

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Jesus, among many capabilities that he possessed, was a healer. This morning's gospel lesson from John<sup>i</sup> shows him restoring sight to a man who was born blind. That seems like a magnificent miracle, demonstrating his relationship to God, except for one problem. Jesus heals the blind man on the sabbath, and certain Jewish authorities of his time say that he can't be related to God if he doesn't observe the sabbath. The sabbath is supposed to be a day of rest, and healing is work. One of the Ten Commandments is "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But [on] the seventh day...you shall not do any work."<sup>ii</sup> There are a lot of stories in the New Testament of Jesus working on the sabbath, or encouraging his disciples to do so. What's going on here, and what does it mean for us today?

All four gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- record Jesus and his disciples doing work on the Sabbath. Scholars generally agree that Mark is the earliest written of the gospel accounts -- probably around 65-70 AD<sup>iii</sup> It records a story of Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain in fields on the sabbath to feed themselves, followed by an account of Jesus himself curing a man's withered hand in a synagogue on the sabbath. Matthew and Luke tell the same two stories in somewhat different ways.<sup>iv</sup> Luke adds tales of healing a crippled woman and a man with dropsy on two different sabbath occasions.<sup>v</sup> John also writes of Jesus' curing a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years and healing a man's whole body, both on the sabbath.<sup>vi</sup> In most of the cases, Pharisees question Jesus about why he is violating this basic requirement of the Ten Commandments not to work on the Sabbath. In almost every case, Jesus presents other examples of actions regularly taken on the sabbath that could be considered work but are commonly agreed to be permissible: lifting out a sheep which has fallen into a pit,<sup>vii</sup> saving a human life,<sup>viii</sup> untying an ox or donkey from its manger and leading it away to give it water,<sup>ix</sup> pulling out a child who has fallen into a well,<sup>x</sup> circumcising a male,<sup>xi</sup> and priests themselves working to perform sabbath rituals.<sup>xii</sup> The strongest statement that Jesus makes in response to his challengers is this: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."<sup>xiii</sup>

As one of the biblical commentaries I use puts it, these stories show that "setting aside the strict observance of the sabbath for the human good was a way of honoring God."<sup>xiv</sup> Or, as I put it in the title of this sermon, sometimes we need to break the sabbath in order to honor it. This same commentary points out, though, that Christians have a special responsibility to avoid anti-Semitic stereotyping of the Pharisees and other religious authorities of Jesus' time as supposedly bound by intolerant legalism. Often Christians today think that Jesus was challenging contemporary Jewish religious leaders because of their lack of humanitarian concern for others. However, the truth is that Jewish tradition already decided long before that genuine concern for human well being

takes precedence over ritual observances. Jesus himself cites the prophet Hosea to the effect that God requires steadfast love ahead of sacrifices and burnt offerings.<sup>xv</sup> The prophet Amos had famously spoken for God in this way in the Hebrew scriptures more than 700 years<sup>xvi</sup> before Jesus: "I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."<sup>xvii</sup>

My New Testament teacher in divinity school used to say that as much as Jesus criticized the Pharisees, he was actually closer to them in his approach than he was to other Jewish groups of his day like the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots. The Pharisees were a reform group, distinguished by learning and piety, deeply involved in public interpretation of Jewish law as opposed to priestly activities in the temple, quietism, or political agitation against the Romans. The Pharisaic approach greatly influenced the rabbinical movement that grew up after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, and therefore Pharisees stand directly in the line to modern Judaism.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Pharisees, like the rabbis who followed them, argued with each other over the proper interpretation of biblical law. Their disputes were as central a part of the social and religious landscape in the Israel of their day as appellate and Supreme Court decision-making is now in the United States. Jesus entered into their disputes on their own terms. Hence, the sabbath stories in the New Testament should be seen as elucidating Jesus' participation in these legal debates as to the proper observance of the sabbath, rather than as a Christian rejection of "Jewish legalism."<sup>xix</sup>

To understand what Jesus was arguing about, it's necessary to say more about the role of the sabbath in Jewish law and social experience. The sabbath was felt to be a joy, not a burden. It was a festive day of rest from labor -- a day of eating and drinking rather than fasting. It had an explicit dimension of social justice: servants and slaves received a guaranteed day a week of much-needed rest, and the poor and the hungry had a day to relax and to join in the eating and drinking. The words of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Deuteronomy, required that: "You shall not do any work -- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave... or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your town, so that [they] may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in 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."<sup>xx</sup>

Nonetheless, exceptions were recognized to the daylong no-work requirement, when they would produce greater social justice and humanitarian benefit. As the rabbinical tradition came to enshrine the principles that were followed, healing could be practiced on the sabbath if there was danger of death. One was also permitted to render assistance to animals. Jesus can be seen as an advocate in Pharisaic debates of a more liberal interpretation that foraging for grain and healing the sick and disabled on the sabbath is ultimately preventing death, even though the foraging and healing in those cases were not responding to immediate emergencies and probably could have been delayed for twenty-four hours.<sup>xxi</sup> It's telling that Jesus was able to silence his Pharisaic challengers to his healing activities by explicitly referencing the duty to care for thirsty animals<sup>xxii</sup> and to pull out a child or an ox that has fallen into a well.<sup>xxiii</sup> Jesus was not trying to eliminate the sabbath or challenge the Ten Commandments or Torah as he

entered into these Pharisaic debates. Instead, he was simply trying to remind his antagonists of the requirements of sabbath law in the context of its real intent -- God's mercy for the oppressed, the overworked, the poor, and the hungry.<sup>xxiv</sup>

How about the Sabbath in our day? Blue laws are gone in most states, so stores are open and commerce is in full swing seven days a week. Community and school athletic events for children happen all weekend long, and parents are busy getting them there. Many college students study every day of the week. When are we all getting a festive day of rest from our labors -- a day off to share with our families and our friends? If we're not getting that day, are we breaking the sabbath to honor it, or for some other reason? Are we breaking it to promote even more social justice and sense of humanity than the sabbath itself provides? Or are we breaking it in such a way as to lose its social intent and social impact entirely?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People, has written that along with other major and minor contributions to world civilization, Jews invented the weekend. However, it may be an endangered invention: "In the modern world, the issue of slavery is not a question of who owns your body, but who owns your soul and who owns your time." Those who live for their work, or are controlled by it -- school work or employment -- are slaves. Those who feel they can't take a day a week, free of all school or work-related obligations, are slaves. Those who have trouble getting the time to see a child's Little League game or ballet recital, are slaves. Kushner knows that few of us thoroughly control our own time. "But [he says] if at least once a week, we can claim a day for ourselves, we can feel free...When we refuse to be beasts of burden, constantly working, when we insist on pausing to take stock of our work and to redefine ourselves by who we are and not just by what we do...we transcend the animal in us and let the godly dimension of our nature emerge."

So, I encourage each of you to "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But [on] the seventh day...you shall rest."<sup>xxv</sup> I'm actually preaching as much to myself as to you, because I still don't have it right in my own life -- even when I try to take Monday as my uninterrupted day of rest. If you need help on this, I'd suggest getting in touch with Senior Associate Dean and Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann. She really observes the sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown with her family and Jewish friends. She can tell you how transformational it has been in her life by comparison to earlier periods of time when she did not regularly observe the sabbath.

And if you claim you're breaking the sabbath in order to honor it, then make sure you're doing so as Jesus would have it: to promote a greater sense of humanity than the day of rest already provides. Otherwise, you're just kidding yourself. We should all be taking the words of the psalmist to heart: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."<sup>xxvi</sup> AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> John 9: 1-17.
- <sup>ii</sup> Exodus 20: 8-10; see also Deuteronomy 5: 12-14.
- <sup>iii</sup> HarperCollins Study Bible (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p. 1915.
- <sup>iv</sup> Matthew 12: 1-14; Luke 6: 1-11.
- <sup>v</sup> Luke 133: 10-17; 14: 1-6.
- <sup>vi</sup> John 5: 1-18; 7: 21-24.
- <sup>vii</sup> Matthew 12: 11.
- <sup>viii</sup> Mark 3: 4.
- <sup>ix</sup> Luke 13: 15.
- <sup>x</sup> Luke 14: 5.
- <sup>xi</sup> John 7: 22-23.
- <sup>xii</sup> Matthew 12: 5.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Mark 2: 27.
- <sup>xiv</sup> New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 277.
- <sup>xv</sup> Hosea 6: 6 as cited by Jesus in Matthew 12:7.
- <sup>xvi</sup> HarperCollins Study Bible, p. 1355.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Amos 5: 21, 24.
- <sup>xviii</sup> HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 838-839; Peter Calvocoressi, Who's Who in the Bible (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 149.
- <sup>xix</sup> New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VIII, pp. 559-560, 277-278.
- <sup>xx</sup> Deuteronomy 5: 14-15.
- <sup>xxi</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, pp. 277-278.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Luke 13: 15-17.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Luke 14: 5-6.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p. 278.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Exodus 20: 8-10; see also Deuteronomy 5: 12-14.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Psalm 23: 1-3.