

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Sabbath  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Genesis 2:1-3

Mark 2:1-13

It was the late 1800's and the session of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham was in a tizzy. They were in a tizzy because one of their members was caught doing something that he should not have been doing. And this was not the first time either. This member had been caught doing this same horrible thing the year before and was warned that there would be dire consequences should he ever transgress again. And yet he did. Someone had seen him and reported him. The session knew what they had to do. The vote was unanimous, this member would be expelled from the congregation. What was his crime? What was the horrible infraction that he had the audacity to engage in not once, but twice? He was caught...wait for it...harvesting his wheat on Sunday. Yes, that's right, this man was caught harvesting his wheat on the Sabbath; the Sabbath, a holy day on which no work was to be done. I have to say this is one of my favorite stories from the church archives because it is such a great parallel to this morning's story in which the Pharisees get upset when Jesus' disciples do their own reaping on the Sabbath.

Just so we are clear on the similarities, let's take a moment to review our story from Mark which we read a couple of minutes ago. Jesus and his disciples are on the road. It is the Sabbath. They are hungry so they pluck some wheat heads from a field and eat them. For most of us this would seem like a rather innocuous action. But for the Pharisees, who were a group of Jews who spent their lives trying to be faithful to God through strict adherence to the Torah, the disciples' actions were appalling. The Pharisees found the disciples actions appalling because the disciples engaged in more than ten percent of the works prohibited on the Sabbath. Let me explain. Over the centuries, to ensure that Jews did not break the commandment to honor the sabbath, 39 types of work had become prohibited. Among these prohibited work actions were reaping, winnowing, threshing and preparing a meal. The disciples managed to engage in four of these prohibited work actions. In order to understand all of this, we would have to go into a wheat field and try to pluck and eat grains of wheat. To do so really is work. Needless to say, the Pharisees had the disciples dead-to-rights. The question was, what would Jesus do about it?

The short answer is that Jesus did what we hoped he would do. He chastises the Pharisees for being legalistic and makes it clear that he has authority over what happens on the Sabbath...more so than the 39 prohibited work rules of tradition. Chances are most of us are thinking something like, "Go Jesus, go. You show those legalists what's what." Which is fine, except for one thing...which is...that we have in many ways thrown out the Sabbath altogether. Since there are no more legalistic regulations we have simply let the Sabbath slide. The problem with letting the Sabbath slide is that the Sabbath is baked into God's recipe for creation. Not having the Sabbath would be like baking bread but not letting it rise before putting it into the oven. I say this because the Sabbath is the seventh day of God's creative act. The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments in which God commands people to honor the Sabbath. The Sabbath is one of the great issues with which the prophets deal in their critique of God's people, meaning God's people failed to honor the Sabbath. It seems then that with the Sabbath occupying such an integral

place in the life of God's people, perhaps we need to spend a few minutes reminding ourselves about the purposes of the Sabbath; that the Sabbath is a gift of God to help us.

The first way the Sabbath helps us is to give us rest; to give people a day off. What is fascinating is that the Christian church took a day that was intended for rest and turned it into a day for worship. Let me be clear, I believe that worship matters; that attuning our hearts toward God in corporate worship is part of what we are called to do as Jesus' followers. Yet, the sabbath was originally intended as a day in which men, women, children, animals, and even the earth were to be given a chance to rest and refresh. It was intended to be a day that reminds people that rest is important; that life is not about endless work and drudgery; that life is not about endless accumulation. For many of us this call to rest comes as a challenge and a relief. It comes as a challenge because there is an unwritten rule that we are what we accomplish. That if we are not accomplishing something then we are wasting time. So, we work hard. We play hard. Yet ultimately all that hard work and play takes a toll. It comes as a relief because it says down time is good time. Down time is meaningful time. Therefore, Jesus could say that the sabbath was made for human beings because rest is in fact part of God's purpose for the world.

The second way in which the sabbath helps us is to give us an opportunity to enjoy God's good creation. Let me ask, how many of you have ever finished a project, looked at it, declared it to be good, and then just sat back and enjoyed it? If you have, then you have an image of what God did after finishing creation. God took time to enjoy God's own creation. We can see this by linking the end of Genesis chapter one and these opening verses of chapter two. At the end of chapter one we listen as God declares all of creation to be very good, meaning that creation is well suited for its purpose of bringing forth the fullness of life. Then in chapter two, we are told that God blessed and hallowed the seventh day, meaning God set aside this day for the sole purpose of rest so that God could enjoy and appreciate all that had been accomplished. What then we are invited to do is to stand with God on the Sabbath and enjoy this good creation as well. We are to stand with God and appreciate the beauty and complexity of creation and as we do so, to give thanks to God for creating a universe that can be depended upon.

One of the great joys of living as long as Cindy and I did in San Antonio was having our pick of a wide variety of Tex-Mex restaurants. Some were standalone eateries, others drive thrus and still others were chains. On a regular basis we would choose one of our favorites and we would indulge our craving for enchiladas and tamales. Occasionally we would do so on a Sunday after church or in the evening. What we knew though was that there was one chain to which we could not go. And that was Las Palapas. We couldn't go there because they were closed. They were closed because their owners believed in Sabbath. A sabbath for their employees. And on the sign out front of all their stores were these words, "Sunday, closed for faith and family." I always admired that because it said that they understood Sabbath as a time to set aside working and striving and to simply rest and enjoy God's good creation. So this is the challenge that I am offering to us all on this Sunday, to ask ourselves, "How am I taking the time for sabbath, to rest, to enjoy and to simply be in God's presence and creation so I can be refreshed for the week to come?"