“Stretch out your hand”
Sermon on Mark 2:23 - 3:6
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Introduction to the text

We have heard the sacred text that invite us into the rest of Sabbath, and the people of Jesus’ day took seriously God’s call to rest on the Sabbath and keep it holy. Judaism has always held the last day of the week, the 7th day – Saturday – as Sabbath … following the Genesis Creation story that tells us that after God created animals and humanity on the 6th day, God rested on the 7th day.

Christianity’s holy day has always been Sunday. That’s because every Sunday when we gather to worship, we gather to celebrate mini-Easter. Easter happened on the first day of the week, on Sunday, the day after the Jewish Sabbath. So each Sunday, the Lord’s Day, we gather to celebrate that first Easter, and to come together to pause from life responsibilities in order to worship and rest and re-center ourselves on God.

I probably don’t need to tell you that the days of celebrating a whole day as Sabbath once a week are not practiced by many of us anymore. As a preacher and pastor and a youth minister, one of my longest working days is Sunday, so from the start, I’ll let you know I realize we all struggle with Sabbath keeping in this day and age. So while our trouble may be keeping any day holy, almost everyone in first century Palestine held the Sabbath holy – in keeping with the fourth of the ten commandments. With that background in mind, let us listen to God’s word to us today from Mark chapters 2 and 3.

Text: Mark 2:23 - 3:6

One sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’

And Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’
Then Jesus said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Sermon

One of the spiritual practices that we have started in our youth group is gathering in small groups and actually asking the question “How Are You?” – with the expectation that we can and will answer honestly. “How are you?” No one gets to respond to try to fix anything or jump in with another story, the person asked gets to answer the question without interruption for as long as they need.

When I am able to gather with adults to hear about their lives, a similar response arises. One of the common threads amongst both young and old and in between is that our most common refrains is: “I am too busy. … There’s just too much going on these days. I’m exhausted.” And friends, we are too busy … Can I get an Amen?

Our lives are too full of commitments and too much responsibility. The refrain is repeated by our middle school youth juggling soccer practice, rehearsal for the upcoming theater production, going to class and trying to do the homework assigned, and then coming to youth group on top of all of that.

That student’s parent is saying the same thing. The young adult early in their career moves through their busy, rushed life with the same refrain – too busy.

Friends, like it or not, we live in a busy society. We are constantly bombarded with information, with depressing news, with decisions to make, with marketing at every turn that tells us we need more of what-ever they are pushing, with kids who need our attention, or with parents who are asking more of us, and with our church asking you to serve on another important committee.
But I don’t need to stand here and tell you that we’re too busy. What I am called to stand here and say is that **God didn’t intend for us to live this way.** These hectic days and rushed lives are not who God created us to be. God desires more than we do, that we SLOW down, and pause, and realize that life wasn’t designed to be rushed through.

The Sabbath, a day to REST, was made for us. Jesus tells those Pharisees and he’s telling us right through these pages of Scripture – The Sabbath was made for our well-being. The Pharisees, who were the religious professionals of the day, caught Jesus’ disciples “working” on the Sabbath by picking grain. They catch the disciples in a petty Sabbath infraction. Sabbath practice demanded that you only eat food prepared the previous day, and that separating the wheat from the chaff was considered work.

Jesus defends his disciples with a Scriptural reference to King David, but more importantly Jesus points them and points us to the deep and holy intention of Sabbath – the Sabbath, the command to pause and rest, was made for our well-being and to make our lives more whole and complete …

The Sabbath commandment is not some rule to burden our lives with. Sabbath was and is intended as grace and gift. The Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. The Sabbath and the other commandments were and are gift that help us live in relationship with God and in relationship with each other.

We’re meant to see the blaring difference in the Pharisees who attempt enforce the letter the law while blatantly ignoring the vulnerable man in front of them, and Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, who clearly brings forth life and wholeness and healing.

Jesus enters the synagogue and you get the ideas the Pharisees are in the dark corner watching to see if they can trap Jesus. Jesus invites the man with the withered hand to come front and center before the whole gathered community. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” Jesus asked them.

But THEY were silent. Jesus looked at each one of them with anger, and he was grieved at their hard hearts. “Stretch out your hand.” And the man was healed and made whole. And immediately, right there on that Sabbath, they rushed out and conspired how to kill Jesus.
Clearly, God’s intentions for the Sabbath are for healing, wholeness, restoration, renewal, and life-giving rest and relationship.

The Pharisees are over-protective of the Sabbath regulations. But friends, that’s not our problem. While those first century Pharisees may have been following the letter of the law while missing the whole spirit of the law, most of us are nowhere in the ball park of following the letter or the spirit of the commandment to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Because … as we would all say – we’re just too busy! There’s just too much going on and too many responsibilities. I think that’s just it – we need Sabbath more than we ever have because we are just too busy.

We have fallen trap to the idolatry of productivity that has convinced us that our value is in what we acquire, or what we produce, or in what we accomplish. The idea of pausing to rest and simply enjoy almost carries guilt that we’re not being productive – we’re not accomplishing anything.

But friends, THAT’S the point of Sabbath – to be completely free of the need to accomplish or produce something. God didn’t create us so that we would accomplish tasks and produce things – even good things like food or books or sermons or lesson plans. We were created to delight in God, to enjoy creation, to develop and celebrate relationships.

“Stretch out your hand” Jesus says to the man with the withered hand on that Sabbath day two thousand years ago. God says the same thing to us – STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND!

Stretch out your clinched hand and let go of your need to do, and to accomplish and to produce and to consume. Stretch out both hands of control and fear and just BE – one day a week or one hour every day – just be.

Just enjoy, celebrate life, rest, marvel at God’s good Creation, go on a long walk in the wood, sit on the floor with your children and play, laugh with someone you love, pour yourself into your relationships, give your undivided attention to your grandchild, read a book that brings you peace, paint for the joy of painting, make music, be quite, be alone, watch the stream roll by, listen to the birds singing spring into season.

For friends, the Sabbath was created as gift for us. It’s God’s permission, God’s commandment even to stop and rest and live and breathe deeply, and to celebrate.
The original commandment comes to Israelites who had been slaves in Egypt and were forced to work day after day with no break, no rest, no Sabbath. And so God offers them this gift of Sabbath –

*But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or any of your people or animals* - *so that y’all may rest.*

That’s my translation from the Hebrew – for real it’s there: “so that y’all may rest.”

*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.*

They were slave, being forced by the taskmasters to work endlessly. And God gives them Sabbath. Friends, we are not slaves to the ancient Egyptian taskmasters, but we are enslaved by our own success, our work, or our accomplishments, our productivity … and God GIVES us Sabbath, God offers us the gift of Sabbath. God graciously commands Sabbath for us.

Because Lord knows we need it. Our culture is full of noise and distraction and business. We are all saturated with media and overloaded with information, and many of us have lost the ability to filter. We are bombarded with constant communication, and we expect personal entertainment at our finger tips any time there is a spare second. We have all but lost any sense of sacred time.

Where is the quite in our noisy world?

The good news and the bad news as it’s up to no one but us to create that silence, to carve out the time to be still and know that God is God an rest in that. Those few who have prioritized taking a Sabbath day once a week I imagine are much more centered, more balanced, more in touch with their own spirituality and more in touch with the Divine – which when you think about it is a pretty good use of a day. That’s why God gifted us the Sabbath day.

But so because I know it’s not realistic for most of us to actually take a full day of Sabbath rest and play and enjoyment and delight in God’s created world, I want us to think about ways we can practice Sabbath in the lives we’re living this month. What is at the heart of the intent of Sabbath as a sacred time that is set apart from work and family and life responsibilities that we fill all our days and our lives with?

The safe Sunday school answer to any church question is always JESUS; so let’s start there. More than any other Gospel, Mark is full of action – Mark’s
favorite word is immediately. And yet in the very first chapter of Mark, in the middle of an action packed scene of Jesus casting out demands, healing lepers and the paralyzed man, we get a gem of a verse on Jesus’ spiritual life: Mark 1:35: “Early in the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a secluded, deserted place, and there he prayed.”

Solitude and prayer is one of the best places to start with keeping Sabbath. Certainly Jesus worshiped in the synagogues, but Jesus also went off by himself in nature and prayed – he sat and prayed and cried and listened and observed and dwelt in God’s presence. So how can we practice Sabbath in our full and busy lives? I imagine it’s different for each of us.

Those of you who are on our church email list received an email from me on Wednesday asking how you re-connect with God. I am so grateful for the thoughtful responses that you offered. Many of you find Sabbath rest by carving out time to be alone: alone in nature, or alone with Scripture or a devotional book, or on a walk, or practicing yoga. Many of you lifted up our time together on Sundays worshiping God and celebrating community as a powerful Sabbath practice. For several of us, we are reconnected to the Divine though music – singing or playing or listening to music – or just humming a hymn that travels with us throughout our day.

My prayer is that each in our own ways, we accept the Divine invitation to pause, to carve out sacred time and sacred space in our hectic life to bring peace to our souls, meaning to our lives, and purpose to our days. And because I know how busy the rest of your day is, and that Monday is coming, I want all of us to take some time right now to think and pray over how you might accept God’s invitation to rest and reconnect.

So in the next 30 seconds of silence, pray over something YOU can do to add Sabbath to your weekly rhythm. For until you add it to your week, it will never become part of your life. So take 30 seconds and prayer over what you might do to slow down and reconnect to our Creator.

[30-45 seconds]

I invite you to gently bring your personal prayers to a close.
As you do, I have asked a few individuals if they would share some of the spiritual practices that help them practice Sabbath in the midst of the full lives they live.

*Martia Rachman shared with the congregation about her practice of yoga.*

*Caroline Roy (high school youth) shared about her practice of writing and journaling.* *Kent Smith and Dan Davis shared with the FirstLight congregation only.*

If you desire getting into a rhythm of Sabbath-keeping, then you alone have the power to make it happen. I know that most of the time our days feel like they are out of our control, but friends, there will not be a time in the future that it just become easy and natural to carve out Sabbath.

We begin the season of Lent on Wednesday with Ash Wednesday. The season of Lent is 40 days long, which is right about how long it takes for a practice to become habit forming. So try it – figure out how to say YES to God’s invitation to Sabbath.

If nothing else seems to click, I encourage you to make time to spend 10 minutes a day completely unplugged. No computer, no phone, no texting, no TV, no books, no noise – just 10 minutes in silence to let God’s spirit move within you and around you.¹

Stretch out your hand and be FREE to be who God created you to be. Amen.

¹ From email devotional from Mark Ramsey at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church this week.