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Luke 6:1-11

The Spirit of the Law

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Eleven months ago, the elders of this church met to talk about how we might do communion differently in order to keep the congregation safe in light of what we were learning about COVID-19. It was a difficult conversation because, while our tradition is not a tradition of rules and order, it is a tradition that places a high value on gathering around the communion table each week. And while communion doesn't hold the exact same meaning for all of us, it's accurate to say that most of us believe that communion represents "who we are." That is why the theology of an open communion table, of welcoming everyone to the table, is such an important part of our tradition.

Today's text is about tradition. It is about doing things the right way, following the rules, or in this case, the Jewish law. Specifically, it is about Sabbath and what the commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8)" means. We are in chapter 6 of the Gospel of Luke. At this point in Jesus' public ministry, after he called his first disciples, which we talked about last week, he continued his travels around the region of Galilee. There are a few things we skip over between last week's text and this week's: Jesus cleansed a leper, healed a paralytic, called another disciple, Levi, and answered questions about the tradition of fasting. One thing impossible to miss in this part of Luke's narrative is that Jesus had definitely gotten the attention of the Pharisees.

Let's talk for a moment about the Pharisees because if we are to responsibly interpret the text, we need to understand that, in some respects, the portrait of the Pharisees painted in the New Testament is something of a caricature. This caricature reflects the tensions between the early Christians and pharisaic Judaism at the time the gospels were written, a full generation after Jesus was killed. In some ways, it obscures the heart of the very real concerns of the Pharisees and kind of paints them as anti-Jesus, which has contributed to anti-Semitism within Christianity.

The Pharisees established a reform movement within Judaism at a time when foreign occupation and the culture of their occupiers (the Roman Empire) threatened Jewish culture and tradition. Lexington Theological Seminary Professor of Homiletics and Worship, Dr. O. Wesley Allen, Jr. describes the Pharisees as “the liberal, mainline Protestants of first century Judaism.” He writes, “While other mainline Jewish sects claimed the people needed the priesthood and the temple to mediate between them and God, the Pharisees democratized religious experience.”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/healing-on-the-sabbath/commentary-on-luke-61-16-2>

In other words, the movement of the Pharisees was about making Jewish traditions and practices accessible to everyone, not just the priests at the temple. As part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination that is not hierarchal and believes in shared clergy and lay leadership, this ought to sound pretty good to us.

The pharisaic movement was based on their belief that along with the written Torah, there was an oral Torah given to Moses and passed down through the generations. The oral Torah was eventually recorded in the Mishnah and Talmud and used to interpret the written Torah. Think of the Mishnah and Talmud as commentaries to the Torah, just as there are biblical commentaries, such as the one from which I quoted a moment ago. Biblical commentaries often conflict with one another, just as the writings in the Mishnah and Talmud conflict at times. One of the jobs of a responsible teacher or preacher is to help students and congregants understand why one interpretation is more appropriate or responsible than another.

So, this leads me to today’s text in which there is conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding the interpretation of Sabbath law.

This is Luke 6:1-11:

6 One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ³ Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat and gave some to his companions?” ⁵ Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

⁶On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath day is rooted in the creation story in Genesis, where God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. God rested, so God's people should rest. And then in Deuteronomy the Sabbath commandment is connected to the experience of God's people liberated from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh forced the Hebrew slaves to keep working, under progressively worse conditions, with no time to rest. Free people rest, slaves work...all the time. In the Jewish tradition, when work ceases for Sabbath, they remember that God delivered them from slavery. Sabbath rest was meant to be for everyone, even servants, even people who were poor. Everyone in the community was supposed to be able to rest.

On all of this, Jesus and the Pharisees agreed. Their disagreement, and frankly the disagreement of many teachers of the law, was on what constituted "work," what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples were plucking grain on the Sabbath, they were questioning the timing, not the activity. It was acceptable for outsiders to eat from the fields of another. The problem for the Pharisees was the disciples were doing the plucking (harvesting) on the Sabbath.

Jesus responded by citing a story told in I Samuel 21. David entered the sanctuary in Nob and asked the priest for bread for him and the men who were with him. The only bread the priest had was the bread of the Presence, 12 loaves which represented the 12 tribes of Israel. Each Sabbath, the bread was changed out and only the priest could eat the bread from the previous week. The priest gave David the bread, demonstrating that feeding the ones who are hungry takes precedence

over strict adherence to the law. This doesn't make the law or tradition bad. It prioritizes easing suffering and promoting life.

In the second story of Sabbath conflict in today's reading, Jesus had a question for the Pharisees, "Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" Luke's story doesn't give us the Pharisee's answer to his question, but the answer is obvious. There was no disagreement among teachers about doing good on the Sabbath, saving a life, rather than destroying it. But did healing the man's withered hand count as life-saving? I mean it wasn't *life-threatening*, so why not wait for another day to heal him? Jesus' actions say it all; there was no reason for the man's suffering to continue for even one more day.

Luke writes, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath. Jesus does not serve the Sabbath. God gave the Sabbath to human beings and the Sabbath is meant to be life-giving, not life-draining. It is meant to be a gift, a time apart from the relentless demands of life, a time to rest in God's presence. Sabbath is for all people. Jesus' interpretation of Sabbath law asked the Pharisees, and all of us, to consider, "Is Sabbath restful if you are starving? Is Sabbath restful if you are suffering?" I don't see how it can be.

Sabbath observance was one of the hot button issues in the early church. As the church began to include more and more Gentiles, the question of early Christianity's relationship to Jewish tradition came up in a number of ways and Sabbath observance was one example. The early church considered the Hebrew scriptures to be its scriptures. What was a little murky was how to interpret them in light of a culture, a world, that had changed and was changing.

Sabbath observance is not a pressing issue in today's church. Maybe it should be. Certainly, a case could be made for the need to return to a rhythm of life that includes regular, intentional rest. In fact, a couple of years ago, we devoted the season of Lent to Sabbath as Resistance. It is good to be reminded that, as people of faith, we are called to rest and to ensure our neighbors can rest, knowing the worth of human beings is not tied to what we are able to produce.

As important as rest is, there are other challenges before the church that seem to be more pressing in this time and place and they are every bit as divisive among

Christians today as Sabbath observance was between Jesus and the Pharisees 2000+ years ago. And these challenges boil down to interpretation as well. Inclusion of members of the LGBTQ+ community, how we should treat refugees and immigrants, whether women should be preachers, and what it means to be “pro-life,” are a few areas of conflict that come to mind. While each one of these challenges is different and deserves its own treatment from an interpretation perspective, I believe Jesus’ interpretation of Sabbath law speaks to these areas of conflict within the church just as clearly.

In both stories of Sabbath activity in today’s text, Jesus’ interpretation leans heavily toward what is life-giving. Insisting people stay hungry, rather than allowing them to get something to eat is not life-giving. Looking at a man’s suffering, having the power to ease it, and not doing so, is not life-giving. It’s important to note that Jesus’ position was not, we must do away with tradition and throw out the law. His position was, we must interpret the law in ways that align with what we believe about God. And I hope that we believe God is a god of life, that is life-giving and not life-destroying or death-dealing.

Through that lens, it is clear that the vision for the kin-dom of God that Jesus was going after was one that included all people, valued all relationships grounded in love, understood the intrinsic worth of all people regardless of where they came from or what color their skin was, and fostered a sense of community and connectedness for all of creation. And that is the vision of the kin-dom of God we must pursue as well.

I think that is why that discussion 11 months ago with the elders about communion has stuck in my mind. What made the discussion so hard was not that the elders were insistent that we do things the way we had always done them. It was hard because, even then, we were feeling like some of what makes “us”, “us”, was in danger of slipping away. We love the theologically rich imagery of breaking a single loaf and each one of us tearing a piece of it off as we come forward together. And equally, we loved having communion trays with wafers and individual cups available at the table as well, for the ones who prefer that way of participating. Because it was important that everyone present was able to participate. Both the communion trays and the bread with the chalice for dipping were served to the people gathered by lay people, reminding all of us that the

table of God must be accessible to everyone. Communion can happen and should happen whether the minister is there or not.

And now, here we are, 11 months later and we haven't physically shared a loaf of bread or a cup of juice since then. We haven't held a communion tray out to each other or stood in a circle afterward as a final act of community before leaving worship. Instead, we choose our own communion elements and eat and drink them in our homes. A year ago, I would have said that this would not work, that online communion would not hold us together, draw us closer to God, that it wouldn't be long and we would forget who we are. And I was wrong. It works. We are here together, connected, serving our community, alive, and filled with compassion for a world that needs the imagery of a table that has a seat for everyone.

Traditions and rules have their place, dear ones. But their place is never over and above people and loving people. I think that was what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees. They couldn't see it then because their traditions and their law were what they knew, what they could count on holding things together. And I get it...we all get tunnel vision from time to time, thinking the way it's always been done is the only way. But it does make me a little sad for the Pharisees, for anyone who is afraid to see things differently or to change what has always been, because what I have learned to count on, and what I hope you have learned to count on, is God, and God is love. Amen.