

**February 2, 2025**  
**Luke 6:1-11**  
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I have a love-hate relationship with rules. On the one hand, I love rules. I like there to be an expectation of how we will behave and what we will do and not do in any situation. For example, I liked it in seminary when a professor was clear about whether we should use their first name or address them using the “doctor” title they earned. I like it when someone is making a presentation if they let their audience know if they want all questions at the end of the presentation or if they would prefer to answer them throughout the presentation. And...I love it when people actually do what is expected of them and act right.

On the other hand, I hate rules that seem to inhibit people from doing the right things. For example, I used to volunteer at a food pantry in IL. The pantry was about a block from the church I served, so on Tuesdays and Thursdays I would walk over about noon to be ready to give food to the people who lined up at 12:30 pm when the pantry opened. Every so often, someone would be waiting outside the door when I arrived and they would ask if they could be given their bag of groceries a little early because they needed to get back to work or get their child to an appointment. Much to the annoyance of everyone else who worked at the pantry, my answer was always yes.

To be clear, there was no shortage of food. We had never run out of bags of groceries. When I asked why giving people their food a little early was a problem, I was told, “It’s the rule.” Of course, I understand that rules are necessary, but I also understand how difficult it would be for someone to have to balance their work schedule or children’s medical appointments around a food pantry that operates in the middle of the day. The people in charge tried really hard to train me to follow that rule. They never fired me, so I assume at some point they realized that I was untrainable and gave up.

Today’s text has a little bit of this love-hate vibe going on with the Jewish teaching around the Sabbath. This is Luke 6:1-11.

6 One Sabbath while Jesus was going through some grain fields, 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 How 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.”

6 On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 7 The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to

bring an accusation against him. 8 But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand in the middle." He got up and stood there. 9 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?" 10 After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. 11 But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.

There are at least two complications associated with reading and understanding these Sabbath controversies in our contemporary context. The first is that Christians haven't observed the Sabbath, Friday evening-Saturday evening, as a day of rest for thousands of years. Even if our understanding of Sabbath is that it's "the Lord's Day" on Sunday, we are quite okay with going out to lunch where others serve us and stopping at the store on the way home, and then when we get home, we bustle around doing laundry and cleaning the house. A full stoppage of work for ourselves and for others is so far outside of how we live our lives, that it's difficult for us to imagine Sabbath as it is understood within Judaism.

In addition to not being able to imagine Sabbath rest, the second complication with our understanding of this text is that the portrayal of the Pharisees in the gospel writings is distorted and reflects the tensions between the early church and pharisaic Judaism at the time when the gospels were written. I mentioned this briefly a couple of weeks ago, but it is important and it shows up over and over again in Luke's gospel. The Pharisees were not evil people who hated Jesus. They were desperately trying to protect their faith tradition and way of life from the threats of Roman occupation and the influences of Greek culture. They promoted a form of Judaism that extended beyond the temple and into all aspects of daily life. In other words, sacredness wasn't just in the temple, it was everywhere.

So, in a world in which rest is not prioritized and a world in which we are accustomed to distorting the humanity of entire groups of people, how might this text be relevant to us today? Let's go all the way back to the beginning to try to answer that question...literally the beginning. The Sabbath teaching is rooted in the story of creation in which we are told that God created the world in six days and declared all of it good and then, on the seventh day, God rested. Human beings are supposed to rest because God rested. From the very beginning, there has been a rhythm to life, and part of that rhythm is rest...not just for people who are wealthy or white or educated or lucky. Rest is not even just for people. It is for all for all of creation. Every living thing needs to rest. That message is from Genesis.

Then in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath teaching is tied to God's delivery of the Hebrews who had been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt. Under Pharaoh the people were required to work harder and harder under progressively worse conditions, never being given a day off. Free people rest, people who are enslaved do not. So, on the Sabbath, when

God's people rest, they remember that it is God who freed them from Pharaoh. The Sabbath practice is life-giving. Rest and freedom give and preserve life.

There has always been debate about what is considered work and what is not on the Sabbath. So, this tension between Jesus and the Pharisees about what was allowed on the Sabbath was not unusual. Jesus' message was gaining traction with the people who heard it, so the Pharisees in their quest to protect their tradition were curious and anxious about this new teacher's reasons for allowing his disciples to "work" on the Sabbath. And they were equally curious and anxious about Jesus himself healing on the Sabbath. Picking grain and healing were work as far as the Pharisees were concerned.

In response to their question about gathering grain on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded the Pharisees of a story in 1 Samuel about future king David, going to the Tabernacle to secure food for his hungry companions. The only food there was the bread of the Presence which was only to be eaten by the priests. This specially made, sacred bread was kept on a table as an offering to God. You may have heard it called the showbread. David and his men were hungry, there was nothing else to give them, so the priest gave them showbread.

Jesus' response here seems to indicate that sometimes there is room to suspend the rules. Jesus does not say the Sabbath teachings are wrong or dumb or should not be followed. He says....wait, there was this time when the priests made an exception to another rule because people were in need, they were hungry and the priest gave them something to eat. By giving David the showbread and feeding people who needed to be fed, the priest promoted life. Sabbath is supposed to be life-giving. Similarly, on that Sabbath day in the author of Luke's narrative, Jesus' disciples were hungry so they were allowed to pick the grain and they ate. Again, when people who are hungry eat, that is life-giving. I would like to say that this is the story I recited to the people at the food pantry when I gave out food early. Instead, I think I said something equally eloquent like, "It's dumb to turn people away because they are early."

The text goes on to tell a story of another Sabbath in which the Pharisees were observing Jesus. In the story, Jesus knew that he was being watched. And I love that instead of whispering to the man in need of healing, "Hey, catch me outside, and I will heal you, Jesus brought the man front and center. He asked, "...is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" I don't know if Jesus meant for that to be a rhetorical question, but the story doesn't say anyone answered him as he looked around at all of those who were gathered. He told the man to stretch out his hand and his hand was restored.

I love that Jesus didn't really "do" anything. He didn't lay hands on the man or wave a magic wand. The man held his hand out and he was healed. And I love that Jesus was

like, is the Sabbath supposed to be about life or not? I don't know about you, but I am wired in a way that makes me unable to rest if I know someone needs help. On a large scale, that's exhausting because there is always someone who needs help, so by that standard, there would never be an opportunity to rest. But if we place this within the context of "doing the good that is ours to do," bringing life in the ways we can, true rest is possible. We can rest when we know we've done what we can and when we remember that for us to fully be who we were created to be, we need rest. Because we are alive, we need rest.

I want to circle-back for a minute to what I said about the Sabbath teaching and the rhythm of life. You will remember last week we read the story of Jesus calling Peter, James, and John as disciples. At the end of chapter 5, Jesus called another disciple, Levi. Levi was a tax collector, and as such, was not well-liked by the Jews. Jesus went to a banquet at Levi's house and was vehemently criticized by the Pharisees. What kind of a Jew eats with a tax collector? Would you want to sit down for dinner in the house of someone who gives payday loans?

After this criticism of Jesus' dinner companion, to reinforce their point, the Pharisees said to Jesus, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." It's like the Pharisees were trying to shame Jesus. "If you were a good leader or a faithful leader, your disciples would be depriving themselves. They wouldn't even want to eat." To be sure, fasting is an important part of the Jewish tradition, and from a biological perspective, fasting is one of the cues our bodies use to maintain a healthy circadian rhythm.

But feasting is part of the rhythm of life too and Jesus and his disciples mastered the art of feasting as they ate with the ones nobody else wanted to eat with..."tax collectors and sinners." What better way to share the good news of liberation from oppression and abundance for everyone than to gather with people around tables? Once around the table, Jesus drew people into community and gave them a glimpse of what having enough looks like, a glimmer of what abundant life could be like.

As Jesus sat at tables with all kinds of people, he showed his followers that all of life is sacred. Sure, praying is sacred. Fasting is sacred. Sharing the good news is sacred. And so is feasting. And celebrating. And laughing. And hoping. And dreaming. Throughout Jesus' life, he demonstrated the importance of all of these things, but based on the number of stories we have of him sitting at a table, we can assume that he knew there was something very special and very important about eating together.

When we eat together, we tell the stories of our lives. We celebrate the good things and mourn the hard ones. We share our anger at the present and make plans for the future. The sacred space around a table is life-giving. Jesus' message for a hurting world 2000 years ago and for our hurting world today is that his followers should

allow nothing to hinder them from bringing more life to their neighbors. Tradition, fear, pride, nothing, should hinder us from valuing and bringing life.

So, we cannot allow executive orders to impact how we treat our neighbors who are immigrants, trans, gay, poor, unsheltered, or employed by the federal government. The current administration (or any administration) doesn't decide who deserves compassion and who doesn't. We don't either. Good news is not good news unless it is good news for everyone. Our work, the good that is ours to do, in the next little while at least, is going to be about easing suffering one person at a time. Not that we won't have opportunities to speak serious truth to power and work toward community transformation, but a lot of what we are being called to right now is about keeping our neighbors who are vulnerable afloat because egg prices are not coming down. Healthcare is not going to be accessible for everyone. Immigrants will be in danger.

We are not called to follow the ways of Empire, the ways of executive orders, fear-mongering, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and greed, which are the ways of death. We are called to follow the ways of Jesus who, at every turn, affirmed life and freedom for everyone, who always put what was best for the whole ahead of what was best for the privileged few. He was smart like that. He knew that what is best for the whole is ultimately what is best for us as individuals.

And the ways of Jesus begin and end with love. It is love for other people that will save us. Politicians will not save us. Capitalism will not save us. Isolating ourselves will not save us. We will save each other, one person at a time, one day at a time. In the words of Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, "Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week." There are not parts of our lives that are sacred and other parts that are not. Life, all life, is sacred. Our whole lives are sacred. Let us work together to create a world in which life flourishes. Let us choose love...always. Amen.