

# COVENANT WORD

## *The Sabbath Day*

Deuteronomy 5:12-15. II Corinthians 4:5-12. Mark 2:23-3:6

A message by  
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Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.  
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

Our Saturday mornings had a rhythm to them unlike any other day. The milk man would wake me making his delivery to the back door. I knew if I hurried, I could catch my mother before she left for the grocery store. It was my mission to accompany her, because it allowed for one on one time. We would select the pot roast, potatoes and carrots that would later be wrapped in foil and put back into the refrigerator until it was time for a slow cook during church and an unveiling at Sunday's noon day meal. I once asked why we didn't eat out on Sundays like other families and so began a long explanation about Blue Laws. Do you remember Blue Laws? To keep Sundays holy, these laws prevented commercial work, travel and the selling of goods so that all received a Sabbath—a day set apart for rest and worship. The Puritans enforced these laws with vigor in the 1600's, and the laws continued to be enforced all the way into the 20th century. In listening to my mother, however, I was savvy enough to realize it wasn't Blue laws or even the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy that concerned her as much as church attendance numbers, the tradition of Sunday family lunch and her constant pursuit of protecting our father as much as possible so that his stamina would outlast the Sunday night worship service.

So after the grocery store, we would fill the car with gas, and as we pulled out of the station, my mother nearly always said the same thing. "My Sunday School lesson is finished. We have our groceries for the week. We have a full tank of gas, and I still have \$20 in my pocket. Now, we are ready for Sunday to come." The anticipation in her voice

led me to believe that everything in our lives occurs just so we can be prepared to give ourselves over to Sunday. Sunday was the goal. Sunday was the objective. Sunday was the prize for which we were reaching.

In the very beginning chapters of the Bible, we find that God establishes time by creating light. Light set into motion the cycle of day and night. But yet, on the seventh day, the Sabbath, God rests. And in doing so, God introduces and blesses us with sacred time. This

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sacred time is the focal point around which all other time revolves. It shapes all the days of our life as celebrations of God and God's delightful world. It presents the challenge to trust God with one day a week wherein we suspend work in order for God's created order to operate benevolently without our labor or interference. It is trusting God to provide enough goodness, enough prosperity, enough gracious mercy that an entire day can be set apart for rest and worship. (Richard Lowry, "Sabbath, a 'Little Jubilee,'" The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2002)

Moses sets the observation of sacred time into motion when he descends from Mt. Sinai and delivers the Ten Commandments whose explanation of how the Sabbath should operate is longer than any of the other commandments. It would have been the hardest to hear by those Hebrews who, only days before,

were slaves to Egypt's Pharaoh. They were slaves who were mandated to work, to labor, to produce around the clock in order to meet Pharaoh's demands. No sacred time. No day of rest. No day set apart for family and friends. So to receive a commandment NOT to work was strange indeed. To remember the Sabbath as a holy day underscores the Israelites' liberation and celebrates the fact that their new covenant with God is for free men and women possessing a future based on the gracious and sustaining gifts of God and not their own work. (David Capes, "The Eighth Day," The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2002)

Mark's gospel begins with Jesus in the earliest days of his ministry. In fact, after calling Simon and Andrew, James and John, he goes to the temple in Capernaum to teach. It is there that an unclean spirit calls out to him and Jesus, in turn, calls the spirit out. The people observing were amazed of course, but guess when this took place: the Sabbath!

Jesus leaves Capernaum. He heals a leper. He heals the paralytic lowered through the roof by his friends. He calls Matthew, and the scribes and Pharisees observe that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. It is then that he walks through the grain fields, and the disciples casually break off the heads of grain to eat as they walk alongside Jesus. He is confronted by the Pharisees, because guess what day of the week it is? Yes, it is the Sabbath and the disciples are guilty of laboring.

## ***Jesus' action poses the question to all present, "Are we here to do God's will or are we doing something else?"***

These are not isolated Sabbath experiences. In Luke 13, Jesus frees a crippled woman from her ailment. The leaders of the synagogue criticize Jesus, because he heals her on the Sabbath. In John, chapter 9, Jesus places mud on a blind man's eyes and the man's sight is restored. The Pharisees conduct an investigation placing the healed man on trial. Their concern? It occurs on the Sabbath. Over and over again, Jesus

sets the example that the Sabbath is made for humans and their needs. Curing the sick and freeing the bound is not unlawful work, as the Pharisees argue, rather, it is the work of God's goodness that should never be stopped. (Heidi Hornick, "Lord, Even of the Sabbath," The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2002)

In today's text, when Jesus enters the synagogue in Capernaum for a second time, he sees a man with a withered hand. Jesus heals him even while receiving the complete attention of the scribes and Pharisees. The text goes so far as to say that their coat-and-tie-polished-shoe-narrow-minded-elitism makes Jesus angry. And so it feels almost like spite—a challenge—a "so what are you going to do about it" attitude—when Jesus tells the man, "Stretch out your hand," while the religious leaders stand there fully engaged and watching.

Jesus' action poses the question to all present, "Are we here to do God's will or are we doing something else?" Jesus and the Pharisees probably do not disagree about the protocols of the Sabbath. The Pharisees know full well that saving life and doing good are lawful on the Sabbath. It's just that Jesus' opponents are not in worship that day to fulfill God's will. They are there to gather evidence against Jesus, and as is so often the case, one gets from worship precisely what one seeks. The miracle occurs on the Sabbath, and so the scribes and Pharisees waltz out of the synagogue and into the arms of the Herodians with just enough distorted evidence and alternative facts to plot Jesus' death. (Thomas Long, "Reflections on the Lectionary," The Christian Century, May 9, 2018) In their desire to catch Jesus in what they believe is a distortion of their religious codes rather than celebrate the man's restoration to wholeness, they, themselves desecrate the holiness of Sabbath.

I imagine Jesus standing in the synagogue so keenly aware of the scribes and Pharisees' motivations. Does he merely heal the hand with a mystical wave or does he take it and hold it open to receive all the goodness of God? Does Jesus continue to hold the hand so that once the tension dissipates, he can express overt compassion? Does celebration break out in the synagogue so that the purposes of Sabbath are fulfilled in the praise of God for healing? The text

says that Jesus is grieved ... grieved by the Pharisees' hardness of heart. Jesus wanted those Pharisees, as well as the afflicted, to know the full freedom of his love and grace. It is what he wants us to know and experience too.

The full freedom of Jesus' love and grace is best enacted when we gather about the Lord's Table to remember him. The spiritual practice of communion reminds us of Christ's invitation to wholeness. It is a practice that takes us to places not always visible in our daily lives because it requires us to release productivity—to release our desire to fix things—to release our over-functioning—to release control—to release perceived power. We release and stretch out our hands to receive God's grace that cannot be earned.

Just like the healings in the synagogues, communion takes place in the midst of community. More than any other practice, communion forces us to be with one another; to stand in a circle or kneel at the altar or pass a tray of grape juice and cubes of bread or walk down the aisle before the faith community to practice intinction. Communion forces us to be with strangers and people we don't like and persons of different color. Communion removes the barriers of "us" and "them" as we are humbled to realize: we are equal beggars in search of the bread of grace and the cup of salvation. (Nora Gallagher, The Sacred Meal)

We come as afflicted in every way, but not crushed. (II Corinthians 4) We are perplexed but not driven to despair. We are persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed, because, at this table, we receive the body and blood of Jesus and carry it with us in the living of our days.

Nora Gallagher writes that her rector asked her to assist in serving communion one Christmas Eve. As she took her place in front of the altar, people began to approach. She would hold up a wafer and say, "The body of Christ. The bread of heaven." But before she placed it in the palm of their outstretched hand, she says that she purposefully looked each one in the eye. Not long, just a very short look. And in the

looking, she saw the bright tears of a homeless man; the love of a husband for his wife as he pushed her wheelchair forward. Paralyzed, she could only bend her hand in her lap, but her eyes!? Her eyes were laughing. She writes:

Serving each person became a little dance step, as if we were in a minuet, or one of those dances that involves a bow and a change of partners. A choir member, a child, a teenager with a tongue stud, a tattooed man, a woman with a haggard face and too much lipstick, the joy was all around us, running through us, and we were all a part of it, we were riding in it, we were dancing through it, invited into it; we were adding to its strength [simply by stretching out our hands to be healed in the receiving of God's gift of grace.]

My friends, this is how we remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. We put aside productivity for the great gift of grace. We stretch out our hands for a reminder of Jesus—the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation.

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