

I found two funny stories about the Sabbath this week while doing my sermon prep, and you deserve to hear them too. One is about a minister who preached on this passage, and afterwards, as he was chatting with church members, one woman said to him with some disapproval, “I always *thought* Our Lord was a bit of a liberal.”

The other is about a minister who used to skate to church in the wintertime. The governing board got upset about this frivolous behavior on the Sabbath, and told him to stop. They went round and round, with him probably citing Luke 6, and the board finally decided it was okay for him to skate to church as long as he didn’t enjoy it.

Our Puritan forebears passed down to us this stereotype of Sabbath as an impossibly long, tedious day on which you can do nothing, nothing at all, no work, no shopping, no gallivanting. Of course we know that’s not how Sabbath is intended or described in the Bible, but that’s the concept behind those two stories. In fact, the Sabbath was meant to be liberating—what one scholar calls “God’s gracious intrusion” on the other would-be lords of our lives. Your employer cannot compel you to work; you are free that day. You are not going to suffer new financial stresses; the market is closed and we’re not buying and selling. According to Leviticus, in addition to the weekly Sabbath there was also a mandatory freeing of slaves every seven years, and every 49 years, a liberation of the land, when land had to be returned to the family that had owned it, and all debts were forgiven. God’s gracious intrusion on the would-be lords of our lives.

We see two themes in Luke 6: Jesus’ own take on appropriate Sabbath observance, and Jesus’ emphatic claiming of messianic authority. One, of course, reinforces the other, so what he has to say about the sabbath is not just a good idea but authoritative.

It was understood that Torah observance was a matter of community well-being. The Law was given as a gift, and following it was life-giving. But it was like public health—if one person failed to be observant, the whole community could go down. Moreover, many laws were not exactly defined in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy” is assumed to mean “no working,” but does that mean you can’t cook? Does it mean you can’t travel? The consensus was, by the way, that welfare always took precedence over strict observance, so it was universally accepted that if someone was hanging by one hand over a cliff, clinging to a root, they didn’t have to hold on till sunset; you could go ahead and rescue them even if that was work. You could care for someone acutely ill on the Sabbath. But because it was a matter of community well-being to be sure the law was observed, the rabbis came up with regulations that, if followed, would ensure the law was not broken. It was an abundance of caution, like the lines in the subway that you have to stay behind. You could stand on the other side of the line and probably be fine, but you’re definitely safe if you’re behind the line.

So in today’s story, Jesus does not bother to litigate where the lines around the Sabbath should be; he just acts. His disciples pick grain on the Sabbath because they’re hungry without checking it out first with the local scholars. *Some* of the Pharisees challenge him on this, and his response is to refer them back to David, who, when he was on the run from Saul, had persuaded a priest to give him holy bread. At that time David had been anointed the new king of Israel, but Saul still held the throne, and was actively trying to overturn the anointing. Jesus is comparing himself to David—anointed king, but not yet publicly acknowledged or on the throne. It’s pretty brazen.

The scribes and Pharisees are still watching on another sabbath when he goes to teach in the synagogue, and one of the members has a withered hand. On this occasion, interestingly, the man does not ask for healing (and it's a little discomfiting to see a person with a disability essentially acting as a prop in the story), and Jesus never touches him, either—but knowing that the legal scholars are watching, Jesus causes the man to be healed, and asks them pointedly whether it's lawful to do good or harm on the sabbath. It's a question to which the answer is obvious, so again he's sort of acknowledging their paranoia about him and at the same time not literally doing anything they could cite. It seems provocative to me—after all, the man *wasn't* dying and hadn't ask for help—and the scholars take it that way too, because they are “filled with fury” and discuss what they can do to Jesus.

But Jesus is on a roll, and he's not slowing down to explain himself or get anybody's permission. He goes off and prays all night, and in the morning, one assumes coming off that time of prayer, he pulls twelve of his followers out and tells them that they're not only followers, but they're also going to be apostles—they're going to be sent out to extend and multiply what he's been doing. One commentator suggested that his recent interactions with the legal scholars had put him on his guard, and maybe he needed a posse, but that's not how I read it. I think he's already put the Pharisees behind him and moved on because he has important things to do, and he's not going to worry about their hurt feelings or revenge fantasies. People are hurting in Galilee, and Jesus is on it.

The sense I get from this narrative is that Jesus is bold, authoritative, getting stuff done. I've seen the same kind of posture recently from a coalition of folks loosely aligned with BLM in Des Moines (Capital Defenders?) who are *done* with how all the bus stops in poor

neighborhoods never get shoveled out after a storm. They've just been putting out a call to their Twitter feed to show up with shovels and clear out the bus stops themselves. (They're also using media to shame the city for not doing its job, but that's just being smart and strategic.) I can imagine Jesus at the head of a bunch of people with shovels, just going from bus stop to bus stop and the hell with the plowing schedules that exist on paper but never happen in real life.

But Jesus brings all this authority—this no-nonsense attitude, this “be the change you want to see in the world”—to Sabbath observance. And he does so, I suggest, because the would-be lords of our lives are constantly pushing, constantly trying to erode human wholeness if it will make another buck or make someone marginally more prominent. Jesus strongly wants people to be more whole: better-fed, clearer-headed, stronger—and the Sabbath was established for that purpose. God wants us to rest—and to play, to take walks, to visit with friends—for our own good. “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath,” he says, both claiming his messianic authority again and underlining his conviction that the sabbath is *always* for making people more whole, for renewal of life.

I don't want to dump on the Pharisees, even though they're kind of the foil in this story. The real Pharisees were people who loved the Law and wanted to understand it and follow it, and who were more than happy to discuss different views about it. But in this story, the ones who are on Jesus' case seem to be perturbed with him because his defense of the Sabbath is so unruly, so apparently reckless. And a little in your face. These characters seem to view Sabbath observance as a matter of fear, like if you do it wrong you'll get punished. They're like the woman who suspected Jesus of being a liberal—they are more concerned with not doing it

wrong than with doing it perhaps too generously or exuberantly. Jesus in this story is standing up for the Sabbath, but he's saying, if you're going to make errors in your sabbath observance, do it on the side of too much generosity, too much wholeness. God isn't watching to make sure you don't step over the lines; God is giving you a lovely gift. And Jesus is very serious and authoritative about that, because he is just done with people trying to stay out of God's disfavor. That's a model of authority that comes from the competition, the would-be lords of our lives. The real lord of our lives, Jesus fiercely asserts, is already on your side. And Jesus and his band raise snow shovels to shoulder to spread the good news.

Lord of the Sabbath,

Your followers were told not to work on the Sabbath, and yet they boldly plucked grain to show that you are Lord of all. The world tells us not to rest on the Sabbath. Show us how to rest boldly, rejecting conventions that go against your will, and instead praying and resting as you did up on the mountain, for the glory of your word and work, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.