

Scripture Texts: (from the season after Pentecost, Year B, proper 4)

### **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

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.

### **Mark 2:23-3:6**

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; 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 he 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 he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind 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 he 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.

Opening Prayer: Gracious God, in Jesus you have told us that all who are heavy laden and weary might come to you; that if we take your yoke upon us we might find relief from our burdens; that if we join Jesus in the yoke we might find rest and peace for our souls. Grant that such might happen for us this day, and week, and year, and through our whole lives into life eternal. Amen.

A number of years back in one of our Adult Education sessions, we wandered into the weeds of “remembering the Sabbath”. Reflection on decades past came quite easily. I recalled a Sunday tradition of my grandmother Thieszen in which she reduced a hot Sunday lunch to activating two switches on the stove—potatoes on the stove and porky goodness in the oven. She wanted to minimize her Sunday slavery in the kitchen—not just because it is biblical command, but on account that Sabbath rest is good for a person. The generations helped wash up the dishes with Grandma enjoying the family from the comfort of her rocking chair. Sabbath is good for Grandmas, parents and people in general.

In those same sessions I recall Rosmary Slater invoking the memory of her father who would shave late on Saturday. The kids were all washed up on and finally father would bath and shave. Why shave on Saturday? To avoid any undo “labour” on Sunday. We all have stories of striving to live into Sabbath rest.

Our Mark passage for the day muddies the Sabbath waters. Picking grain and healing on the Sabbath is honoured by Jesus and vilified by the Pharisees. Before I delve into that controversy, I must be honest that I have worked on the Sabbath. In my young adult years, I recall making a conscientious decision to go swathing and baling on the Sabbath. I didn’t want to offend anyone or God, but a diminished or compromised hay crop did no good for farmers, ranchers, or the livestock. Other Sabbath work also entailed plying sick animals with antibiotics or trimming away of foot rot. We didn’t go looking to start projects, but it seemed some of these things simply needed to get done; and I do not regret such decisions. I took the position that I would take my Sabbath rest when it rained. Some years it did rain, and other years not. And then I rested during the drought.

These days, the Sabbath is equally fluid. I am up here today speaking. Last Sunday afternoon over faspas I was planning an inurnment. I check and respond to email and text messages on Sunday. I willingly transgress sacred space if I sense there is hunger or injury among the people for whom I have committed to care. I sometimes, like last week, eat out on a Sunday thereby compromise the Sabbath for others; or maybe they need the work to pay the bills. Sabbath stories and complexities abound for us all. It could be we have lost a reasonable balance of honouring the Sabbath amidst tasks which seem important, but maybe aren’t. After a closer look at our scripture texts, we will return to such considerations.

The Revised Common Lectionary for this week (Season after Pentecost, Year B, proper 4) listed two passages that reference the Sabbath; the two which James read earlier. This got me curious about the Sabbath and the implications within the biblical tradition, the context of Jesus, and the early church.

Two weeks ago I noted that in earlier Hebraic existence, the feast of Pentecost was about the renewal of God's covenant with Noah.<sup>1</sup> And that makes sense because it references events in their collective life which had great significance. As we move forward through several centuries of Jewish religious life, the festival of Pentecost evolved to a celebration of a different covenant: God's giving of the Torah on top of Mt. Siani. And within the Torah, the decalogue (the 10 sayings, or the ten commandments as people often describe them) is a jewel within the treasury. A great frustration among biblical and theological scholars alike is that the 10 commandments vary among Exodus, Deuteronomy and Christian traditions. The annoyance is that there isn't one precise account of the ten sayings. Gwen copied the screen image from Gerald Gerbrandt's work on Deuteronomy within the Believers Church commentary series.<sup>2</sup> It might be shocking to see some of the differences, but such things are good for us to know. The ten commandments are somewhat fluid while holding the core of honouring the sacredness of God, time, and relationships.

An important distinction in relation to the Sabbath is the variance between Exodus and Deuteronomy. Both texts take extended time in encouraging us to "remember", but they differ on the focus of those collective memories handed down from our spiritual ancestors. Exodus links Sabbath to creation and God taking the seventh day to rest (Gen 2:2). And because God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, according to Exodus, so too should we and all of creation. Deuteronomy links Sabbath to the release of the Hebrews from slavery and bondage. According to Deuteronomy, because you have suffered in slavery you should be empathetic and sympathetic to the people and animals who slave away all week. Give them rest from their heavy loads because I, the LORD your God, have given you rest.

This is the manner in which Jesus understood the Sabbath in our episode out of our gospel reading. Imposed hunger, at least according to the international criminal court, is classified as a crime against humanity. Depriving hospital access to wounded and suffering persons, like the bombing of hospitals, is classified as a war crime. The Hippocratic oath, which dates to several centuries

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<sup>1</sup> John Frederick Janssen, "Pentecost" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press: 1993), p. 582.

<sup>2</sup> Read more from Gerald Gerbrandt's commentary, *Deuteronomy* (in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series), (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2015), pp. 127-141.

before Christ, underscores that physicians then or now are called to do no harm in their practice of the healing arts.

Within the biblical context of Jesus, and civil society I would say, hunger and illness change the equation of Sabbath. If we or a loved one were starving or wounded, would we not long for divinely inspired acts to ease our hunger and our infirmities? We would! Jesus invites us all to reclaim our compassion and partner with God to ease hunger and disease and support policies which address such travesties. It is a type of Pentecost renewal of covenant which point us to respect of God, of our relationships, of animals, of the those in bondage.

The text of Deuteronomy 5 clearly necessitates such a reading. The covenant was made with “all of us here alive today” chapter five states (5:3) just before the ten words commence. “All of us here today”? Generations and centuries had literally passed from the setting of the events on Mt. Horeb and the recording of those events. By the time these words were set down, all of the key players and the masses gathered at Horeb would have been dead. The authors putting the story into written form understood that the “us” referred to in the narrative is actually us. “All of us here today” are actually “us”, not those people from centuries ago. The scribes chose to use the present tense in their writing rather than the past tense. This covenant, these guidelines for right living, are real time events and not an historical artifact. In that respect, the covenant is with me, you, the animals, the slaves still among us and those with burdens.<sup>3</sup>

If such is the case, how might we live the Sabbath in our time and place? From my reading of the texts of today we can apply them personally, socially, and internationally. I will take a bit of time with each.

### Personal Sabbath

I one time heard a lecture from a theologian within our Mennonite circles reflecting on Sabbath rest. This teacher and preacher said a few things which got me thinking about Sabbath. He was a bit of news junky (as some of us are), so on Sundays he chose to not read the Globe & Mail, the NY Times, or internet news—I need a break from the unrelenting news of the world, he said. On a Sabbath day, maybe we seek to connect with people. It may be church, surely, but it may be others in the family or community. Sabbath is not all about me, it is about us. Rest, in the Sabbath sense, is more communal than personal, he said.

Maybe on a Sabbath, we can seek to live more gently with creation itself. Maybe not every errand needs to be run; or maybe some errands truly need to be run. Maybe the quack grass gets a Sabbath break from my weeding; or maybe

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<sup>3</sup> Gerbrandt, 130.

being in the garden is therapeutic for me. And truth be told, the quack grass is not a slave to any gardener and it doesn't seem to mind the culling.

Maybe on those Sundays we choose to dine out, we offer a tip a bit larger than what we might typically give. Why? Because many of us, at one time or another, had lower paying employment—we were once in bondage to economic forces greater than ourselves. An extra 5% tip from those eating out will not likely make a difference to the tipper, but it might make the difference for someone else. Surely such a practice might remind us that the economically well off and economically challenged are together in this messy society.

I respond to a fair bit of email and text messages during a week; of course not as many exchanges as for some, but enough that at times I feel in bondage to the in-box. Maybe I could be more discerning in my Sabbath use of the computer. These lines of thought are potential points of application. But they are far too personal in nature for the scope of the NT lesson. To dwell solely in the personal realm is the mistake which the Pharisees of Mark 2 represent.

### Social Sabbaths

Jesus chose to transgress the individualist approach to worship presented by the pharisaical interpretation. I like that—according to Jesus our spirituality and piety is communally centered rather than in the individual. For any of us to experience a peace filled Sabbath will entail mindfulness of God, our previous liberations, and our community. Note, the Sabbath is not about you or me-- it is about you, me, the animals, the slaves and the God who loves us all. I have two potential avenues with which such Sabbath minded interests might be pursued on a social level.

First, In the last months we have been intentional about including in worship stories from those engaged in care for the broader society. We hope to continue this practice for at least the next season or two. Why? Service has been a value of the people within this congregation. Service is a value of the current leadership of this congregation. Knowing about the hunger and illness which afflict people is necessarily linked with Sabbath. Strategic partnerships with others committed to the common good is necessary for our society and the spiritual essence of our souls. So, we hear what is happening out there. We hear their challenges. We hear about the transformational moments within their ministry. We consider if this is an opportunity to partner with their ministry. We consider spaces where withered hands and hopes might be restored; be it Sabbath or Sunday, sunrise or sunset.

Secondly, as I consider the June calendar within our city, there are walks, parades, and events we can attend around National Indigenous Peoples Day and Pride month. Maybe the presence of one like myself who is of European descent. Heterosexual, and a pastor would contribute to healing within society. Or maybe it

would be an opportunity for deeply seeded cultural and systemic biases within me to get some air towards healing. It might be uncomfortable, and that might be o.k.

### International Sabbath

As the most recent manifestation of the conflict in Palestine nears its 8<sup>th</sup> month anniversary, and the immensely disproportionate violence apart of the conflict, I was drawn to the cover story from the first quarter publication of *Community Peacemaker Teams*. The title of the article is “The Power and Complexity of BDS”—boycott, divestment and sanctions.<sup>4</sup> Boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) are an economic response a person can take to encourage conflict resolution as well as challenge injustices on the ground. Many lending institutions and other service vendors are linked with occupation forces in Palestine, military Juntas, and nasty dictators. Some companies are out to make a profit and not necessarily the peaceable kingdom. Many suggest the boycotts leveraged against policies in Apartheid South Africa last century contributed to the transition to a more humanitarian society in that region. I know of one person who has changed banks on account of institutional action and inaction in the recent Middle East unrest—the Credit Union seemed a less toxic route than one of the big five. That could feel way too much for some of us.

Maybe, though, we could take a Sabbath from our Starbuck’s coffee or our flame broiled whopper from Burger King or Ms. Vickie’s chips—all of which are tasty. These three organizations, among numerous others, appear on BDS sites as institutions with investment policies detrimental to lasting peace in the Middle East. A Sabbath rest from consuming as usual takes seriously our economic power. Sabbath rest, when understood in this framework, could contribute to the diminishment of hunger, the restoration withered hands, and healing of the land itself.<sup>5</sup>

I have preached a bit longer than usual. I am aware that Sabbath considerations in the personal, social and international arenas come with a variety of strong opinions. For that reason, I have sought to soften the application dimension of the sermon with a great number of “maybes”, “perhapses”, “coulds”, and “mights”. Sabbath conversation needs to continue among us as we follow the LORD of the Sabbath who walks in the light of God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ameera Al Rajobi, “The Power and Complexity of BDS” in *Community Peacemaker Teams* (vol.xxxiiv. No.1: January-April 2024), pp 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> [Canadian BDS Coalition – ...working together to promote justice for Palestinians.](#)