

Sabbath Sunday

June 2, 2024

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We've now entered the long season of Pentecost in our church year – sometimes referred to as Ordinary Time

So...ordinary.

We've gone from the anticipation of Advent with Mary being told she would bear a child, to the celebration of Christ born in a stable at Christmas, to the Epiphany of the three Magi, to the wilderness of Lent, the journey to the cross in Jerusalem, Christ's death, Christ's resurrection, and two weeks ago the celebration of the great Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost.

Whew! What a ride it's been!

So, what do we do during Ordinary Time?

I mentioned on Pentecost that I love this season because I love the Holy Spirit, but I also love this season because we get so many more stories about Jesus - his life, his friends, his ministry

When we confess our creeds, they go from "born of the virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried"

Not to be a pain in the rear, but I think a lot happened between "born of the virgin Mary" and his trial before Pilate, no?

Yes! Indeed – so many things happened

So many things that help us understand how we get from being born of Mary to a trial that ultimately takes his life.

Stories that help us glimpse ever more clearly what the kingdom of God, which broke into the world in Jesus, might look and be like, and why it was so dangerous to the Empire

Stories like the one this morning about Jesus seemingly breaking the rules of the Sabbath and enraging the religious officials of the day.

Being the parent of a toddler, I read this morning's story from Mark and I thought to myself "I know this behavior"

tell a toddler not to do something, they're going to do that thing any way

Yes, I know this behavior, and I know the rage it can engender

But, surely, this story about Jesus in Mark isn't the behavior of a toddler? Surely there is more to it than simply intentionally disrespecting religious law and teaching of the day?

Surely, there is more to this story.

The law to "observe the sabbath day and keep it holy" as our reading from Deuteronomy states it, is repeated many times throughout the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and referenced many more times throughout the whole Bible

You might recall it's one of the Ten Commandments Moses received from God in the book of Exodus

It is a law that harkens back to the very genesis of the world, according to our ancient grandparents, told in the book with that very name where God creates the world in 6 days and then rests on the seventh day

"on the seventh day God finished the work that had been done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that had been done. So God

blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that had been done in creation.” (Genesis 2:2-3)

But, in John Dominic Crossan’s book *The Greatest Prayer*, which some folks here recently read as part of our Book of 2 Months Club, Crossan approaches the significance of that seventh day of creation, that sabbath day, quite differently

According to Crossan: “the crown of creation is the Sabbath day itself.”¹

“Creation is not the work of six days, as is often mistakenly said” Crossan writes. “and whether it is said literally or metaphorically, historically or parabolically, it is still mistaken. Creation is the work of seven days, and, as its climax, the Sabbath day is built into the very fabric of our world, the very creation of our earth.”

In other words, the Sabbath is not an afterthought

the Sabbath is not the day of letting out a deep breath of fatigue, the Sabbath is the day of taking in a breath of wonder and holding it as we marvel at the greatness, the holiness, of our God and what God has created, what God desires

Crossan marvels at the creation story told in Genesis 1 – a story that has no violence (the world was not created out of the destruction of something else), a story that indicates a balance to and for all things (there is symbiosis between all that God creates), and it’s a story that gives us a glimpse into the very thing that God desires, perhaps, most of all: distributive justice

An article I read defines distributive justice as that which “concerns the fair and equitable distribution of resources and burdens throughout a society.”²

¹ Crossan, John Dominic. *The Greatest Prayer*. Harper One © 2010

² <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-distributive-justice-5225377>

The Sabbath, then, is the day that is to be kept holy because it is the day when all of these marvelous wonders of creation are held together

Keeping the Sabbath, Crossan notes, “is an attempt to return once more to that beginning moment of Sabbath creation, when all the world was distributed fairly and equitably by God and was declared good and blessed in its inaugural glory.”

not the deep sigh of fatigue, rather the day of taking in a breath of wonder and holding it as we marvel at the holiness of our God’s desire: “a fair distribution for all”

not a day to rest from labors for my sake but for our sake and for the sake of the whole creation, all deserve a fair share even of rest

all deserve, are entitled to, were endowed by our creator to be worthy of a fair share, and Sabbath is our day to ensure that that is precisely what we are observing in our world

Sabbath is our value statement, sabbath is a moral imperative

Remember the sabbath day, it is holy.

Now, this is a 20th/21st century, Christian theologians take on Sabbath – and it is a beautiful, radical vision of what it is we hold so dearly on this seventh day

It would not necessarily be they way that Jesus’ contemporaries would describe the sabbath

Keeping the sabbath was law, and for those of us who have read the books of law in the Hebrew Bible, the laws are very specific not only in the “what” of a law but the “how”

For Jesus' contemporaries, there was a "right" way to observe the sabbath: tradition held it, and Jesus was mocking it

But, I don't think Jesus was mocking it

I think that Jesus and Crossan are very aligned in their value of Sabbath which we hear when Jesus says: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;"

The sabbath is not simply our ritual, the sabbath is our blessing

The sabbath is not static, the sabbath is dynamic

The sabbath is not a day, the sabbath is an ideal

Matt Skinner, Prof of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Minnesota writes that "Mark casts Jesus as honoring the purpose of the sabbath commandment. It is as if Jesus is saying that the chief objective of the law, in general, is to save and preserve life"³

Crossan might say it as "to save and preserve the order of fairness and justice on which God built the world"

"Indeed, therefore," Skinner goes on, "what better day is there than the sabbath, a day meant to promote God's commitment to humanity's well-being, for the restoration of a man's malformed hand?"

"In receiving that ability," Skinner writes, "the man may recover his ability to provide for a family...The event represents a restoration to wholeness and dignity. It means to promote life and human flourishing."

Which, sounds to me, exactly like what the Sabbath is for.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-09-2/commentary-on-mark-223-28-31-6>

Maybe we could call it the “why” of the law

What: observe the sabbath day and make it holy

How: rest from your labors, as best you can

Why: because when God created the world, God created an ecosystem in which all had purpose, all had a place, and all had all what they needed and the sabbath is the day when this is held and honored

We honor the sabbath day by resting from our labors because we are all deserving of a bit of rest, which is actually a taste of that genesis-initiated, God-sanctified balance of creation that all that is is held in

We worship on the sabbath because when we are actually able to pause and consider God’s creation – that balanced and fair distribution of grace upon grace – we are overwhelmed with praise and thanksgiving

And, sometimes honoring the sabbath day requires action of us – because in taking our rest, in taking a pause, and considering the distributive justice that God so desires for all the earth and her creatures, we notice how far away from that great desire we truly are and we seek reconciliation and reform

Our society doesn’t naturally make space for us to remember the sabbath day and to keep it holy

But as our ideal and not simply as an obligation, I think we can find ways to have sabbath moments, sabbath moments of prayer and reflection

Sabbath moments of introspection and inspiration

If you can carve out a day, well done you – if you can carve out a moment, well done you

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Amen.