

Lord of Rest

Mark 2:23-3:6
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First Presbyterian Church
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Summer officially begins next week, marking the time when people usually get a break from all the hustle and bustle. The spring cleaning is done. The holidays that demanded all that food-prep, shopping and decorating are past.

The time and effort it took to put on your winter coat, and hat, and scarf, and boots gives way to simply opening the door and strolling outside. No more clearing the car and driveway of snow, or the lawn of leaves. I hate that!

Summer often also brings a more relaxed schedule – maybe a month without that monthly meeting, some time to be on vacation, a day set aside for a picnic with the kids or grandkids – does anyone go on picnics anymore? I don't know, but it sounds nice.

And yet, when it comes to our schedules during summer, they are often just as jammed as any other time of year – maybe even more so, as we plan all the fun stuff, we want to do to get away from it all, and then have to manage all the details.

Getting away from it all. That's what we're looking at today in our New Testament lesson from Mark. Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples had gotten away from it all – all the cities and towns – and were going through the cornfields. Can't you picture it – this group of friends strolling and skipping and weaving along without a care in the world, and Jesus in the lead?

Suddenly, they realize they're hungry, and of course there's no place to get any food. Maybe it was Jesus who plucked the first grain of wheat and popped it into his mouth.

As the smile grows on his face, Peter grabs a handful of grain and looks to Jesus for approval. Jesus nods and Peter eats. Then all the others begin plucking heads of grain, eating and laughing, nudging and stumbling over each other. Such joy, such freedom, such thanksgiving as their hunger eases.

Then, the interruption. Out of nowhere, the Pharisees appear. They go straight to Jesus and say, "... Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Everyone stops dead in their tracks. Fear sets in. How will Jesus handle this one? Are they in trouble?

Jesus looks the Pharisees in the eye and tells them about King David, when David and his friends did the same thing, only worse – taking bread from the Temple, bread

that was reserved for the priests alone to eat, in a sacrament of Thanksgiving for God's gift of abundance and provision.

Finishing the story, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

As God's dear children, we are given so many good gifts – chief among them, a day of rest. After all, maintaining a time of Sabbath rest, of holy rest is unique among the Ten Commandments. It's the only commandment that brings with it a true gift from God – time to rest from our busy, hectic lives.

How well do you receive and enjoy that gift? Think about your periods of rest each day, each week. What are those like for you?

Does your hectic schedule control that time of rest – making it a time of exhaustion, collapsing in a puddle? Or are you able to truly set aside some sacred, holy time that you enter into in the spirit of peace and calm, freedom and joy?

God created a period of Sabbath rest as a gift for you to enjoy without a care in the world, confident in the abundance and provision of a loving God who will be there for you as you reenter your usual routine.

The problem is, few of us truly receive that gift. No, instead of enjoying a period of holy rest, we shoehorn the downtime we get into our busy week. And then we spend that time in worried anticipation of what's next. It's just so hard to get away from it all without some preset agenda or future concern crowding its way in.

Take for instance the guy who had been away fishing all day, and had no luck, no fish to show for it. Not wanting to admit he "wasted" all that time, the man stopped at a local fish shop and asked the storekeeper to pick out three of the largest trout he had.

"Shall I wrap them for you?" asked the storekeeper. "No," replied the man. "I'll stand here by the door, and you throw them to me from behind the counter."

"Why in the world do you want me to throw them to you?" "Well," said the man, "I've been fishing all day and I haven't caught a thing. Now I may not be a good fisherman, but I'm a worse liar. When I get home, my wife and kids are going to ask me if I caught anything, and I want to be able to tell the truth."

We worry so much about being productive that it gets in the way of enjoying our downtime, receiving our needed rest. And this gets in the way of our being productive. As we heard in today's Old Testament reading, we are to "remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth ..., but (he) rested the seventh day...."

If God so valued a period of rest from the work of creation, shouldn't we also take some time to truly rest from our acts of creation, our hectic to-do lists, our incessant worrying? Of course we should.

To underscore the importance of this and to help us see what's at stake in taking time for true rest and relaxation, without worry, with no agenda, Mark tells about what Jesus did next.

Jesus entered the synagogue and healed a man with a withered hand, on the Sabbath, restoring this man's ability to provide for himself and his family. And of course, as Mark says, the Pharisees "watched him to see whether he would cure ... on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him."

What Jesus actually shows them is that God's priorities are not our priorities. God values life, and grace, and mercy, and wisdom, and peace, and health and wholeness, and faithfulness, above all else, above any self-centeredness that might take hold of us.

We see this when Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" There is condemnation in that question and that contempt is for the Pharisees, who should have known that restoring the crippled man's ability to care for himself and his family is more important than the Pharisees need to wield power over others, to control the lives of others.

For Jesus, the Sabbath commandment is all about people living their best lives. When you set aside time to entrust your day to the Lord, to step away from the worry and fears of tomorrow, and to enter into a place of peace and contentment and thanksgiving, then tomorrow takes care of itself.

This is because when we are well rested, we make better choices, we have more energy and are better able to focus on handling whatever comes. What's more, when we entrust at least one day a week entirely to the Lord, we come to know that the Lord is with us every day.

So why continue to be trapped in the rat race when the Lord is inviting you – and commanding you – to join the human race, to come alongside God as his beloved child, as you learn to entrust all your days, all your cares, all your concerns to the Lord? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

As we gather together for worship, let us gather our hearts, our minds and ourselves into this sacred space of prayer. Breathe deeply of God's presence with us, and settle in to these few moments of quietude.

When a concern over your well-being enters your mind, give it over to God. When a worry comes to you, let it go. You can do nothing about it just now.

When you think of what the rest of your day holds, push the thought away, for the rest of the day will come.

When you have thoughts of all that is before you in the week ahead, throw out those thoughts. The jobs will be there when tomorrow comes.

Be here. Be in this place of prayer. Be here now. And breathe in the calming presence of God's love which will sustain you and provide you with all you need in the days ahead.

You must be present to God now so that you will be aware of God's presence with you in the days to come. Can you not hear the voice of God breaking through? Listen! "Be still and know that I am God." Listen. And be comforted.

O Lord, we thank you for your comfort, your care, your provision. And we ask you to draw near to those who need you most, and especially those who are grieving. We pray your healing touch upon those dealing with illness, injury and disease.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who referred to himself as the Lord of rest, and who makes possible all the healing and restoration this world needs, as we pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**