

“Worship and Work”  
 Mark 2:23-3:6  
 A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley  
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 University Baptist Church  
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Here we are on this beautiful day. After a week of scorching temperatures, it’s finally a bit cooler. We can even venture out of our air conditioning to bask in a refreshing summer breeze that makes us feel fine.

We are here at a time when the divisions in our world are as stark as ever. Even though the latest election has brought some return to normalcy, the rancor continues on the streets, in the state houses and national houses, stalling any kind of movement forward. We retreat into our separate camps in order to make sense of our world or at least to bask in the glow of people who believe just like us. And we stay stuck. Or at least we stay predictable. Farmer Poet Wendell Berry penned these lines way back in 1973 and they still ring true:

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
 vacation with pay. Want more  
 of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
 to know your neighbors and to die.  
 And you will have a window in your head.  
 Not even your future will be a mystery  
 any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
 and shut away in a little drawer.  
 When they want you to buy something  
 they will call you. When they want you  
 to die for profit they will let you know.*

And so we become predictable.

But is that what the Gospel wants us to be and do?

Of course we want to have consistent and even predictable faith. But there is something about the Gospel that calls us to a higher standard. To be out of step with the crowds so that we can be in step with God’s purpose in the world.

That’s the context for today’s scripture.

It comes at the beginning of Mark’s gospel. Mark is setting the groundwork for the rebellious prophetic work that is part of being a disciple of Jesus.

These stories about eating and healing on the sabbath are actually about the place of worship and work. It’s about who has authority. It’s about priorities.

The fourth commandment says that we are to keep the sabbath and make it holy. That means no work. One day for rest reflection and to give thanks to God who makes all things possible.

These days, it’s hard to refrain from work. Our cell phones remind us of pressing issues that demand immediate attention. We attend to these little devices with such devotion that it seems like they are the focus of our worship.

But think of the Sabbath not so much in literal terms, but in symbolic terms. Sabbath observance was the way that the Hebrew people defined themselves as different than their counterparts. It's a little more explicit or obvious than say circumcision, but it served to distinguish the Hebrews from the Goyim or the nations—everyone else.

In today's scripture, Jesus gets into an argument about the Sabbath about worship and work with the Pharisees.

Now, the Pharisees were not bad people. They were a reform movement that tried to protect the Hebrew people from disappearing like all other peoples who were subsumed by the likes of Rome. They were sincere in their piety, but by the time Mark's Gospel was written, they had become symbols of a religion without relevance. Piety without purpose. Fidelity without a future.

The Pharisees sought to redeem their fraught community through restoring traditional values. They believed that the rule of Torah wasn't enough, since it hadn't worked to save the people from foreign domination. The answer must be in a higher level of individual piety. They loved their rules of conduct. Things like fasting, prayer and no work on the sabbath were their totems. They wanted to protect the orthodoxy of the Hebrews. They saw themselves as better than the scribes and more holy than the priests. And they were always kinda dumbfounded that no one decided to follow them, especially Jesus.

And in today's passage they made the mistake of arguing scripture with Jesus.

The story goes that one Saturday, Jesus and his entourage were traveling and they were hungry. So they started harvesting some wheat so they could eat. The Pharisees pounced on this practice and declared "look what they are doing is not lawful on the sabbath." But instead of Jesus arguing with them, he quotes a story from I Samuel 21:1-6 where David and his troops ate on the sabbath.

I like the way my former pastor and mentor George Williamson tells the story of David and Abiathar the high priest:

*For a time, David was a guerilla fighter in insurrection against King Saul. Jesus probably identified with this period of David's life, thought of himself as an insurrectionist against the religious establishment. The story has a tongue-in-cheek quality to it, odd for the Bible. David and his band of insurrectionists ran out of food and were hungry. David sneaks up on a synagogue in his camouflage greens. The priest is there. David says, "give me some food."*

*The priest says he can't, that the only food he's got is communion bread, already consecrated for the Sabbath. David says, "give it to me anyway, got to have it."*

*Abiathar the priest of course is terrified. By now David has quite a reputation. Abiathar is looking for some way he can legitimate giving this armed brute his consecrated bread so he can go home and hide in his bed. He says, I kid you not, that only people who are abstaining from sex are allowed to eat consecrated bread. David, I kid you not, swears that anybody who plays soldier with him has to abstain from sex. Can you imagine? So with the deal cut, the priest tosses him the holy food and gets the hell out of there.*

Jesus all but said, "I can quote scripture just as well as you and maybe even better. And since David's army ate on the sabbath, so can mine. After all the sabbath was made for humankind not the other way around.

You can't just pick and choose the laws and stories that are important to you. Instead you need to focus on the point of it all. It's about doing good and saving lives.

He then goes even further by healing on the sabbath—a man with a withered hand. One whom the Pharisees might shun because of his condition.

Way back in the late 90's when AZT was making people with HIV wither away, the church I served in San Francisco joined three other congregations in becoming distribution centers for medicinal marijuana. It was the one substance that was able to stimulate appetite and dull the pain. It was effective for AIDS patients as well as people dealing with glaucoma and chemotherapy. It was also illegal. But we looked at the scripture from Mark and said, this is what we must do. Before we decided to take this step, I decided it made sense to ask everyone in the church what they thought about it. Was it a risk we were willing to take. Might there be another, safer route to go?

I was especially concerned about what some of the senior women might think. They had been the faithful remnant of the church that stood by it when the leadership got younger, bolder and more daring. Ida Curran, an old rosie the riverter, then in her 90's said to me, "Does it help people? Is the church supposed to help people? Then what are you asking me for?"

Today, we are getting ready for our annual meeting. It's a time when we celebrate the work we have done in the past year. The ways we have modified our worship and strove to be faithful through it all. We'll reflect on the work and worship that we have accomplished in this time and space. We'll also wonder together how we can respond to the current reality of multiple pandemics.

I think Jesus would have us focus on what heals our community. What brings out hope? What brave steps might we be poised to take in the seasons before us?

My friends, we follow one who ate and healed on the Sabbath. Meaning he did not worry so much about pleasing the law-and-order part of the Hebrew people. He was there to attend to the outcast and marginalized. He attended to a higher law and a better kind of order.

But he always affirmed that worship and work were two sides of the same coin. And that one ought to make the other one better.

So with Jesus, let's think outside of the box. Let's dare to imagine something daring, daunting and delightful. Let's live, love and laugh together. Let's imagine a world where the best of God's laws provide us the order we seek.

Let me close with the prophetic words of Wendell Berry.

*So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.*

*Love the world. Work for nothing.*

*Take all that you have and be poor.*

*Love someone who does not deserve it.*

*Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.*

*Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.*

*Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.*

*Say that your main crop is the forest*

*that you did not plant,  
 that you will not live to harvest.  
 Say that the leaves are harvested  
 when they have rotted into the mold.  
 Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.  
 Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
 that will build under the trees  
 every thousand years.  
 Listen to carrion — put your ear  
 close, and hear the faint chattering  
 of the songs that are to come.  
 Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
 Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
 though you have considered all the facts.  
 So long as women do not go cheap  
 for power, please women more than men.  
 Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
 a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
 Will this disturb the sleep  
 of a woman near to giving birth?  
 Go with your love to the fields.  
 Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head  
 in her lap. Swear allegiance  
 to what is nighest your thoughts.  
 As soon as the generals and the politicians  
 can predict the motions of your mind,  
 lose it. Leave it as a sign  
 to mark the false trail, the way  
 you didn't go. Be like the fox  
 who makes more tracks than necessary,  
 some in the wrong direction.  
 Practice resurrection.*

*“Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” from The Country of  
 Marriage, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1973. Also published by Counterpoint  
 Press in The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry, 1999; The Mad Farmer Poems,  
 2008; New Collected Poems, 2012.*