

11 March 2018

Play and Sabbath

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Throughout Jesus' ministry, one of main ways he irritated the institutional faith was in his approach to the sabbath. Today we read two encounters in Mark, from chapter 2, verse 23, through chapter 3, verse 6:

²³One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' ²⁵And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He 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.' ²⁷Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.

3 *Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' ⁴Then 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. ⁵He 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. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

In the late 19th century, the great German sociologist Max Weber noticed something peculiar. Since the Protestant Reformation, Germany had been divided into Catholic states and Protestant states, and what Weber noticed was that all the wealthy, thriving, industrial states were Protestant. He set out to see why, and the result was his 1905 book *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*. Here's a vastly oversimplified version of his argument. While the Reformation, theoretically, was about salvation by good works (as Catholics supposedly taught) versus salvation by grace (as Protestants claimed to believe), in practice it often worked the other way. Protestants, because they believed that salvation was a matter of God's choice, felt a desperate need to prove to themselves and others that they were among the chosen few. So they worked very hard at being moral. In fact, they worked very hard at everything, with the result that, over time, hard work itself came to be seen as the pre-eminent sign of a person's salvation.

This, Weber concluded, is why Protestant states were wealthier. Protestants simply worked harder – not because Catholics were lazy but because Protestants were scared. In their minds, their eternal salvation was related to their industry. Weber added that if you want to see this Protestant Work Ethic in its extreme form, look at the United States of America. In the

Protestant states of Germany, hard work and material success were features of the dominant religion. In America, it sometimes feels as if hard work and material success *are* the dominant religion.

Think about our attitude toward work. *Idle hands are the devil's workshop*, you know. *Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise*. (Think about that one. What is it saying? Get up early and don't do anything but work and sleep. That might make you wealthy, but "healthy" and "wise" are less clear.) Or here's one: *Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration*. (That one's actually kind of gross.) What is our highest compliment? "This is Allison from the office. She's a hard worker." How do we place each other in our minds? By our work. *It's so nice to meet you. And what do you do?* "How are you doing?" *Busy!* "Hey, you look rough! Are you all right?" *Oh, I'm fine. Just putting in a lot of 12-hour days at work*. And when we say we're busy or we've been putting in long hours at work, we say it as if we're worn out, but we're really bragging, and everyone knows it. Look how important I am. Look how valued I am. Look how virtuous I am. Look how *godly* I am.

So that's the context for this sermon. We are a people for whom hard work is more or less synonymous with virtue, and the worst thing we can say about someone is that he or she is shiftless or lazy or can't hold on to a job. We might cluck our tongues over a "workaholic" who neglects family and has no hobbies other than golf with clients, but we don't really disapprove. At heart, part of us admires that hard-working soul, because if hard work is admirable, then someone who does nothing but work must be *really* admirable. Now let's read Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For 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, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Now the Bible is not opposed to hard work and definitely has little patience with laziness. But it is worth remembering that in the Garden of Eden story hard work is not a virtue but is laid on humanity as a curse, and here in the Commandment, holiness has to do with *not* working. In fact, with *nobody* working: not you, not your children, not your slaves, not the immigrants who live among you, not even your livestock. Doing no work one day a week is an act of devotion to God.

And you would think that that would be the easiest of all the Ten Commandments, wouldn't you? The others all require vigilance and restraint, which takes effort, but this one just says, "Don't work one day a week, all right?" But as we've seen over and over again in this sermon series, we don't seem to be able to accept the easy stuff. We have some weird compulsion to make faith harder than it has to be, and here again, people have taken this lightest of all commandments and complicated and legislated it within an inch of its life. In the stories from Mark, we saw the Pharisees having a fit because Jesus' hungry disciples picked some heads of grain from the fields and ate them. "That's farm labor! Or food preparation! Or something! It's work!" In the second story, they were offended because Jesus healed a man of a physical

deformity on the sabbath. “That’s terrible! You can’t do that! That’s doctor’s work!” The Pharisees had regulated everything about the sabbath: how many steps you were allowed to walk from your home, how heavy a burden you were allowed to carry, and so on. You weren’t even allowed to eat eggs laid on the sabbath. Those sinful, sabbath-breaking hens! See what I mean? This commandment, which you might think would be easy, had become by degrees the most complicated and difficult one of all.

Before we sneer at those Pharisees, though, we should remember that we aren’t that far from an age in America when we were just as strange. We “celebrated” the sabbath by wearing our least comfortable clothes to church, then sitting at home doing nothing, because we not only weren’t supposed to work on Sunday, but we weren’t supposed to do have fun. My mother couldn’t play dominoes on Sunday. Frivolity. For many churches – including Methodists, who were big sabbatarians – if you were enjoying yourself on a Sunday, you were doing something wrong.

Fortunately, as usual, Jesus cuts through the fog of institutional rules to the heart of the matter. In the first story we read, he says, “People, the sabbath was created to serve us; not the other way around. We’re supposed to have a day of rest, not a day of worrying about nitpicking regulations. If keeping the sabbath means you have to go hungry, then it’s just become a burden, hasn’t it? And that’s the opposite of sabbath.” Then, in the second story, Jesus asks, “What do you think God would prefer us to do on the sabbath? Help someone, or ignore their need in the name of God’s law? How is that even possible? If your idea of following God’s commandments requires you to leave one of God’s creatures in distress, you don’t get it.”

So now let’s talk about us, and let me start by admitting that today I am preaching to myself. I’m a product of my own culture, and that Protestant work ethic is deeply ingrained. When I get home after work and Rebecca asks about my day, I don’t think first about whether I made a difference in someone’s life that day. My first thought is generally about how many items I checked off the Microsoft Outlook task list. To an unhealthy degree, I measure my own self-worth and success by how many hours I have worked, and how productive those hours have been, as measured in checkmarks. Fortunately, I’m married to someone who really enjoys hearing nightly updates on my sermon progress, but still I know that I define myself and my value far too much by my work. It generally takes me several days into a vacation to let go of work, which means I probably never relax on days off. It is an illness. Or a madness. Maybe some of you recognize this affliction in yourself.

We Americans desperately need to rediscover sabbath, but we don’t know how. We need to learn, and as we do, we need to make sure we don’t follow the usual path of defining it with a long list of burdensome regulations and prohibitions. So here are a few preliminary suggestions, a sort of beginner’s guide, for myself and my fellow inmates. Make some time every week. It doesn’t have to be on Sunday, or Saturday. Our work hours are not always up to us, but find some time to set aside as *different*. Start small. I know people who insist that Sabbath be a full 24 hours, and maybe that’s a goal to work for, but if going that long while the dishes pile up drives you batty, then don’t. It’s defeating the purpose. Start with, say, a four-hour block. This is what I’m trying to do now – I take Friday mornings as sabbath time, which is different

from day off time. But don't get legalistic about the time, either. Sabbath is important, but other things – and especially other *people* matter more. Okay, you may say, and what am I supposed to do during this separate sabbath time? Pray for four hours? Well, yeah, that'd be great. But frankly if your prayer life is at a point where you can get lost in prayer for four hours, you don't need this beginner's guide. You're way beyond me. So start with prayer, but then with the rest of your time, do something useless. Do something that will not contribute to anything on your checklist. Do things just because they sound fun. Read non-educational books, the kind that you stay up until two am to finish even though you have work the next day. Talk to people you enjoy talking to. Eat things you love. Go places that are beautiful or fun, and don't stop to pick up milk on the way home. In other words, *play*.

It really is that simple. The commandment doesn't ask any more than that. Stop working. Stop being productive and be playful for a while. And perhaps then, as we play, we can begin learning how to be ourselves away from our jobs. Maybe we can learn to define ourselves by who we are instead of by what we do. And maybe we'll find that that thing we are when we stop working is "child of God."

* * *

A final word: Whenever I hear a politician calling for a monument to the Ten Commandments, because they're the foundation of our Christian nation, I want to say, "Great! I'm so glad you honor the Commandments! Tell me about your sabbath observance." Because I guarantee you that he – and I'm not being exclusive; it's always a he – doesn't observe the sabbath beyond attending church on election years. Sabbath is the orphan commandment that Americans pretend doesn't exist. Which is a shame. Most of the other commandments – don't kill or steal or lie and so on – are about how to not be a terrible person. This one is about how to be a healthy person. Worth a try, don't you think?