

## **Sabbath for Every Body**

### **Mark 3:1-6**

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“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” is the fourth of the ten commandments, and it is for every body. It’s not just for a select few, it’s not just for those who can afford to or have the privilege to be able to rest, it’s not just for humans, but it is for every body—animals, trees, bodies of water, land—Sabbath is for all the earth and everything in it.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” is not a divine request, it is not a suggested way to order one’s days, it is not a “if you have time for it, then it really is something you should do.” It is a command. It is a command because Sabbath is not optional. Life depends on the Sabbath—*life for every body depends on the Sabbath*.

Our story today, finds Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Though we are not yet very far along in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is causing quite a stir.

He was baptized by that no good, John the Baptist, who was thankfully now in prison and not out causing any more trouble. Jesus called fishermen and a tax collector to be his followers. He even had been seen sharing a meal with sinners and many other tax collectors. He wouldn’t stop debating specific religious leaders. He has been traveling all around, preaching, teaching, and healing all sorts of people. Jesus just didn’t seem to understand who he was and wasn’t supposed to interact with. So, when Jesus goes to the synagogue on this specific Sabbath day, everyone there knows exactly who he is and what he has been doing and they start watching his every move.

They had seen the person with the withered hand enter too, and they figure that Jesus is probably going to do something about it. Because so far, it seems that he has cured every malady of everyone he has come into contact with even if it is on the sabbath.

Jesus looks around at the people there watching him, and he calls to the person with the withered hand to come and join him in the middle. Then Jesus asks those who are watching a question, “Is it permissible to do good or to do evil on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:8-1 (NRSVue)

This passage of scripture, particularly Jesus' question in this passage, and other passages like this one have been read and interpreted poorly for centuries. Often folks use it to suggest that the Jewish people of Jesus' day were more concerned with what the law said than with caring for their fellow human beings. Passages like this one have been used in harmful ways against Jewish folks, condemning them for things they are not guilty of and using it as justification for anti-semitism.

When Jesus asks the question to those watching him, he's not asking to have some great "Ha! You're wrong!" moment. Any onlooker in that synagogue knew the answer to Jesus' question. Jesus is simply naming the purpose of the Sabbath—wholeness, life, abundance for every body—and inviting those around to remember that the Sabbath is for life and life abundant. He is not asking to accuse or condemn.

It's important to pay attention to the ways in which empire seeps into our mindsets, our speaking or not speaking, our actions or lack thereof, and even the way it seeps into our holy spaces, our places of worship. It's happening all the time and has been for as long as empire has existed.

Like when white women worked and advocated to have the right to vote but they wouldn't do it for black women, because they thought if they worked and advocated for black women too then they wouldn't gain the right to vote.

Or when the "white moderate"—to use the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*—"is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.'"

Or when the statement "Black Lives Matter" is met with a chorus of "well, what about these people or these people or these people."

Or when people flee their own homes because of unimaginable violence and persecution to come here to the United States in search of a better life, and the accusations that they are taking "hardworking Americans' jobs" immediately begin to spew.

Or when we say, we want a specific group of folks to be safe, healthy, and free, and the automatic assumption is that it means we don't want the same for another group.

Empire works so hard to pit us against each other, and it often succeeds. Empire tells us there is only so much to go around, so you better grab it and hold onto it so no one else can have it.

And I think that is why the people watching Jesus in the synagogue stayed silent when he asked, "Is it permissible to do good or to do evil on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" It's not because they didn't know that the purpose of Sabbath is abundance, wholeness, life for every body, but

it's because the empire told them there is only so much to go around, there is not enough for every body.

Jesus is angered and grieved by their silence, but he doesn't angrily confront or condemn them. Instead, he tells the person to stretch out their hand. The person stretches out their hand and their hand is restored.

We are then told that "the Pharisees went out with the Herodians and immediately began to conspire against Jesus, how they might destroy him." This specific group of Pharisees who went out had no official political authority but had gained influence in powerful circles. The Herodians were not a well-defined political party but were most likely wealthy aristocrats who were friends and retainers of Herod. They may not have actually done evil or killed on the Sabbath, but they plotted to and were determined to do so, which is what the empire's lie of scarcity does. It causes people to cling to power, to cling to whatever they have or think they have, however they can even if it means harming or killing. They were scared of Jesus and his actions of abundance and the way they threatened whatever illusion of power they had.

In my Old Testament class in divinity school, we read *The Sabbath* by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel was a Jewish theologian, writer, and activist. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and so many others in the Selma to Montgomery Marches for voting rights for Black folks. Heschel later wrote that when he marched in Selma, his "feet were praying."

His book *The Sabbath* is in part about resisting the empire's scarcity, and instead living into God's abundance. He writes, "The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord."<sup>2</sup>

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We observe Sabbath by resisting the scarcity of empire, and living into the abundant wholeness of the kingdom of God. There is enough, and it is our call as followers of Jesus to work to ensure that Sabbath—wholeness, life, abundance—is possible for every body. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 3.

