

St. Paul's, Concord  
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1 Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 2:23-3:6  
Rev Kate Atkinson

Back in my very early days of job-hunting, on the occasions when I got to the interview stage, I would almost always be asked a question like this: “What would you say your weaknesses are?” And my answer would be that sometimes I worked a little *too* hard; that I sometimes put in a few *too* many hours. In my mid-20s I thought that answer was pretty clever – because what potential boss would be put off by someone with a tendency to go the extra mile? Of course, as the years went by, and *I* ended up being the one doing the interviewing, I soon discovered that *most* applicants, when asked that question, admit to the weakness of being a hard worker. And it's very clear that most people, job-seekers *and* employers, don't really consider it a weakness at all!

In our goal-oriented society, we place a huge value on hard work and productivity. We may pay lip-service to downtime and self-care, but the reality is that we judge ourselves and each other by the time and effort we put into making a success of our lives.

Jesus certainly wasn't opposed to hard work – far from it. There's no reason to doubt his commitment to his early trade as a carpenter, or his desire to contribute as much as possible to the household income. And as an itinerant preacher, teacher, and healer, he spent long hours hard at work and expected the same from his disciples. But Jesus also knew the value of rest. He understood recreation – or “re-creation” – to be a necessary process. God *created* us to be the best we can be – and, in order to do that, we need to *re-create* ourselves on a regular basis. That's why a day of rest features in the Creation story. God spent six days in a whirlwind of productivity, and on the seventh day, God rested.

That model of hard work followed by intentional rest later featured in the Commandments God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai: *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.* (Exodus 20:8-11)

God *commands* us to rest, to devote an entire day to resting – and to recognize both that day and that rest as holy. The sabbath was instituted and consecrated by God as a gift to God's people – and our acceptance of that gift, our obedience to God's command, is not only of benefit to us, it's an act of devotion to God. Not only that, but, just as God called out to young Samuel as he lay on his bed in the temple, God often uses our times of rest to speak to us in new ways.

Unfortunately, God's people have a tendency to overthink our faith. From the years of Jesus' ministry on Earth we have numerous gospel accounts of Jewish leaders nitpicking over matters of the Law. But this wasn't only a first century practice: it began when the Ten Commandments were first received and continued as they were expanded and added to in what we now know as the book of Leviticus. What were originally intended as guidelines for holy and healthy living, became a rigid set of rules to be followed at all costs.

The sabbath law was no exception. Pharisees introduced more and more detailed codicils, defining everything from how heavy a burden could be carried, to how far one could travel from home, plus a whole set of descriptions recorded in the Mishnah (collected oral traditions of the Pharisees from the Second Temple period, 536 BCE-70 CE), relating to activities banned on the sabbath.

That over-zealous legalism is what prompted the Pharisees to confront Jesus and his disciples as they were walking through the field of grain on that long-ago sabbath day. God had commanded that the sabbath should be observed even at harvest time (Exodus 34:21) and this was interpreted to mean that a handful of grain couldn't be plucked and eaten as a convenient meal on the go. But Jesus knows his Scripture! So when the Pharisees berate him he reminds them of a time, around 1,000 years earlier, when David and *his* traveling companions were hungry and they were permitted to eat the "bread of the Presence" – which is holy bread offered as a gift to God and only allowed to be eaten by the priests. (1 Samuel 21:6)

(Actually, although Jesus certainly does know his Scripture, there is a mistake in this account. Jesus refers to Abiathar as the high priest – but, if you look at the passage from 1 Samuel, it was Ahimelech who was high priest at the time. It may have been a slip of the tongue, or just an error in the writing down of the gospel, but biblical scholars have had fun with that one over the years!)

The point Jesus was making, and which he expressed in that line we should all have engraved on our hearts, was that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." (Mark 2:27) In other words, the sabbath was created and given to us by God to serve us; not the other way around. How can we have a day of rest if all we're doing is worrying about whether or not we're following the rules? And surely it's not possible to gain the full benefit of sabbath if we can't even eat. It's kind of difficult to feel rested and restored when your stomach is growling!

The gospel goes on to describe an encounter between Jesus and a man in the synagogue. The man had a "withered hand" – which may have meant it was paralyzed, or deformed, or affected by an injury that healed badly. Whatever the cause, the man's condition would have prevented him from working and supporting his family.

And, by the way, it's very difficult to have a sabbath – as an intentional time of rest – if it isn't preceded by an intentional time of work. People who aren't able to work often struggle to experience the benefits of rest. I remember a period of time when we were living in California and Michael was unemployed. It simply wasn't possible for him to take time to relax and find restoration – because he felt as though he had to spend every available minute looking for a job. The abundant life that God wants for us all includes the fulfillment of our potential as contributing members of our communities, as well as the satisfaction of good work *and* good rest. So Jesus knew, when he met the man with the withered hand, that his condition wasn't only robbing him of his usefulness and his dignity, it was also depriving him of that abundant life.

But the Pharisees in the story saw the afflicted man in a completely different way: as a means to trick Jesus into breaking another sabbath law. Healing involves work; work is prohibited on the sabbath; therefore healing is prohibited on the sabbath (unless it's a case of life or death – which this clearly was not). So they were watching Jesus carefully to see what he would do.

What Jesus did was to bring the man front and center and ask the Pharisees the question: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4) And their refusal to answer filled him with righteous indignation. It makes Jesus mad when people put their own self-interest ahead of God’s desires – especially when it’s at the cost of another human being.

So Jesus heals the man. He restores his hand; he restores his ability to work and contribute to his family and his community; he restores his dignity; and he gives him the abundant life he was missing out on – a life that includes a time of sabbath rest. Jesus gives the man the power to enter a new cycle of work and rest, work and rest, productivity and recreation, productivity and *re-creation*.

And what about us? Is there a day of the week that you consider to be your sabbath? For me it’s Friday – but I have a feeling I’m about as good at observing a true sabbath on my day off as you are on yours! So what can we do to ensure that we experience sabbath in all its fullness?

There will always be chores and tasks that need to be done – and every one of us will always put time and effort into doing them. There’s nothing wrong with that; it’s part of the pattern of work and rest, productivity and recreation that God modeled for us. But we must also allow ourselves to be unproductive, to do something we enjoy, or simply do nothing at all, without feeling guilty! We can read a book for pleasure; we can put our cell-phone away; we can go for a walk; we can take a nap; we can spend time with someone we love – and we can do any of those things in the full knowledge that we’re doing exactly what God wants us to do. *And* we can do those things in the full expectation that God will take the opportunity to speak to us in a new and wondrous way.

“Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy,” God says. (Exodus 20:8) I made this day for you, I blessed it for you and I have taught you through my Son that it is there for you to use for your benefit and the benefit of others. Because when you honor the sabbath, God says, you honor me.