## Mark 2:23-3:6

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

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

I think we all know this, but many studies have analyzed and quantified it for us. Social networking use is up in this country and that has led to an increase in anxiety and fear. According to a Pew survey conducted in 2015, 65% of adults in the United States use social networking sites on their computers and phones. That's a nearly tenfold jump in the past decade. Much of the public's news consumption occurs on these digital platforms. That means most of us have access to social media and breaking news 24 hours a day, exposing us to information, distressing news and traumatic events and the reactions of others to these things at a phenomenal rate compared to our parents and grandparents. They had to wait for the nightly news or the evening newspaper to get their information, which came in measured doses. We, however, just need one click to get immediate news overload on whatever is going on around the world.

This presents us with a new and challenging phenomenon. On any given day, this almost constant exposure can make us feel like the world is falling apart. Experts tell us that every time we experience or hear about a traumatic event, we go into stress mode. Our physiology is triggered to release stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Recurring exposure to traumatic events stresses the body over and over again until our adrenal glads become fatigued. Suzanne Babbel, a psychotherapist specializing in trauma recovery, tells us that adrenal fatigue can lead to lack of restful sleep, being tired in the morning, anxiety and depression, as well as a multitude of other symptoms. Sound familiar?

So what's a modern news consumer to do? Babbel says, "One way of coping with this continual exposure is not getting overloaded with the news and pacing yourself with your consumption. Everyone has a different limit, and you have to find out what your limit is," Also, she says, it can be helpful to use stress management techniques such as exercise, spending time with friends and family and relaxation tools such as meditation, deep breathing and yoga.

I happen to think it's important to keep up with what's going on in the world. It's good to know about natural disasters like earthquakes and fires and hurricanes and erupting volcanoes, because that connects us to people near us and far away. Keeping up with politics makes us informed voters. Knowing what our neighbors experience on a daily basis helps us figure out how to reach out to them with care and support. It's also essential that we step back on a regular basis to recharge our compassion batteries, so we don't burn out while we still can find joy in the people and events around us.

They may not use this terminology, but what Babbel and other experts are recommending for us, in order to preserve our health and sanity, is that we find time for sabbatical: time of rest and refreshment away from the anxiety-provoking energy crackling around us. The concept of sabbatical, of course, comes from the biblical establishment of the sabbath. Scripture tells us that God worked God's creative power for six days, then rested on the seventh. The book of Deuteronomy makes it clear that, “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.” It's one of many rules in the Hebrew faith, one that is there for a good reason. For the most part, Jesus was a faithful observer of the sabbath. He and his disciples worked hard and their travel by foot from town to town left them exhausted at times. It was good to take a day for rest, for worship and for time with friends. But Jesus knew the deeper meaning inherent in the idea of sabbath and he knew the danger of blind adherence to rules without understanding why they came about in the first place. The Pharisees already had it out for Jesus. They didn't trust him. They were rule-keepers and felt Jesus was a challenge to the laws that gave their faith structure. So, when Jesus' disciples gleaned grain in the fields on the sabbath day and Jesus healed a man with a withered hand, also on the sabbath and in the synagogue, the Pharisees thought they had him dead to rights. The leaders demanded to know why Jesus and his disciples were going against what was lawful, and why they were doing it so blatantly, for all around them to see. It must have felt like Jesus was mocking what was of great importance to the Pharisees, and they were outraged. The Pharisees went out to find allies in their quest to silence Jesus.

But, as a rabbi and a reformer, Jesus knew that the sabbath was all about healing, restoration and hope. The whole point of the sabbath was to foster healthy forms of life among God's people. Jesus saw a teachable moment on that sabbath day, so he allowed his disciples to pick grain in order to make bread, so they would have something to eat and to share with others. When Jesus entered the synagogue and saw a man with a shriveled hand, he knew that healing him would give him a better quality of life, perhaps making it easier for the man to provide for his family. Jesus was not desecrating the sabbath; he was fulfilling it by celebrating the healing power of God and God's desire for wholeness for all God's people.

Jesus was also pointing out the danger of blind adherence to rules for the sake of rule-keeping. For rules can become hollow directives devoid of meaning if we let them. All religions face the temptation and danger of making idols of rules and requiring people to follow them in order to keep their good standing in the community. That kind of idolatry is what makes many dislike and distrust organized religion and I don't blame them. Keeping sabbath can become drudgery if we see it as a burden. But Jesus reminds us that the sabbath is made for us and not vice versa. God gives us sabbath as a gift. Sabbath keeping is for restoration, for experiencing the deep, abiding goodness of God and the world that God has made. It is the invitation to step into the loving embrace of God and remember our identities as beloved children of God. Sabbath is the time to bask in the love of God, not just for us but for all people. Sabbath not only gives us permission to delight in all that God has made, it recharges our spiritual batteries, so we can go out into a world in which God's people have acted to heighten anxiety, threaten the well-being of creation, exclude and condemn those we fear and trample upon the rights of the vulnerable.

As a long-time pastor, I believe sabbath happens here in worship, where we share the word and a meal and Jesus' love for one another. I hope that's why you come to church on Sundays – not because you *have* to, but because you *get* to. The sabbath was made for us: for love and delight and renewal. You don't have to come here to secure your salvation, for that has already happened. Jesus has died and been raised so you and I may have life in him forever. We get to come here each week to celebrate that reality. I also believe that sabbath doesn't only happen in church. It can happen around the dinner table or on a hike in the woods or reading a good book.

But be careful. Keeping the sabbath might make you less a follower of rules and more a follower of Jesus and his counter-cultural ways. It may give you the respite you need to listen less to ceaseless chatter and more for the voice of someone who needs you.

“Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.” Listen. God's voice doesn't convey judgment or punishment, but is brimming with invitation and love, God's arms open wide to embrace us on the day the Lord has made – for us.

*Amen.*

*Pentecost 2B*

*June 3, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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