

Advent Lutheran Church
Honoring the Sabbath
February 2, 2025
Luke 6:1-16

From before the time of Jesus to the present there have been countless controversies surrounding the Sabbath. And, I imagine such quarrels will continue long after all of us have passed from this life to the next.

I wonder how many of them arose because of what was happening in the wider culture at that point in time.

While the youngest among us probably have no idea what it is like to live in a world that provides a structure to support Sabbath keeping, those of us beyond a certain age remember.

We remember “blue laws.” These laws were designed to keep many businesses operational a maximum of six days a week.

In some places blue laws meant many businesses had to be closed on Sunday. Here in Texas in the 1960s, 70s, and early 80’s the blue laws kept businesses from selling any of our 42 prohibited items on consecutive weekend days. Put simply, businesses were closed on either Saturday or Sunday if they sold things like clothing, jewelry, home appliances, automotive parts, or sporting goods . . . or basically, most of the things you’d want to go shopping for.

While these wide-ranging laws were repealed 40 years ago, two still remain: automotive dealerships cannot open on consecutive weekend days and you cannot buy liquor on Sundays.

I’m not here today to suggest we return to the life in Texas in the way it was 50 years ago. I’m also not here to suggest that it was a morally superior or morally inferior time compared to the present. Instead, I share this trip down memory lane to encourage you to think for a moment about how your view of Sabbath has been shaped by and perhaps even now continues to be shaped by the dominant culture.

For those who grew up with or spent some of your adult life with broad blue laws in place, I wonder how they impacted you. Did they lead to more time devoted to family and faith or did they simply keep you out of certain stores one day a week?

Shifting back to our Gospel lesson, let me frame all that follows with quote by the Rev. Dr. Wesley Allen – a professor of preaching just a few miles down the road at Perkins School of Theology at SMU. He writes:

Preaching on ancient Sabbath controversies in the Gospels is no easy task, and in this lection we have two!¹

Dr. Allen goes on to say that there are two problems with trying to preach on these specific Sabbath controversies today. The first is about history and the second about irrelevance.

Historically, the church has often mischaracterized the Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus’s behavior in the passage by labeling them as legalistic Pharisees. Sadly, this has sometimes led to antisemitic portrayals or dismissive commentary suggesting that the controversies are their issues rather than our own.

Irrelevance is always a concern sermonically. I can hardly expect you to pay attention if I speak about matters that lack relevance. Today many people have simply never considered Sabbath keeping. This is true however we define Sabbath.

It is certainly true when we think of it in the way most folks have for thousands of years – Friday evening until Saturday evening. And, it’s also true even if we understand Sabbath as a time we set aside each week to rest from our work.²

So, before I address the controversies, I need to make a case for honoring or keeping the Sabbath. Theologically, it is an easy case to make.

¹ O. Wesley Allen, Jr. “Commentary on Luke 6:1-16”, January 29, 2017, available from <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/healing-on-the-sabbath/commentary-on-luke-61-16-2>

² Ibid.

Our Scriptures begin with the story of God doing the work of creating. In the first creation account, which begins with the first verse of the first chapter of Genesis, God set about the work of creating the heavens and the earth. And after six days of creating, he rested on the seventh day. God established a Sabbath pattern. God used Godself to model the behavior he intends for humanity.³

Then, just a bit further into Scripture we learn exactly what this looks like in the 10 Commandments.⁴ As good Lutherans we all remember the third commandment: keep the Sabbath holy.

Perhaps you recall in Exodus 20 when the commandment to observe the Sabbath was received it came with some commentary. Those words reconnect us to the first creation story and remind us that God worked for six days then rested on the seventh.⁵

And maybe you remember that the commentary about this commandment was different when it was introduced in Deuteronomy 5. There, the Sabbath keeping commandment is linked to the memory of being an enslaved people in Egypt. This was an invitation for them to remember how they were treated and how the conditions became worse and worse and required to make more and more bricks. And, it is a reminder that while slaves cannot take a day off, free people can.

Keeping the Sabbath is one of the 10 commandments. As group these are not suggestions; they are expectations for those of us who seek to live God honoring lives.

God modeled Sabbath. God invites us to keep the Sabbath. And Sabbath is a reminder that we belong to God and are made in God's image.

³ Genesis 1:1-2:3

⁴ Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21.

⁵ Exodus 20:8-11.

We need to set aside time to rest and to reconnect with our Creator. We need to cease working as a reminder that we are free people and that we are God's people.

And, we need to know that Sabbath keeping can take many forms. What matters most is not that we observe Sabbath on a specific day of the week or for a full 24-hour period of time, but rather that we do so regularly and purposefully.

Now that we are on the same page about the Sabbath in general, we are ready to consider the two specific controversies named in today's Gospel lesson.

The first controversy arises when Jesus' disciples do something that is technically wrong, at least according to the Sabbath practices – think blue laws – of the early first century. They were not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath to prepare meals, which included the work of threshing grain.

Jesus explains that his disciples have precedent for their behavior in the form of David aka King David. He reminds them of a story they know, accept, and approve of that went far beyond what the disciples just did.

The second controversy involves Jesus' own actions. He heals a man's hand on the Sabbath. Healing is work and work isn't supposed to take place on the Sabbath.

Here Jesus is much more direct. He tells the people he knows set him up that it's clear to him that doing good rather than doing evil is what the Sabbath is all about. Further, saving life rather than destroying it is always the right choice.

Through these two encounters, Jesus was teaching his early followers and is teaching us that the humanly constructed rules for Sabbath keeping can be broken. All such rules have exceptions. But, more importantly, he is inviting us to Sabbath keeping that is guided by love rather than by cultural or generational expectations.

What does this all mean for us?

Just do it. It means we keep the Sabbath, but don't get caught up in the rules or rubrics. We stay focused on who we are and whose we are.

There are many Sabbath practices you might adopt, including regular worship attendance here at Advent. For some, it means unplugging from a near constant connection to work or even setting aside your cell phone. For others, it means making time for family – your family, your family of choice, and your church family.

Sabbath is countercultural and it is part of who we are and what we do. The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, one of the most widely respected Old Testament scholars of my lifetime, explains:

We used to sing the hymn "Take Time to Be Holy." But perhaps we should be singing, "Take time to be human." Or finally, "Take time." Sabbath is taking time . . . time to be holy . . . time to be human."⁶

Siblings in Christ, during this unusually busy and stressful season and in all seasons of life, I invite you to honor the Sabbath.

Amen.

⁶ Walter Brueggeman. *Sabbath as Resistance, Saying No to the Culture of Now*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p.88.