

The modern church, which is US, doesn't really care much about keeping the Sabbath anymore. This controversy between the Jewish authorities and Jesus seems irrelevant. Especially after the week we just lived through, it seems as if we should throw this reading out the window and instead of talking about Sabbath I should be preaching on Amos where God says, "I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... (that's church folks!)

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Or I should preach on Exodus where we hear God saying: "You shall not oppress the 'resident alien' or 'refugee' or 'immigrant' for you were refugees yourselves once, in the land of Egypt." Every American, other than Native Americans are descendants of immigrants. Our ancestors were all aliens or refugees or immigrants once.

Or I should preach on the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus himself provides a litmus test for entrance into God's kingdom. Jesus says, 'At the last judgment, the Son of Man will say to the people, "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me." And the people will say, "When were you a stranger and we did not take care of you?" And he will say, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."'

After a week like we just lived, I'd be happy to preach on any of those and many other passages we are given to guide our lives. At the Bishop's convocation that I attended this past week, one of our preachers, Kim Latterall, associate to the bishop said, "Within your congregations are people who want you to be more bold in proclaiming the intersection of scripture with the events of the day and there are people who want you to be less bold in that proclamation. No one ever said it would be easy to lead the church in our times."

So, this week we have a passage from Luke and I trust that the Holy Spirit is here among us giving us the word we need to hear to sustain us even in these times and prepare us for whatever lies ahead.

In the past, this reading of Jesus and the disciples picking grain, Jesus healing in the temple on the Sabbath, this has been misused to bash Judaism. But, this controversy between Jesus and the legal experts and Pharisees is not an argument between Christians and Jews. It's an argument within Judaism about how that faith will function in a new reality. Given that Rome is in charge, how will Jews act? What will they do to remain Jewish? How will they live since the Roman government restricts their actions?

The Pharisees were sincere in their care for the people and how they would worship and live as Jews under an oppressive government that wanted them to blend in with all the other religions. The Pharisees were trying to figure out how Jews could remain faithful in a hostile world.

The legal experts and Pharisees' answer is to live the letter of the law. Make your life distinctly Jewish by fulfilling every aspect of the law including not doing any work of any kind of the Sabbath, even if it meant not eating, even if it meant leaving a suffering man to his misery.

But, that's not Jesus' way. Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter and says that the law is made for humans not humans for the law. The Sabbath is made for humanity not humanity for the Sabbath. Jesus too wants the people to remain faithful to God and their identity as God's people. But, for Jesus that identity is shaped not by following the letter of the law. Instead, it's shaped by love. Extreme love. Costly love. Whenever any law comes into conflict with the law of love, Jesus shows us the way to love.

Jesus isn't throwing out the commandment to observe the Sabbath, he's putting it in its proper perspective. Jesus shows the greatest concern for the law by insisting that we not miss the intent of the law; Jesus wants us to see that the law is a gift.

When you think about it rules always reveal the point! Rules or commandments show us the point behind what we are doing. The point behind a game is revealed in its rules. So, the rules of musical chairs eliminate one person at a time until there is only one chair left, just enough for the one person; the winner. The rules of Musical Chairs reveal that the point is that one person and only one person can win.

Traffic rules reveal that they're about safety, mostly. A red light is a rule that says, stop here so that other people can go and then you'll get your turn, no one will hit each other or a pedestrian and everyone will be safe. The point is creating a world where everyone can safely function because they can trust that others are following the rules too.

Some rules are meant to make our life together more kind, more gracious and loving. So we say please and thank you. We let others go first in line. We hold doors for people. These rules are unwritten but passed down from generation to generation because the point is that our life together can be life-giving and kind. The world can be generous and respectful if we follow the rules of being polite. My husband calls this 'garden variety politeness'. It's the simple choice to interact with one another with kindness.

By cutting to the heart of the matter, Jesus makes clear that the intent of the commandment to observe the Sabbath is to give life. The point of the Sabbath rule is that God's creation is intended to run according to God's economy where there is plenty for everyone.

When we live according to God's rules we see that Sabbath is about trusting God. It's understanding that God is God and we are not God. We can rest. The world will go on even if we take one day a week to breathe, to play, to worship God, to laugh and eat with those we love. God WILL provide. Life is not pie where if you have enough and you have enough there might not be enough for me. In God's economy, there is plenty for everyone.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and Jesus says the law is made for humans not humans for the law. The Sabbath is made for humanity not humanity for the law. Jesus just like the Pharisees wants the people to remain faithful to God and their identity as God's people. But, for Jesus that identity is shaped not by following the letter of the law. Instead, it's shaped by love. Extreme love. For Jesus, whenever any law comes into conflict with the law of love, Jesus shows us the way to love.

Jesus calls us to keep the commandments, all of them because God is God and we are not. But, most of all we are to keep the commandment to love. Sabbath rest puts everything in perspective. It reveals the point of it all. Sabbath gives us time, and rest and fellowship with people who can help us to see what is right, what is important, what is life-giving. Sabbath time, where we hear God's word, we're in relationship with God's people; reorients us to God's economy where all life is holy.

Maybe that's why our culture, even Christians within the culture have so easily given up Sabbath. Because it reorients us. It's easier to go along with the culture than to try to swim upstream. So, we justify ourselves by saying we're not bound by the letter of the law. Which is true! But, we've also relinquished the point of the law – the life-giving, sustenance of the law which keeps us in right relationship with God, with humanity, with creation and with ourselves.

Turns out this reading really is a lens through which to see the events of the week. Turns out when we look at all of life through the lens of Jesus' commands to love God and love our neighbor things become more clear. Not easy necessarily. But, clear!

This past week may have been a wild ride. But, the ride's not over. It's just begun. As disciples of Christ we're in it for the long haul. If we want to have a chance at loving God and loving neighbor faithfully in this world, we are going to have to live within God's economy, not fight against it.

Sabbath time together is the only place we're reminded that all life is holy and that as people of God we are commanded by the law of love to care for everyone but especially those who can't speak for themselves: the vulnerable, the weak and marginalized, whoever that may be in any situation, no matter how uncomfortable or costly that love may be for us personally or as a congregation.

As Father James Martin says, “Jesus himself speaks from the Gospels. It is Christ whom we turn away when we build walls. It is Christ whom we reject when we slash quotas for refugees. It is Christ whom we are killing, by letting them die in poverty and war rather than opening our doors.” That is the law of love that supersedes all other law.

We come to the table of grace together to be shaped by God’s forgiveness and love into the people who can love in this costly, demanding way. Thanks be to God for that gift, for the gift of this community of faith. Amen.