

January 29, 2017

Anything But Neatly Organized

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Luke 6:1-11

[The Question about the Sabbath]

One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ² But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ³ Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" ⁵ Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

[The Man with a Withered Hand]

⁶ On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸ Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. ⁹ Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰ After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Four years into my ministry career I got fired. Carl was a full-time graduate student. We had a one-year-old baby. We lost our health insurance. It was pretty scary and entirely my fault. I was a Baptist campus minister at a huge state university. I loved students. I still love students. The work was wonderful. It was the job that was so hard that became impossible.

We got a new state Baptist director who prioritized *evangelism* in a particular way. Every job description in the state convention had a *personal evangelism requirement* attached to it. In my very shaky 28-year-old voice, I said, "No." I wouldn't promise to meet a weekly quota of twelve new contacts. To capture twelve different students, faculty or staff per week and hold them down long enough to force-feed them *The Roman Road to Salvation* or *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Now obviously, that is MY interpretation of the new mandate, not my boss's. *But the twelve new contacts a week was a real number.* Nevertheless.

I didn't know until years later what a stroke of luck – or divine providence! – being fired was: to learn so early and so clearly the difference between employment and

vocation, between a job and a calling. And, in my case, between religion. . . and faith. I have nothing against *The Roman Road* or *Four Spiritual Laws*. They are formulas for sharing the gospel of Jesus in ten minutes or less. Some people share them with strangers as naturally, as un-offensively, as you please.

I must be severely handicapped, in that it seems like it's taking me a lifetime to share the gospel of Jesus with others. . . that I may not even live long enough to finish the task. But it wasn't the formulas that upset me so much; it was the quotas. Because see, I'm one of the *rules* people. And for me to agree to the new rules was, for me, to promise to lie on my reports, because I was not going to do the work to meet those quotas.

I tried to negotiate another way to fulfill the spirit of the requirement: *relationship evangelism*, I called it – long-term relationships with non-believing students interested in Christian faith. And then count the contact hours. Nope. They wanted the numbers. There were many tears, and 1992 was a very lean summer for our little family. In the fall Carl got a job at the Business School, and we thought we were in high cotton!

Rules are necessary for order and progress. But inevitably, rules take on the character of whoever enforces them. Ever since the Babylonians kicked the Jews out of Israel around 650 BCE, two rules were especially important in Judaism. Do you know which ones? – Sabbath and food laws. Why? Because you don't need Temple to keep these two.

Sundown on Friday happened in Babylon, happens in every corner of the earth. It's entirely possible to do no work whatsoever, just to worship and rest that one day a week. And food laws can also be kept, though not without some adjustment maybe, wherever a person finds himself or herself. No hooved animals, no shellfish or reptiles, no meat touching dairy. It's why we have double sinks, you know – not so we can wash and rinse. No matter where a Jew found himself, he could find other Jews by looking around and seeing who kept Sabbath and who kept food laws.

These rules were identity-critical. By them, Israel remained Israel, no matter where she was scattered on the earth. Were Sabbath rules negotiable? Of course. If your donkey fell into a deep ditch on Saturday, you could do the work necessary to get him, so as not to lose your livelihood. If your child fell into a well, she wasn't required to tread water until sundown. You could pull her out; the law wasn't heartless. God rested on the seventh day, making sabbath theologically sound. Animals and workers needed to rest to keep working, making sabbath practically sound, too.

So why does Jesus come along and mess up a perfectly good system? Giving Jewish rule-keepers fits. He's breaking Sabbath rules for no good reason as far as they can see. Now hold that for a second, because we also need to talk about the first-century church Luke was writing to: congregations of Jews and Gentiles together, trying to figure out how to be *the one body of Christ*, when they are so different in every other way. This *Sabbath* discussion is not only about *Sabbath* – it's also about *religion*, about the rules of religion that are sometimes so smoothly presented *as God's will*, rather than *tools for accomplishing* God's will. Tools that can be used effectively. Tools than

can also be abused, like when my husband tried to use a bike tire pump on the car. Luke needs us to figure out how Sabbath can be expanded and applied to the church we live in now.

Back to the story. In Luke 6:6-11, the Pharisees came to synagogue, locked and loaded to trap Jesus. This is always a fun day at church – when folks show up looking for a fight. What’s interesting here: Jesus also arrives with his gloves on. The crippled man is just minding his own business when Jesus calls him up front. Please note: his ailment is NOT an emergency, which any Jew – ANY JEW – would have jumped to help with, without criticism from others. Jesus calls the man up and the Pharisees are thrilled. They have no idea they’re being played.

Then Jesus says, to everyone and no one in particular, “*I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or destroy it?*” Then he healed the man. The Pharisees were enraged, Luke says, and began to discuss what they might do to Jesus – thereby answering Jesus’ question, though not to his face.

I get why they are upset. Jesus is breaking rules for no good reason that they can see. He just as easily could have healed the man on Friday or Sunday, right? But no, he has this NEED to cause trouble. Why? What do YOU make of it? And what does it have to do with us, because we really don’t care about the Old Testament Sabbath rules, do we? Anyone eating out today? Doing laundry? Homework? Professors getting ready for class?

By 85 CE, when Luke wrote, it wasn’t just about Sabbath. By then half or more of the church were Gentiles, no doubt going out for falafel and hummus after worship. Rather, I suspect it was about religion itself, how Christian faith was becoming one, and therefore in danger of the same danger every religion always faces. When the ways and rules slip in and take root. And become confused with faith itself. So that *keeping Sabbath a certain way equals being a follower of Jesus*. A narrative that Jesus interrupts by standing up in the middle of worship to heal a man with a withered hand and to announce from the midst of the church at worship, *I am Lord of the Sabbath*. With equal emphasis on each word.

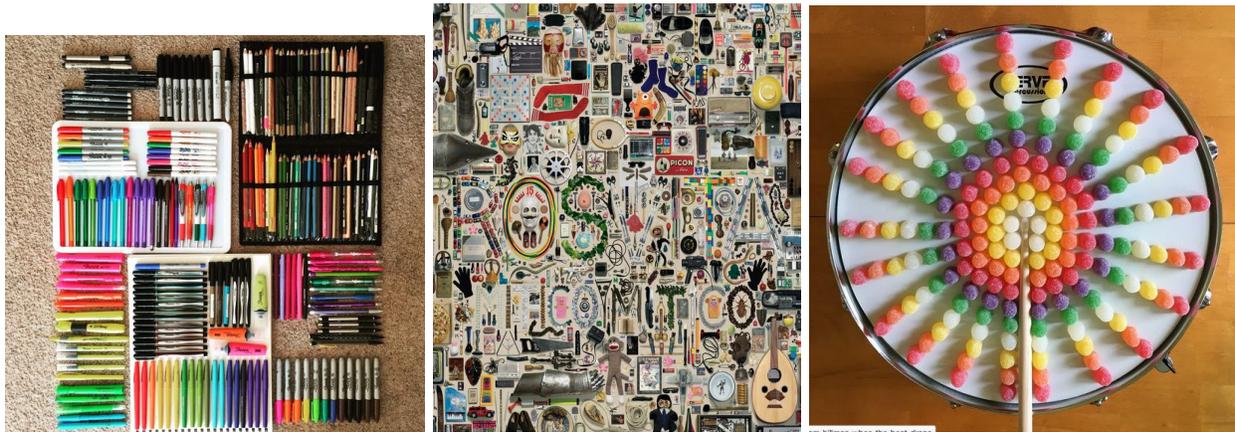
I AM LORD OF THE SABBATH.

Whatever else we might negotiate and debate, all of it is subject to, less than, the lordship of Christ. The Sabbath itself is something less. What else might we add to the list? The Bible? The Bible itself is something less than the lordship of Christ, a tool for knowing him but not the same as knowing him. I see and hear Jesus from the center of religion itself – the middle of worship at the synagogue, which we the church associate with the moment we are in here and now – pushing hard against religious people’s understanding and use of rules for being faithful.

My Lordship is not a point of negotiation. You’ll have me – or not – but you will not force me into the contour of whatever religion makes you feel safest. Or most comfortable.

Seems to me, rules serve one of two purposes, depending on who is enforcing them. For one group, the purpose of rules is following the rules. This is the group where I most naturally fit.

I want to show you an art blog I follow on Tumblr. It's called, "Things organized neatly." [<http://thingsorganizedneatly.tumblr.com/>] A photographer spends hours arranging objects in certain layouts and takes pictures of them. It has no other purpose than visual pleasure.



Who among you finds this viscerally soothing? Who thinks it's kind of a stupid waste of time? Confessionally, I'd love my whole life to work like this looks: my house, job, everything.

But you do see how, for that to work, nothing can ever move? And in what circumstance does nothing ever move? Death. I'd have to be dead, for my life to look like this. And the gospel which has saved us, and which we preach, isn't a gospel of death. Quite the opposite. We preach the death of death. Or life! Life everlasting! Life is constantly moving, therefore, inevitably messy. And Life Everlasting is anything but neatly organized.

The Sabbath, Jesus says, is for life! And not just for saving-life-from-the-brink-of-death kind of life, pulling-the-child-out-of-the-well or the-donkey-from-the-ditch. But life on all the other ordinary days and years of life we have to walk through. It seems to me that by the Christ event, we have inherited a reality in which we are to pump time and space full of as much life as we can: for ourselves, for one another, for the strangers around us.

And that includes worship and rest – two life-giving tools at our disposal. But NOT ends in themselves. We do not worship in order to say we have worshipped. We worship to be healed, to regroup and to receive our orders for another tour of duty in the field and at the front. We don't rest to justify buying new pajamas. We rest to be strong and fit for whatever he asks of us.

And when I write it down like this, it's so neat, so clear. But then, when I try to go do it, it's so messy, so unorganized. It's useful, helpful, comforting, encouraging, and even a little exciting, to realize this is exactly how Jesus promised and means for it to be.