

Unbreaking the Sabbath

Luke 6:1-11

A couple of years back, I got speaking to the woman cutting my hair at the barbers'. It came up that I was a Minister, so we got to chatting about her experiences of church. She'd lived in different parts of the Highlands and Islands throughout her life.

She told me about a time that she was driving her car one Sunday, and it broke down. Somebody came to sort her out and get her back on the road. But some time after this incident, she was telling a church elder about it. He said, 'I wouldn't have helped you - it was a Sabbath day. You shouldn't have been driving around, and it was wrong to make someone work by coming to sort your car.'

What do you think, in God's eyes, this church elder... Was right about? Was wrong about?

When I read Luke 6:1-11, I conclude that this church elder got it *all* wrong. And as we have a look at what Jesus said and did, and how some religious people responded to Him, we'll find out why.

Luke is telling us a *third* episode of Jesus getting into controversy as He set about His mission. First we saw Him welcoming socially and physically excluded people, and claiming and demonstrating He could forgive sins. Then we saw Him eating and drinking with people that everyone else called sinners, saying that people who know they're sinners are the ones He's come to invite home with God.

And now, with the Pharisees and teachers of the law paying more and more attention to this upstart, Jesus is getting into hot water over the very sacred and treasured Jewish day of 'Sabbath.' In this passage, the word 'Sabbath' is used 6 times, and the words 'lawful' or 'unlawful' 3 times. It's clear what the issue is we're dealing with here. What's right and wrong to do on the Sabbath?

Here's why the Sabbath mattered so much to the Jews, with whom Jesus spent His life. It wasn't just a special day to have a worship service and to take some rest. It was one of *the* identity markers that set them apart as people who belonged to God and were faithful to Him.

Throughout the history of God setting people apart to belong to Him, He has given them a sign that marks the covenant between Him and them - like a ring for two married people. Here's what God said in Exodus 31:12-17 when He talked to Israel about having a Sabbath day in the week:

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.

The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites for ever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.

You can see why the Jews took this day so seriously. God had made it really clear to them how important this day was for marking His commitment to them, and for them marking their commitment to Him. Like a marriage, to be separated from this commitment involved death. And like a marriage, expressing faithfulness was vital. God told the Jews, you express faithfulness to me by observing the Sabbath like this.

But now, in vv.1-5, Jesus sets the cat among the pigeons with what He says and what His disciples do. His disciples are picking corn as they walk through a field. The Pharisees complain that that's unlawful on the Sabbath. Actually, that was a debatable point.

Jesus doesn't go down the road of a theological debate with them, though. True, He starts by questioning if they've read and understood their Old Testament Scripture as well as He has in vv.3-4. But He presses right on to say in v.5, 'The Son of Man (that's Jesus referring to Himself) is *Lord of the Sabbath.*'

Here's Jesus making another outrageous claim that got people gasping. He's saying, 'The Sabbath is not the identity marker for being faithful to God now. I am. I am more significant than the Sabbath, and what I say is fitting for the Sabbath, is fitting for the Sabbath.' Jesus claims, once again, the authority that only God has.

In Mark's description of this encounter, Jesus adds this in Mark 2:27 - 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.' It's a reminder, in just a handful of words, of why the Sabbath mattered so much to *God*. He gave it to us, *for our benefit*.

The Creator God doesn't need to rest. He's God, for goodness' sake. But He modelled rest to us human beings, and called His most treasured creations to follow His pattern, *for our sake*. God gave us a day set aside each week for two linked purposes. To worship Him. And to be rested and restored.

In worshipping God, we find ourselves being restored to fullness and wholeness. And our experiences of rest and engaging in the things that restore us lead us to worship Him. Having a day set aside each week to celebrate these things together as a community matters to God, because *we* matter to God. Our need for being released and restored matters to Him.

So, the spirit of God's law - the purpose for which it was given - trumps the letter of God's law and how it gets used by people like a weapon. Meeting human need trumps strict rule keeping. *Always*.

Jesus lives that out by encouraging His disciples to meet their hunger by eating the corn they were entitled to pick from that field. And He points to David doing the same thing back in the Old Testament. He's referring to an incident you can read about in 1 Samuel 21, when David and his band of followers were on the move and really hungry.

David took for them some food which, by the letter of the law, they were not allowed to eat - it was set aside for priests only. But the spirit of God's law has always been releasing and restoring human beings. They were hungry. That was the only food there was. So they ate it.

That's the first reason that this church elder got it all wrong with the hairdresser with the broken car. Jesus said and showed really clearly in this passage that meeting human need trumps strict rule keeping. *Always*.

As well as teaching that little lesson, Jesus is also building up His claim to authority. Jesus is like David. He is God's chosen leader who will decide what is right on the Sabbath (and everything else) for the sake of the people following and depending on Him. *More* than David, Jesus is a King of authority who gets to say what's right and wrong on God's day of rest and worship.

Is Jesus telling us to ditch the Sabbath?

Let's remind ourselves the purpose for which God gave human beings a Sabbath day - to worship Him, and to be rested and restored. And this mattered to Jesus very much. We've read a lot already in Luke's gospel about Jesus and the Sabbath. He would be at the synagogue. He taught there, and He worshipped there, week by week. Worshipping God together with the family who belongs to God was a central part of Jesus' life.

And as for resting and being restored, we've seen how that matters plenty to Jesus. Rest and restoration for Himself - in finding quiet spaces and times to be alone or with just His close friends. And rest and restoration for others, too. So when people in need meet Him on the Sabbath, as a good many have now since chapter four, He meets their need.

So no, Jesus is not teaching us to ditch the Sabbath. There is no truth to the idea that with His coming, the whole idea of a special day of rest and worship goes out the window. It mattered to Jesus, and so we should value and treasure it too.

For Jews, Sabbath was sundown on Friday through to sundown on Saturday. For centuries, Jesus' followers have named Sunday their 'Sabbath', marking the day that Jesus rose from death and changed everything for us forever. It's one way that we mark that Jesus defines the Sabbath, not the other way round. He has *claimed* the authority to be 'Lord of the Sabbath' in vv.1-5. And in vv.6-10, we see Him *demonstrate* that authority.

In vv.6-7 we read about the Pharisees lying in wait for Jesus. They see this man with a shrivelled hand in the synagogue. And they watch Jesus closely to see if He's going to be true to form and heal the man - on the *Sabbath*, of all things!

The word 'watched' in Greek has the idea of 'spying on,' 'to watch out of the corner of one's eye.' We're to understand that they are coming to observe Jesus with a sneaky, catch-you-out attitude. They want to sit back quietly until they spot Jesus breaking a rule, then take great pleasure in condemning Him when He does. Sadly, I fear that reminds a number of us of experiences of church in the past.

But Jesus isn't having this. He is *not* going to play their game. He isn't going to hold back from healing this guy, even though actually, his condition isn't so

serious it couldn't wait another day to be healed, which would avoid Jesus getting into trouble or causing a scene. And Jesus isn't going to quietly heal the guy while they're not watching so He can show compassion but leave the Pharisees no proof to work with.

Jesus is *not* hiding. He does what He usually does in these scenes in the gospels - He names the elephant in the room, and gets every pair of eyes and ears to pay attention. He makes things really public, really in-your-face, and He confronts His snide accusers up front. v.8 says that Jesus knew the thoughts of these Pharisees, and He has the man get up in front of *everyone*.

Then Jesus asks a question, directly challenging His accusers, and directly addressing the question of what is right and wrong to do on the Sabbath. 'I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?'

Mark makes a point in his version in Mark 3 of noting that 'they remained silent.' No wonder. Jesus looks at the question of what's appropriate to the Sabbath from a *relational* viewpoint - what blesses people, and what blesses God. His opponents are looking at it in terms of *technicalities* - what makes people correct or incorrect. They can't answer the relational question, because it was never their motive.

Silence descends also because Jesus hasn't really given them the option to disagree with Him. This is not a neutral question. 'Which is lawful - to do good or evil, save life or destroy it?' 'Hmmm... I'll go for... evil, I think. Destroying life, yes, that sounds right.' Not really an option, is it? But then, of course, they can't say: 'Do good! Save life!' Not if they want to disagree with Jesus.

And that's the bottom line. They *want* to disagree with Jesus, not learn from Him. They want to catch Him out and find reasons not to bow the knee to Him, not stop to consider whether Jesus might actually be far superior to them and truly be the 'Lord of the Sabbath,' and of everything else, for that matter.

Jesus asks this question very confrontationally. To shame His opponents. To silence them in their petty technicalities. The other reason that the church elder was wrong in his dealings with the hairdresser was that he was thinking in terms of technicalities, not relationships, and how the woman could be *caught out* on the Sabbath, instead of *helped* on the Sabbath. And I'm afraid

that attitude has more to do with Jesus' enemies than with the living, loving Lord of the Sabbath.

What would you say to the church elder about that conversation he had with the hairdresser? What would you say to the hairdresser about it?

In the last two verses, everybody gets very angry. Jesus first. v.10 tells us that Jesus 'looked round at them all.' This silent room. This crowd of people who cannot or dare not answer His question. Mark tells us in Mark 3:5, 'He looked round at them *in anger* and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts...'

This look around the room that Jesus engaged in was a penetrating look. A searching meeting of the eyes between the Son of God welling up with compassion, and the cold deadness of heart in His very religious opponents. Jesus was enraged and disturbed by the lack of compassion He saw in those eyes and hearts. How do you suppose He feels when He looks at our churches in the Highlands and Islands?

It's a delight to me that my experience of this church family is compassion. An attitude of restoring one another in Jesus' name, and not of catching people out on technicalities. Long may that continue, I pray.

Then, with just a word, Jesus heals this man who is standing in front of everyone. And in that moment, several things happen.

One - the man's life is completely changed. He probably couldn't work before this, now his life was filled with new opportunities, and with a wholeness and freedom he did not have before.

Two - word and deed come together in Jesus' ministry. As we've already seen a few times in Luke, Jesus speaks and teaches and that is so valuable to people to hear and know and believe, because they are the words of life. But it's always coupled with deeds, actions of setting people free here and now.

Three - His claim of the authority of God over the Sabbath comes together with His demonstration of that authority. The proof that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, is the One who has the authority of God Himself.

Four - God the Father approves of what Jesus is doing. It would be really easy to lose sight of the fact that the Sabbath matters because it matters *to*

God. He designed it, He gave it to us, and what we do with it is for Him to evaluate. There were people in that room who were so ready to throw the book at Jesus, that they were missing the fact that God had just vindicated Jesus and His version of what matters.

Five - Jesus is condemned by His enemies anyway. When you think about it, just saying, 'stretch out your hand' can hardly be described as 'work on the Sabbath.' But of course, Jesus is condemned for breaking a technicality. They *want* to condemn Him.

And it's their turn to get angry. Furious, actually, Luke tells us in v.11. The word that's used here describes that kind of anger you get where you cannot comprehend what's just been done. It's an irrational anger, it doesn't *seek* to understand.

It's how a lot of people still respond to Jesus and His Church's message about Him today. It's how people react when Jesus does undeniably transforming things in people's lives that *they don't like*, or that they don't *want* to believe are rooted in the power of a person who claims authority over all of life, including theirs.

So they do what the Pharisees started plotting to do. Luke says here that they talked about what they 'might do to Jesus,' casting an ominous note to be filled in later. Mark cuts straight to the point in Mark 3:6 - '...they began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.' And people are still killing off any mention or consideration of Jesus today.

So, here's some final thoughts about living out a life that takes Jesus' Lordship over the Sabbath seriously.

One - The Sabbath is a good thing that God has given us. How do you 'observe the Sabbath'? God's intention is that we get a day each week for two things - to gather together to worship Him, and to be restored in rest and play. These things feed one another.

As much as we're able to do that on a Sunday, when we can do it in community, it's good to do that. Of course in our day, we've got to account for shift work and lots of other genuine demands on our lives. I think the bottom line here is that regular weekly worship and restoration blesses us and blesses God. When that can be on Sunday, let's make it on Sunday together. When it can't, let's build it in to the week at other times.

Two - Don't judge other people's walks, but do all you can to help them. 'Observing the Sabbath,' perhaps more than anything else, is the the thing in Highland and Island life over past generations where Christians have most got this wrong. We are not here to tut-tut at what other people do. We *are* here to show the love, help and compassion of Christ to them, whatever day of the week it is.

Three - Meet people's needs quickly, even when that costs you more. Again, the man's shrivelled hand was hardly life-threatening. Jesus could have waited a day. He would have saved Himself public conflict and staved off a plot to kill Him. Jesus wasn't only *inconvenienced* by meeting this man's need quickly, He was sentenced to death over it. But even then, Jesus would not wait even one more day before helping this man.

You'll know, as I'm saying this, the need that someone has that you're aware of. Maybe you've decided it's something that you'll set to once you've got more time or more money in, or when it won't cost you in some other way. Can I suggest that this Sabbath day, when many of us do have a little more time than on other days, you use some of it to meet that need *today*?

And four - The litmus test for faithfulness to God is not observing the Sabbath, but aligning with the saving purposes of Jesus in this world. That's the new identity marker for belonging to God - for Him being committed to you, and you to Him. That you believe that Jesus saves, and that you bring that saving truth and love to others.

You are not a Christian because Sundays are special for you, because you go to church every week, or because of what you do or don't do on a Sunday. You are a Christian when you believe that Jesus has saved you from sin and death and guilt and fear; and you live out that freedom and lightness and compassion amongst others, *every day*. The Sabbath is not God. Jesus is.