

## **Healing on the Sabbath: Luke 6:1-16**

What is the purpose of our worship? What is the purpose of our rituals and traditions? And by whose authority do we answer those questions?

Sometimes it seems the questions raised in the practice of faith never really change.

All four gospels were written in the latter part of the first century. Part of the reason there are differences in the gospels...and why each writer chose different ways to arrange the story...is because they were writing to address concerns in their own congregations decades after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Although the fundamental story in all the gospels is the same, each writer chose which events and teachings to emphasize and how to arrange them based on what their particular audience needed to hear.

Luke was probably writing after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 AD. Scholars think his gospel dates to the 80's. In about the year 40, the Zealots, along with other Jewish and Greek revolutionaries, began a series of violent attempts to overthrow the Roman government.

Jesus had warned people that violence was not going to be the answer to their plight. But as is still true, it's always an attractive option for us humans.

In 66 Rome brought its massive military power to squash the revolt. At first the Jewish rebels had some great successes.

But ultimately Rome was too powerful. In 70 AD Jerusalem was under siege and the city finally fell. The Temple was destroyed. Its western wall is all that remains to this day.

This was a massive problem for the old guard Jewish religious leaders. The priests and the Sadducees relied on the Temple and all the Temple rituals as the backbone of the Jewish faith.

Without the Temple, and Temple rituals, how could faith survive?

The Pharisees got a bad rap in the New Testament. Now, it wasn't without good reason – they perceived Jesus...and later the Christians...as a threat.

But the reality was a little more nuanced. The Pharisees were in many ways the progressive religious leaders.

At the time of Luke's writing, they were the ones working to lead the Jewish people into a faith that did not require mediation by the Temple and its authorities.

After the fall of the Temple, the Pharisees were already dealing with all the unsettledness that comes from immense change.

They were trying to figure out how the ancient traditions and rituals should fit in this new way of practicing faith.

Adding to the unsettledness are the followers of Jesus. At this point, many of them were still Jews. The Christians were considered a Jewish sect at first.

They shared the synagogues with those who were not followers of Jesus. But, conflict was growing between the Jewish Jesus followers and the Jews who were not.

Then, added into all that is a growing number of non-Jewish Christians...the Gentiles. To many of them, the old traditions and rituals of the Temple mean nothing.

That's the situation Luke is writing into. He's trying to help his community learn how to be church in a world that has changed dramatically...and that has in fact become more diverse.

Sometimes when everything is changing too fast, we humans have a hard time regaining our footing. It can feel like everything is careening out of control. We start looking for anything to give us some foundation...something to grab onto. Often that takes the form of tightening our grasp on traditions and rules.

To their credit, the Pharisees were trying to lead the people into a new way of practicing faith in a world that had changed so, so much.

They're trying to balance some of the old faithful traditions with a new way of worship and faith life. Now, here's this Jesus guy messing things up. What right did he have to upset the traditions of Sabbath? Who gave him this kind of authority?

Jesus asks a question that apparently none of them dared answer – is the Sabbath a day to do harm or do good? What is the purpose of Sabbath? What is the purpose of ritual and tradition?

These questions are still pertinent today. To answer, let's go back to the original purpose of Sabbath. We have to go way back to Israel after their escape from Egypt.

The commandment about honoring the Sabbath is one of the ten commandments given at Mt. Sinai. It's a part of God's instruction on how they were to live as a newly freed people of God.

The ten commandments show up in at least a couple places in the Old Testament. There are two reasons given for Sabbath. One is that God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of creation...it is a holy day...a day to honor God.

The other reason is pure and simple, rest. But it's not rest just for the Israelites. It's also rest for their slaves, their employees, their animals, even the land.

God knew that rest was needed for all. In Egypt, they got no rest. Their slaveholders worked them to the bone. That's not God's desire for any part of creation.

Sabbath was meant for the good of all people and all creation. That purpose was established by the authority of God.

Now, Jesus confronts what this looks like in his time. By then, the laws expanding Sabbath had become kind of a burden. The practice of Sabbath had lost its original intent.

In the first story, Jesus makes an analogy to David. But more importantly, he asserts his authority. He is Lord of the Sabbath. That likely contributed to the rage of the Pharisees...Jesus seems to be claiming an authority they would give only to God.

And then in the second story, Jesus enacts that authority. In doing so, he returns the Sabbath to its original purpose of restoration. He restores a man with a withered hand.

In an economy built on agriculture and the use of tools – occupations that required two good hands – a withered hand was a serious problem. This man may have been unable to do work that could fully support himself and his family.

Maybe he was even reduced to begging.

When Jesus heals him, all that changes. It's not just a physical healing... his ability to fully participate in his community is restored.

Well, all of this is true for our worship, traditions, and rituals, too. Our practice of faith is not just about us. It's not even just about us and God. Our purpose for everything is to embody Jesus' ministry of healing and restoration and compassion. It's to draw people into a community that works for the good of our neighbors.

Even before the pandemic and everything else that's happened, we've lived in a world where people's bodies and souls are withered by conflict and violence, by abuse, neglect, racism, sexism and victimization of the LGBTQ folks. People's futures are withered by our society's approach to those with disabilities. Sickness withers hope.

Sexual violence and exploitation wither hearts, minds, and souls.

We live in a world where our environment is withered by exploitation of natural resources, by failure to adequately address pollution and greenhouse gases.

We live in a world withered by astounding and unsustainable greed and wealth inequality.

We have neighbors whose souls are withered by loneliness and despair. We have children in our neighborhoods and schools whose futures are withered by poverty.

The purpose of our worship, rituals, and traditions is to sustain us and give us life. The purpose of worship, rituals and tradition is to nurture our faith and inspire us to love.

But our worship and tradition can never be just for us in the church. Worship can never be just for its own sake or even just for God.

We too are called to move outside our most cherished traditions if they do not further our ministry to to heal and restore the withered bodies and souls of our time.

And by whose authority do we say that? Jesus of course. Jesus, lord of the sabbath. Jesus who really all the way through made it pretty clear what our purpose is.

The commandment about the Sabbath is a hard one for us. A few years ago I preached on the Sabbath during the summer. I challenged everyone to try to take one day to truly practice Sabbath. Several of us did. It was hard, but in my experience it was restorative.

But however we approach the actual practice of Sabbath – or anything else – we do so remembering that the purpose of our faith practices is to draw us into that ministry of healing and restoration.

Our worship, traditions, and rituals shape us by the word of Jesus' immense love for us. And they remind us of Jesus' call to carry that love into a withered world.