

October 26th: “What Is Lawful On the Sabbath?”

Welcome, my friends, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions and answers. As we know, Jesus was forty times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer, so in these ten weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at ten conversations that Jesus had with the people of his time. This series is intended to challenge us and form us to be more like Jesus, so it is my hope this morning that this meditation will give us some wisdom about how to live out these ancient truths in our own modern era.

We're now in the second month of this series, so if you've missed previous sermons, be sure to check out our website—all our sermon manuscripts are posted so that you can go back and catch up, or reread a message that resonated deeply with you. These are resources for you to use as we continue this process of dissecting and discerning together.

Before we prepare to discuss another question that Jesus addressed, I invite you to take a deep breath, and pray with me.

God of the Law and Prophets, you have given us your wisdom to live by because you desire to see us whole and flourishing. You made covenants with our ancestors, and wrote commandments for them because you wanted us to experience harmony and abundance. You spoke to your people with songs, parables, and stories because you hoped that we would learn how to be kind, compassionate, and honest. You never meant for these to become cages, entrapping us. You never meant for these to become prisons, separating us from others. You never meant for these to become chains, binding and restricting our bodies and spirits. So help us this morning as we approach this text, teach us the true meaning of these words. Open our ears to your eternal calling, and invite us into action that is lifegiving and liberating for all. Amen.

In December of 1955, a woman named Rosa Parks boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. It was the early evening, and she was tired from running errands and a long day of work. Although she chose to sit in the

middle of the vehicle, the section at the front quickly filled, and she was asked to give up her seat for a white passenger, who had boarded after her. At this moment, she refused—she did not move to the back of the bus as instructed by the driver. Instead, she remained in her chosen seat, and waited for what would happen next.

According to the city regulations and state statutes that prohibited the mixing of races within public spaces, also known as the Jim Crow laws, Rosa's decision was an illegal act. Something as simple as sitting in a specific seat on a bus, or refusing to give preference to white passengers, went against the national and local rules that allowed for the segregation and subjugation of Black people. This wasn't the first time that Rosa had engaged in this kind of civil disobedience, nor was she the only one who was protesting in this way, but she became the symbol of a movement—the face of a revolution. After her arrest, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts began in earnest as a coordinated plan to speak out against the injustice of segregation. Within a few weeks, these protests became a national headline—with hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals of all races engaging in this cause.

For many of us, this is a familiar story—either something we lived through, watched on TV, or were taught about in school. Rosa's actions on that day, and the courage of her fellow activists, changed the course of history for our nation. Thanks to their willingness to stand against unjust laws, we can now look back on this effort and condemn the marginalization and disenfranchisement of our Black neighbors. But at that time, there were many opinions about desegregation, including the belief within certain Christian communities that it was natural and right for Black people and white people to be separated. Even some spiritual leaders who agreed with the principles behind the protests voiced disapproval at breaking laws—to them that was a step too far.

But is it? Don't people of faith have some responsibility to speak out against injustice, even if it means confronting power structures and institutions? Don't

we have a divine calling to break down barriers and work for equity and inclusion?

I happen to think so, and I think Jesus would agree—and so we're going to take a look at a couple stories that demonstrate how we should engage this idea of what's legal versus what is just.

But first, a little background information about this concept that's at the core of this conversation: the practice of Sabbath. If you've heard the creation narratives before, you might know that in the book of Genesis, God spent six days speaking the world into existence, and then on the seventh day, he chose to rest. This rest was important, not because God isn't capable of more work, but because rest is an inherent, intentional part of creation. In the Book of Exodus, when God's people are enslaved during their time in Egypt, God begins to make this rest more of a focal point, telling them that when they are freed from this captivity, rest will be an essential part of their new lifestyle. And this comes true—God's people escape into the wilderness, and God gives them explicit instructions about how they are to live now that they are no longer subject to the demands of their oppressors.

In the rest of the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, God spends a lot of time helping the Israelites understand the importance of this day of rest. Over the next few decades and generations Sabbath becomes a cherished ritual—something that separates God's people from other nations. It's a pattern that makes them distinct from other cultures and groups. It's a system that prioritizes the health and well being of individuals and community, and it reminds the Israelites that they don't have to exhaust themselves in order to be worthy of God's care. To protect this day of rest, God's people make a list of activities that are work for them—they come up with a total of thirty nine categories of labor, in Hebrew they're called the “melakhot.” Some of it is very intuitive—obviously planting and harvesting are work. But some of it is more complicated—eating is welcomed, but cooking and baking are not.

It's important that we remember, even thousands of years later, that Sabbath became such a crucial element of God's plan for humanity because of this reality of slavery. Sabbath was the antidote to the slavery that the Israelites had experienced in Egypt. Sabbath is the antidote to oppressive practices that dehumanize and marginalize. Sabbath is supposed to be the opposite of being enslaved. Sabbath, at its core, is freedom. It was intended to be a liberating, life giving, holistically re-creative practice.

But is it? Is that the way that people are experiencing it in Jesus' time? Or has Sabbath changed into something else?

Within this text, we have two different instances of Jesus engaging with this idea of what is permitted on the holy day of rest.

In the first scenario, Jesus and his disciples gather grain to eat while passing through a field on their way to their next destination. When Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders, he compares his actions to those of King David, and says, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." This basically confirms once again that Jesus is this Messianic figure that is taking on the leadership role of God's people, just as King David had done in the past. Not only is Jesus challenging them to see him as the true Messiah, the fulfillment of these ancient prophecies, he's claiming to have divine and royal authority—certainly more authority that was given to these teachers of the law. Jesus subtly reminds them: they weren't kings. They weren't priests. They weren't God. He is.

In Mark's version of these events, found in chapter 2, he adds in an additional detail—he records Jesus reminding the Pharisees, "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." If you've been in church for a while you might have heard this before, but what do you think Jesus means by this? Why do you think Jesus makes this distinction?

When biblical scholars take a look at this verse, they sometimes note that the rules related to Sabbath keeping had gotten so extensive that it was almost

overwhelming to keep track of them all. Instead of being a day of rest and relaxation, it became an exercise in avoiding even the slightest appearance of impropriety. Instead of being about protection and care, it became burdensome and stressful. Going against the Sabbath, even accidentally, carried the potential for punishment, so the failure to follow these rules could have harmful consequences.

From what we can tell from this passage, Jesus isn't happy with this way of enforcing the Sabbath—he seems to think that this idea of mandating and legislating and coercing people into this form of rest isn't what this day is supposed to be about. Jesus wants to remind people that their faith is a celebration of liberation, not another way to enslave people. If Sabbath becomes just another way to restrict and restrain, it's not the true Sabbath.

In the second scene, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when he encounters a group of Pharisees—likely the same teachers of the law that had questioned him before. Also in the synagogue was a man whose hand was shriveled, but we don't know much about him besides his physical condition. Jesus knows that the Pharisees are waiting to see if he will break the Sabbath to heal this man, so he invites the man to stand beside him in front of the entire audience. In full view of his rivals, Jesus heals the man's hand, but it's what he says that really gets them talking. He says, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

"What is lawful on the Sabbath" is both a practical and theological question, but Jesus isn't asking this question to test the knowledge of the Pharisees—because they could probably quote the chapter and verse of commandments and rules that would prohibit Jesus from doing what he has done. Jesus asks this question about good and evil, saving life and destroying it, because he's challenging their mindset—he's asking them to consider that what might be illegal or legal can in fact be separated from what is right and sacred.

Jesus is saying yes, Sabbath is absolutely holy, but so is the kind of healing that he is offering. The healing that Jesus extends to lepers, and disabled people, and the blind is so powerful, so totally transformative, so deeply liberating, so innately worshipful, that of course it's in line with God's design for this sacred day. Of course it's the right thing to do. This divine healing sets people free in the same way that Sabbath does. This healing restores our souls in the same way that Sabbath is meant to do. This healing is so good, that even God will not rest from doing it. This healing is so good, that it would be wrong to make this man wait even one more day.

When you put these two narratives together, I think we can see the bigger picture of what Jesus is trying to communicate.

The rituals of our faith are not meant to be traps, they are meant to help us remember our freedom. The morals and values that guide us as faithful people are not meant to be burdens that overwhelm us, but lights that illuminate our path forward. The core of our religion is personal and communal transformation, not a series of rules and restrictions. Certain commandments do form the foundation of our faith, but Jesus is the ultimate standard that we are meant to follow. He is the one who determines what is right. Laws that prevent us from reaching justice and liberation are worth resisting. If we forget that, and we cling to the wrong things, we're at risk of missing the whole point. If we forget what our faith is all about, or we get distracted, we'll be a religion that can't see the forest for the trees.

I think this is also an important lesson for us to think about as we navigate our current political climate and national division—which unfortunately does not seem so far removed from the hostility and injustice that Rosa Parks faced in 1955.

When we look at our own cultural landscape, and we examine the laws that govern our own practices and behaviors, it might be necessary for us to look deeper and find the reason for why these rules are in place. We need to be able

to understand their true purpose. And we can and should ask ourselves if these laws represent our values and priorities as a community.

Are these legal boundaries helpful to our communal health and wellbeing, or do they actively discriminate against a specific population? Are these rules life giving to our fellow citizens, or do they put additional pressures on us that end up feeling burdensome? Do our structures and institutions protect the vulnerable, or are they agents of exploitation and abuse? Do these systems get us closer to justice and liberation, or do they move us further away from these goals?

Now is the time to ask these questions, because like our friend Rosa, there might come a day when we will need to decide between what is lawful and what is right. Now is the time to meditate on this passage, so that we can reflect on how we might respond if we found ourselves in a similar situation—a circumstance when what we believe to be ethical doesn't match what is legal. Now is the time to wonder how we would act if we were confronted by injustice. Now is the time for each of us to discern how we would resist.

Here's the good news: you don't have to be the face of a movement to make an impact. You don't have to be a national icon to make a difference. You can be you, in your small town, in your neighborhood, in your family, and that is enough. You can be one of many who is working to bring greater liberation to our city or nation. Together, our combined resistance has the power to change our community, just as it did in 1955.

All we need to do is to fix our eyes on Jesus, the true measure of what is good and right, and continue to follow in his footsteps.

Amen.