

*Texts: Psalm 92; Luke 6:1-16*

*Subject: Healing on the Sabbath*

*Theme: To Save a Life*

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany/Reconciling in Christ Sunday; Jan. 31, 2021;

*Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Taking a day off is difficult for me. I have a hard time being still. I need something to do, and luckily, I have five other people in my household that usually can use my time and attention. But I've experienced this phenomenon where there are a number of hours unscheduled in my day. When I have no tasks to tackle, no pressings needs to fulfill, and no projects to complete, it's strange. I get antsy. I can't sit around. Taking a break, just resting is sometimes more stressful than working for me.

I don't know if this is because I'm just not used to it, or maybe that so much of our collective existence is taken up with work, tasks, and things to do, or that the world seems to judge us on what we do or accomplish. We can work ourselves to death. Do you struggle with taking a day of rest? Sure, it's a lot easier if we can sit in a park or on the beach or poolside with a beverage and read a book - sign me up for that. But we should not forget that in our daily and weekly routines, even in the midst of busy lives, our God has created us for, and commanded us to rest. The creation story includes God's seventh day rest. When Moses wrote down the ten commandments, the people remembered that God rested, and they were to take a day of rest. This was the *sabbath* - a day devoted to the Lord, in which they were to do no work, providing rest not only for themselves, but for their servants, animals, and the land itself. Jews observed the sabbath beginning on Friday at sundown, and took this time for study of scripture, bringing of offerings, prayer and praise, and giving thanks to the Lord. That's worship.

Yes, followers of Jesus take that day of rest on Sundays, remembering the day of the resurrection. But for so many, even our weekends have become time to work. We seem to have a need to be going, doing, earning, building, and buying every chance we get. God knows we need rest too.

Luther taught that the purpose of the Sabbath day of rest was above all, a day to hear the Word - to learn it, study it, and hear it proclaimed. This is why we come to worship. It's why we tune in online or read printed devotions, sermons, and prayers. Being a follower of Jesus - a disciple - must begin with being centered in the Word of God. Of course we can read the Bible, and we are blessed with many ways of hearing the Word in our time: we have podcasts, Bible apps on our phones, and social media pages and groups - these are still new to us - they didn't exist even 20 years ago. We can and should be in the Word daily, not just on Sundays.

A sabbath is good. It serves to disrupt our busyness and to refocus our lives on what truly matters. But rigid rule keeping isn't what we're about, and to understand the controversy in our scripture reading today, we need to understand what Jesus is doing. He seems to have entered into an already ongoing debate. What is the sabbath for? Some of the Pharisees - those religious leaders charged with keeping the law, asked about an incident in which Jesus and his friends were walking through a field and eating on their way. A disciple's got to eat, right? Strictly speaking, the law would have prevented harvesting, winnowing, and preparing food. And by plucking, rubbing, discarding, and eating grain, they had broken every part of the regulation. So the Pharisees were watching Jesus and his friends. They saw what happened and accused them of breaking the rule. Well, they did! Jesus reminds them of the story (*in 1 Sam. 21*)

when David was on the run from Saul. David, their anointed king, though not yet on the throne, came upon the tabernacle there and ate the bread that was prepared for the priests only. Their human physical need took precedent over the law, and they ate. People need food. Even their Rabbis had taught that human needs are most important. but they were trying to catch Jesus and condemn him. Jesus defends his disciples actions, knowing that *to save a life* is more important than to keep the law.

On another day, (Was it the following week? We can't be sure) Jesus was in the synagogue maybe discussing the same issue. In the crowd was a man with a withered hand, who came, just as the others did, to hear Jesus teaching. Again the religious leaders were watching to see what Jesus would do. The man didn't ask to be healed, but Jesus called him forward, just the same. He only asked him to stretch out his hand, a feat that had likely been impossible for him his whole life, and there, on that sabbath day, the man was restored. He could work, he could be welcomed into the community, he could protect himself, and care for himself and others. Should Jesus have waited until the next day for the sake of good order? Why should the law have prevented this man from being helped, when Jesus knew he could *save a life*?

Jesus is focused on the need, not the law, both which he knows better than anyone. He says, "the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath." We can take this saying a couple of different ways, but here Jesus claims to have authority. He claims that authority not for his own sake, but for his disciples. Everything our Lord does, he does for us. That's what Jesus is all about. Giving life, proclaiming justice, renewing the world.

Being a disciple means being centered in the life-giving words and actions of Jesus Christ. The day of rest, while a gift and promise from God, if it does what it is made for, ought to create a space for real mercy and justice to be realized. To hear the word, to gather with the people of God, to align our hearts with the Word and will of God, and give us eyes to see what is needed in our community and in our world. Who is in need of food? Who is in need of healing?

How can we hear the word and not respond?

For so long, and in so many churches still, the rules have been more important than the human need. What we wear, who we love, how we move, and what gifts we can offer have been pushed to the forefront. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and He's not taking a day off. This day we gather should transform us and remind us what it is that we are about, what we are for, and about everything Jesus has done for us. They wanted to condemn Jesus because he upended their systems, and seemed more powerful, and broke conventions, but it wasn't for the sake of his own power or notoriety, for his own glory, but for the glory of the Father who sent him, to bring life and redemption, and reconciliation for the world God so loved.

I was applying to go to seminary in the fall of 2009, just months after the ELCA Churchwide assembly had affirmed that openly LGBT people could serve as pastors in our denomination. The stories of those who had been pushed away for so long, who were called to share God's grace and were now able to serve with freedom to be themselves, was to me an affirmation that God's love was alive in this church. I knew this was the kind of church that I wanted to serve among. In June of 2020, this congregation affirmed that this is the kind of faith community we want to be. And like so

many, we know we still have a lot to learn. God is doing something new here again. And even though these doors might be closed today, they will be open again. God's Word is still alive here. God's spirit is still flowing, and we are here for it. Hearing this call from Jesus to feed the hungry and heal the sick, with no reservations about who these ones in need will be, gives us strength to keep moving in ministry, keep welcoming, keep reaching out our hands to those in need of hearing this life giving Word. That means guys and gals and non-binary pals, people who are gay and straight and bisexual and trans and black and brown and indigenous are invited and welcomed and affirmed and appreciated. They may come with walkers and wheelchairs, in families of all kinds and with kids of all ages to hear this word of grace and life. Whatever barriers might have kept them away before are removed for the sake of mercy, for the sake of love, and for the sake of belonging and blessing. Jesus is Lord, of the sabbath and of our lives, and we all belong to him.

Those religious ones tried to catch Jesus and mark him as a rule-breaker, to condemn him, even though they saw him feeding the people and healing them, giving life to those on the margins, doing what was needed most. He opened the door to forgiveness for ones who were unclean, unacceptable, and unwelcome. He went to the cross on a Friday for them, and all of us. On the sabbath, he laid in the tomb, but the Word was working. He went to continue the work of redeeming and reconciling, even for those who had already died. And the next day, early in the morning, at the gravesite, He met the women who had come to do their work, and the world was changed forever.

We're still trying to make sense of the changes all around us. I hope as a society we're re-learning what matters most is compassion and cooperation. Here at

Reformation, we are learning what it means to be the church in a new time, to provide for different needs, and worship in different ways. Even when we're closed, we're open. Even when our church going is disrupted, when our traditions change, and our routines are affected, we ALL have a need to hear this Word that feeds us and heals us. It is for us. It is for you.

Let us pray:

God of Boundless love, you require each of us to love justice. May we follow Christ's example to see, name, and care for all whom we encounter. May your love and grace fill our words and actions, turning us away from the sins of homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and racism, to live for you and serve our neighbor. Soften our hearts and expand our awareness today to share in the spirit of the Kin-dom of God, making the church a place where community is built to experience your grace. In your name, we pray, Amen.