

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y22  
2 Pentecost (Proper 4B) 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.  
Sunday 3 June 2018

1 Sam. 3:1-10 (11-20)  
Ps. 139:1-5, 12-17  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Mark 2:23-3:6

### **The Joy and Hazards of Sabbath**

*“Lord, you have searched me out and known me... there is not a word on my lips but you, O Lord, know it altogether” (Ps. 139).*

1. At the heart of our era with its wealth and progress, lies a gaping emptiness. Despite our miraculous technologies we feel haunted by disconnection and loneliness. We have lost the capacity to wonder, to regularly experience gratitude for the gift of our life. We no longer have a sense of belonging: to each other, to creation, or God.<sup>1</sup>

For me the antidote to this alienation is simple. It is church. I am not embarrassed by this truth – I deeply need to worship in community every week. In my life churches have been places of healing and gratitude. In church I have the chance to experience my existence as a blessing again. In church I repent and rejoice. Most days I’m immersed in my tiny dramas. But during worship I can receive the big picture of all history, all creation.

Quite simply I keep the sabbath because it opens up a door for God to heal my soul and to empower me to be a force of good in the world. When someone is struggling spiritually, socially or emotionally I have to bite my tongue because I always want to recommend church as the solution.

My wife Heidi is a native Hawaiian and it has always been important for us to reconnect with her family and culture during the summer. I don’t often talk about it but there I’m like you, a normal person sitting in the pews at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Wailuku, Maui. Although there are some white people there the church seems predominantly Filipino, with some Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. There are tons and tons of kids. Sometimes I recognize them out in the surf lineups.

They play organ music but also have a kind of ukulele band. They constantly volunteer on projects for the poor and vulnerable. Queen Emma and King Kamehameha IV were faithful Anglicans and in the 1860’s they invited the Reverend Mr. and Mrs. Whipple to found the congregation. The two had a foster daughter from the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota whose name was Clara Mokomanic.

In 1866 when this family arrived at Ma’alaea Harbor no one was there to meet them so they simply walked halfway across the island to stay at Waikapu for the night. Mokomanic played the organ and according to family lore her future husband George Mossmann helped to procure the church’s land.

Mokomanic is my wife’s great great grandmother. I feel so at home there. But if one day going to church became a reason I began to look down on others, that would subvert the whole purpose of the sabbath. That attitude would impair the very health that God gives through sabbath.

In today's gospel Jesus points out that even the most essential religious practice can be corrupted and distorted. But before we get to that let me talk about the context of this gospel and the reason why the sabbath is so important.

2. In the church we observe six months of holy seasons from Advent to Easter and then six months of ordinary time. Today we walk through the threshold into ordinary time. The color for this season is green for the growth that we experience from following Jesus through the story of his life. This summer in our three-year cycle of readings we follow the book of Mark.

Mark is the most primal gospel, the most direct in its message. He uses simple, striking language. He tells short, abrupt stories. Mark's favorite word is *euthus* – or “immediately.” Scholars believe that the gospel came into being around the time of the Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire. Thousands of Roman mercenaries crushed the uprising. The center of religious life, the temple in Jerusalem, was destroyed.

Mark has a simple message. Although evil seems to have the upper hand everywhere, the tide has turned. God's kingdom of peace and justice, with its radical reversal of fortune is near. Mark comes to smash our expectations of a military messiah, a king who is simply the mirror image of the Roman Emperor. Instead the sign of God's kingdom comes in the form of a gentle prophet, a healer, a sage who teaches us a way of rising above overwhelming evil. This messiah, Jesus, transforms the world through his suffering, death and rising again.

3. Of all the places to begin, it might seem strange to you that the first lesson Jesus teaches in this season of ordinary time concerns the sabbath. In the Book of Exodus God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Keeping the sabbath, or refraining from work on certain days, comes before murder, adultery and stealing (Ex. 20:1-17). The Book of Exodus describes sabbath as a way of imitating God in our creativity. “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth... but rested on the seventh day” (Ex. 2:11). Even during the time of planting or harvest God insists that we keep the sabbath.

The Book of Deuteronomy offers a different rationale for keeping the sabbath. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought you out from there with a mighty hand... therefore the Lord... commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15).

In this version the sabbath is a kind of little Exodus. It releases us from toil and work in order to give us a foretaste of the Promised Land. It reminds us that at the heart of our existence God has set us free.<sup>2</sup> But there is more. Sabbath is not just for the head of the household or the hierarchy. “You shall not do any work – you, or your son, or your daughter, your male or female slave.” Even the ox and the donkey, the resident alien, even the slaves deserve this taste of freedom.

In the Bible all creation, even the soil, has a right to sabbath rest. We are fundamentally spiritual beings and require sabbath. It is how we experience and cultivate the deep, abiding goodness of God in the world.<sup>3</sup>

4. Mark connects two stories to help us understand the Sabbath in our own life. When the religious leaders criticize his disciples for eating grain leftover in a field, Jesus says, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mk. 2).

This leads into a much more painful encounter. In the synagogue Jesus invites a man with a withered hand to come forward. He asks the religious leaders, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill" (Mk. 3)? These leaders know that saving life on the sabbath is lawful, "But they were silent" (Mk. 3). This both infuriates (*orgē*) Jesus and leaves him profoundly sad (*sollupew*) or, "grieved at their hardness of heart."

Mark only uses this word for anger once.<sup>4</sup> What upsets Jesus is that these religious leaders do not care about the suffering person. For them the man with a withered hand has no independent existence as a child of God. For them he is only a way to test Jesus. This leads them to conspire against Jesus to utterly destroy him and everything he stands for.

Why is this so bad? What grieves Jesus? Jesus loves the sabbath. He recognizes our need for it and the way that it might transform us. But he also knows that religious practices are not ends in themselves. They are not even primarily standards for determining righteousness. The reason for keeping the sabbath or any other religious practice is to heal the world. If it does not do that, it is not merely a matter of coming up short. In this case the practice comes to be at war with itself.

Observing the sabbath in a way that diminishes or harms other people is, to use an old-fashioned word, desecration. Desecration is a harsh word. It means using a divine gift to thwart God's purposes.

5. This week Franklin Graham arrived in town on his "Decision America: California Tour." Perhaps the newspapers want to stir things up and have not been entirely fair to him. They quote Graham saying that "progressive" is, "just another word for godless."<sup>5</sup> The Graham website claims that, "Berkeley takes it to a new level. Christianity is not just neglected or ignored. It's actually abhorred." The home of the Graduate Theological Union, the town where I was ordained a priest, is a place they say where, "the Bible is pushed aside."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps I am wrong to think that these rallies deal in unhelpful stereotypes, that they assume that all Christians agree with Franklin Graham's politics, or that they set people against each other. But even worse than this they involve a kind of desecration.

In the context of the holy practice of prayer Graham's Crusade rejects the humanity of GLBTQ+ persons. In the same way that religious leaders ignored the suffering of the man with the withered hand, they treat the sacred relationships of gay people as a tool for advancing their political agenda. Make no mistake the mixture of their self-righteous contempt for God's children and prayer is desecration. It is using holy gifts to thwart God's purposes.

My friends, at the heart of this era of wealth and progress lies a yawning emptiness. We see false divisions even between Christian brothers and sisters. We grieve that in prayer

Jesus' name has come to be associated with bigotry, with hatred that denies the humanity of suffering people.

But God has not left us alone. God has not even withheld the Son. We pray that we will not misuse religious practices. But above all we give thanks for these sabbath days. Let us praise God for healing and gratitude, for this chance to repent and rejoice, for the gift of seeing all people and ourselves as God's beloved children.

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<sup>1</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (NY: Doubleday, 2008) 194.

<sup>2</sup> Almost every part of this sermon is deeply indebted to Liz and Matt Boulton's *Salt*, 3 June 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-second-week-after-pentecost>

<sup>3</sup> The Bible sets up a sabbath rhythm to our life. It sets aside for special treatment every seventh day, seventh year and even every seventh sabbatical year plus one as a jubilee year (when debts are forgiven and slaves freed). The Latin word "salvus" means health. Salvation is health and it involves keeping the rhythm of sabbath.

<sup>4</sup> Mark D. Davis, "Putting Sabbath in Its Place," *Left Behind and Loving It*, 28 May 2018. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Dias, "The Evangelical Fight to Win Back California," *The New York Times*, 27 May 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/27/us/politics/franklin-graham-evangelicals-california.html>

<sup>6</sup> Cicely Corry, "Boldness in Berkeley: Decision California Prompts Christians to Take a Stand," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 2 June 2018. <https://billygraham.org/story/boldness-in-berkeley-decision-california-prompts-christians-to-take-a-stand/>