

## Lord of the Sabbath

August 13, 2023

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Matthew 12:1-8

As you have heard this morning, our time away at Montreat Youth Conference was a wonderful time. As a leader of the trip and as the pastor charged to care for the youth of this congregation, I am amazed at the spiritual lessons that we have come away with each year that we have attended the youth conference. The theme of the conference this year was “In Joy” meaning each day the conference focused on how to cultivate or notice joy in one’s life and how Joy is a critical spiritual practice to one’s faith formation.

And in reflection on our time away, I have realized that it is a true **joy** to witness the spiritual formation that our youth develop at this conference each year. I am grateful that this congregation places a priority on our youth and makes sure that youth can have these sorts of experiences.

One spiritual lesson about Joy, that I was not expecting, happened on Wednesday afternoon of the conference. Wednesday at Montreat is different from the other days of the week. At the mid-week point the conference gives groups the afternoon off to rest, or go on a local adventure. Before we left on the trip, I booked our group for a tubing adventure in Asheville. Tubing is the perfect combination of relaxation and nature exploration: you sit in an inner tube and float down a river, one tube is even reserved for a cooler so you can bring drinks and snacks with you. When I signed up for the trip the instructions stated that we should expect a two-hour trip down a slow-moving river, which I thought was the perfect amount of time.

When our group arrived on Wednesday and I was checking the group in, the employee notified me that the water levels were lower than average meaning that our trip would be longer. She sheepishly smiled as she indicated that our trip would be more like 4 ½ hours instead of the 2 hours I was expecting. Eek! (I thought that would affect our dinner plans!), but it was too late to turn back; I didn’t really have a backup plan, and the tickets could not be refunded. So, I smiled, and said well I’m glad we brought drinks and snacks! We loaded up in the bus and traveled to our drop off destination.

You should also know that I kept this information to myself (It was my little own secret). I worried if I told the group they would refuse to go on the adventure.

Eventually after what felt like a comedy of errors the group was in the water (just getting tubes in the water and connected was its own sort of team building exercise)! We were literally a 12-person inner tube circle, and we slowly began floating down the river.

As the group began to acclimate to our situation, youth began to realize they would be sitting in this tube for awhile (they were starting to put together how long the bus ride was vs

how slow we were moving) and youth began to ask “how long is this going to take!” And I said it will take as long as it takes (still keeping my secret)! Maeve, who’s inner tube was connected to mine, leaned over and said, “I’m not sure I can sit here the whole time!” To which I responded, “I’m not sure you have a choice!”

Despite folks initial hesitation, we found ourselves laughing, embracing the unfolding adventure, and marveling at the natural beauty around us. Multiple times ducks floated by connecting us back to the youth conference (ducks had been imagery used at the conference several times) as symbols of Joy! Throughout the trip frustration and challenges arose (Evan’s tube may have flipped over at one point), but the challenges only brought us closer as a group. We had to navigate the river together, we had to stop, and dwell together in the present moment, and we were transformed by the wonder of our surroundings and the beauty of our fellowship together.

After the tubing trip FINALLY ended, we had to rush back to Montreat for evening worship (which we barely made it back to!) and as part of her sermon the pastor touched on Sabbath as an important part of cultivating Joy. In her sermon she defined Sabbath as a time to sit in the wonder and love of God. Sitting in worship, I realized that our tubing experience was a true sabbath experience! On our trip we experienced wonder, amazement, and joy, BUT it was also hard; we had to just let the river unfold as it unfolded. We were not in control, and we had to submit to whatever came our way. This sabbath experience was communal; it was something that we did all together. The trip would not have worked had we each been on our own not connected to one another.

Today, we are continuing our sabbath sermon series AND we finally get to hear from Jesus about Sabbath. Throughout this summer, we have toured the bible learning about sabbath from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah. From our exploration of Sabbath, we have learned that Sabbath is both important to God and definitive about who God is and the practice of sabbath is commanded of all who considered themselves to be a Child of God. We have learned that Sabbath is the practice of stopping and dwelling (even when the work is not done) and that sabbath is not a practice done in isolation; rather, mine and your sabbath are connected. Part of sabbath rest is ensuring that all people can rest, we have also learned that part of Sabbath is setting aside time to worship and delight in God. Two weeks ago, Elizabeth (Lizzy) Steel was a guest preacher and stated in her sermon

*Sabbath is not putting our phones on airplane mode to disconnect. Sabbath is not taking a nap on a Sunday afternoon because it’s been a long week. Sabbath is not an action. Sabbath is a state of mind that leads to delight. Sabbath as a delight is a different atmosphere. If you stop making the sabbath about yourself--then you can enter into this state of mind and truly call the sabbath a delight.*

In our gospel text today, we encounter Jesus and his disciples walking through a grain field on the sabbath. While walking his disciples become hungry and start plucking grain to eat. There happens to be Pharisees nearby who notice and point out that what the disciples are doing is unlawful. The picking of the grain is considered “working” and no one is supposed to

work on the Sabbath. When you read the gospels, it can feel like the Pharisees are nitpicking at Jesus; one could roll their eyes at this overly judgmental accusation. However, in the previous section of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus has declared himself to be the revelation of the scripture and the Son of God, which is a bold statement to the Pharisees, and here they are sort of saying Whoa! If you think you are the messiah, then you should be able to follow the rules of the sabbath!

But, as is typical of Jesus, he will flip their understanding upside down and reframe our own understanding of Sabbath in the process. Jesus tells the Pharisees that he is not breaking the Sabbath; rather he turns to the Bible and references a story about King David. He basically says "Have you read the Bible? What did David do when he was hungry, he and his companions? Jesus reminds them about a time when David was fleeing from King Saul, David went into a synagogue and ate the holy symbolic bread. The bread that David ate was part of 12 loaves of bread that was changed out every sabbath and no one was supposed to eat this bread except priests. This bread was considered sacred. But David ate the bread out of necessity. Jesus is playing around with this story insinuating that Jesus is like David, the real (but unrecognized) king of Israel who is being wrongfully pursued by the Pharisees (who are like King Saul). This comparison would have most likely annoyed the Pharisees, but Jesus is saying that he, like David, is allowed to eat the bread because he is the true king.

Then Jesus pivots and says maybe you do know the Bible and know that on the Sabbath, priests who are in the temple are working all day long but are not considered to be breaking the Sabbath. In other words the people who work in the temple are technically doing work, but it is allowable work because it is kingdom of God work.

Then Jesus goes on to say, "And I tell you one greater than the temple is here." Jesus is saying, "I am the reality to which the temple is pointing." Thus, Jesus is saying because I am the presence of God all that I do is "sabbath work and therefore lawful and purposeful to do any day of the week."

Jesus' last line in our gospel reading: "For the son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath, meaning that the truly human one (that is fully human and fully God) is here to transform everyday into a Sabbath day. Jesus is the true and real king, who ushers in the Kingdom of God, and in Jesus' peaceable kingdom every day is sabbath, and every year is Jubilee.

There is a reading of the Gospel narratives, like the one we read today, in which people think Jesus doesn't care that much about Sabbath or that he plays loosely with the Sabbath rules leading folks to think that Jesus did not value Sabbath very much. But I think that with a closer reading we see that Jesus has the opposite view of Sabbath. Jesus has such a high view of sabbath that he actually wants every day to be sabbath. Jesus would say that all the sabbath practices, 7th day rest, 7 yearly festivals, 7 year land rest, and a 7 times 7 year of jubilee doesn't go far enough, but rather the ultimate hope is that the new peaceable kingdom that Jesus has brought to earth is a kingdom of every day being a Sabbath day. "Every day, set aside as an opportunity to live out of abundance so that we might share with others and love our

neighbors. Every day is a moment to stop and dwell and be present in the Joy and Wonder of God.” (Bible Project Podcast, Lord of the Sabbath)

As we begin to wrap up our summer series on Sabbath next week Pastor Jen will preach our last sermon on Sabbath. We come to a place of seeing that Sabbath is incredibly important; in fact Sabbath is the framework of which Jesus sees his kingdom existing. Sabbath is not something we do when we have the free time to get to; rather Sabbath is the goal of every day. Rest, joy, abundance, fellowship, worship is the goal of not just one day, but every day. As Lizzy said two weeks ago: *Sabbath is a state of mind that leads to delight. Sabbath as a delight is a different atmosphere. If you stop making the sabbath about yourself then you can enter into this state of mind and truly call the sabbath a delight.* May we all be about this work.

Amen