

This is a teaching sermon, a long one. You can use the insert to take notes if you like to refer back to it during the week.

Today's text is easy to mishear. So we'll lay down some background to help our ears.

The first layer of background information has to do with "the synagogue." What on earth is a synagogue? A synagogue is a Jewish house of worship. Synagogues were built originally for those who couldn't travel easily to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. In the time of Jesus, Jews lived not only in Galilee, but in far off places like Macedonia, Greece, Asia Minor, Persia, even Rome. Some lived in foreign lands by choice, others by circumstance, but none of them could get to the temple in Jerusalem without many days of travel. Synagogues provided that space for Jews to remain connected to each other and to their God while separated from the central location of their worship life. Without synagogues, scattered Jews would have been hard pressed to maintain their identity as God's people.

The need for synagogues only increased once the temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 A.D. As more Jews dispersed during the fall of the city, and with no centralized place to worship, the synagogue provided the room for Jews to preserve their social and religious life outside of Israel. They became communities within larger non-Jewish communities, gathering before God in the

synagogue to remember their calling as God's instrument to bless the world.

Worship in the synagogue wasn't complicated. Worship consisted of gathering together, listening to scripture read and interpreted, giving thanks and giving alms for the poor, and being sent to bear witness to God in the surrounding culture. I hope this structure sounds familiar. The church's worship follows the same pattern as synagogue worship. We gather, we hear, we give in thanks, we go. Obviously the details and content of our worship differ from the synagogue, but we share an underlying pattern.

There's a reason for this. Where did Paul go to preach the gospel when he arrived in a new area on his missionary journeys? Most often to the synagogue. The converts he won continued to worship there, not thinking of themselves as separate from Judaism. Later, when they broke with the synagogue, they kept the worship pattern they knew, and the mindset that goes along with it. That is, the church is a community called out from a larger community. When it gathers together, God forms it by the word, then sends it back into the larger community to reflect who God is in word and deed.

The basic form of *temple worship* was *animal sacrifice*, and it was not carried over in Christian worship or in Jewish worship after the destruction of the temple around 70 A.D.

That's our first layer, the Jewish synagogue and the vital role it played in preserving Jewish worship and identity in an age without a temple.

The second layer of background is focused on "the Pharisees." When I hear the word "Pharisee," I see one of those villains in silent films, dressed in black, twirling his long mustache and tying a damsel in distress to the train tracks. If we've grown up in church, we've learned most likely to think of the Pharisees as the bad guys, while Jesus and his followers were the good guys.

But the Pharisees weren't all bad, especially not in the gospel of Luke, no more than we are all good. They also played a role in preserving the Jewish faith. Pharisees were lay people, not clerics, who had a keen interest in keeping the law. Not only did they bring the old law forward, but they also applied it to the situations of their present day. The goal was to provide the common people with a way to obey God's will in every circumstance of their lives, whether they were washing dishes, cooking meals, burying the dead or observing the Sabbath day. They extended the reach of the law so that Jewish people by their behavior would be distinct from people in general, thus revealing their God given identity and bearing witness to their God.

Priests were fixed to the temple in Jerusalem, but Pharisees lived wherever the Jewish people were scattered across the world.

Their devotion and presence gave them a lot of influence in local synagogues. Since they were not tied to the temple system, they survived beyond the temple's destruction. They became the ancestors of what we today call rabbis, Jewish teachers of the law.

The Pharisees often clashed in or near synagogues with Jesus and early Christians. In their noble attempt to build life around the law, the Pharisees inadvertently created a burdensome network of rules that could be stifling to those who tried to keep them, and a source of self-righteousness for those who managed to do so. That network of rules was especially thick around keeping the Sabbath. Jesus took an approach to Sabbath observance that the Pharisees felt as a threat.

That brings us to our next layer of background, this one on the Sabbath. It's hard to overstate the value placed on keeping the Sabbath day in Jewish faith. Everybody knows about the 10 commandments. But the commandment to keep the Sabbath makes up a third of the content of those 10 all by itself. The Sabbath commandment is discussed more than any other commandment in scripture, save the first commandment to have no other gods. And wherever the Sabbath is discussed, its value is honored and its reach is often extended. For instance, the command to set aside one day a week for rest extends to letting the fields rest once every seven years. Time doesn't allow for more

examples, but you get the idea. Sabbath keeping was super important.

If the synagogue made space for preserving Jewish identity, the Sabbath created the time for it. One day in seven was set aside for worship and rest. Just as God rested to enjoy the good work of creation, so the people rested from the daily grind to take in the splendor of God's world and the mystery of their own lives.

Christians also observed the Sabbath on Saturday until they no longer worshipped in the synagogue. From that point, they worshipped on Sunday, the day Jesus was raised from the dead, or the 8th day of creation as they put it, the day God made all things new.

In order to honor God and maintain their distinctiveness, Jews felt they had to keep the Sabbath, which included not working. But inevitably, questions arose about special situations. People had to eat. Was it okay to cook on the Sabbath? The answer was no. Cook the day prior. What if a farm animal needed help or it might die? Could someone help the animal? The answer was yes, but just barely. Pharisees, chief interpreters of the law, leaned hard toward few exceptions. Certainly one couldn't thresh wheat and harvest on the Sabbath. Nor could one heal, which was work that could be done on another day.

Then along came Jesus. Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, deeply imbedded in synagogue worship and Sabbath observance, as Luke makes clear. I kind of like hippies, but Jesus wasn't one of them, living on the fringes and cavalier toward the rules. He was among the people, gaining in popularity and influence. So naturally the Pharisees wondered about his take on things, and were alarmed when Jesus differed from them. Where would he take the people? How might Jewish life be altered if Jesus won the day?

Jesus reconnected to the heart of the Sabbath. Too many rules about what could and couldn't be done had obscured the deepest intention of Sabbath keeping. Jesus obviously believed that at least some Pharisees had lost sight of the Sabbath's core. According to Jesus, the heart of the Sabbath was life, staying in touch with, practicing and preserving true life (bottom line).

So, when some of the Pharisees questioned why his disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath, Jesus answered that they were hungry. And as with David and his companions who ate bread set aside for the priests when they were famished, so his disciples could break the law for a higher principle, namely because they needed to eat to stay alive and didn't have anything else to fill their bellies.

And when the Pharisees wondered if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, he gave them what they were looking for. He restored the withered hand, even though it wasn't legal to do so. Why? Not because Sabbath law didn't matter, but because the heart of the law was to extend life. Not to heal on the Sabbath wasn't a neutral position in Jesus's way or thinking. Choosing not to heal when one could was to do evil instead of good.

My hunch is all of us are on board with Jesus, or at least we think we are. We don't want to be legalistic about Sabbath keeping, either, fretting over whether or not to do a load of laundry on Sunday. We don't mind that his disciples found some grain for lunch and we are downright pleased that the man's hand was healed, no matter what day it was. But are we really on board with Jesus, or might he be alarmed by our current Sabbath practice?

I'm indebted to Ryan Bonfiglio for the insight that the Sabbath actually has two components: rest and work (two lines in the middle of the page). The work we do on the Sabbath is worship. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." If anyone doubts that worship is work, ask the parents of toddlers trying to get here by 9:30 in the morning; or the widow with severe arthritis who gets up at 6 am because it takes that long to get ready by 10 when her ride shows up. Worship requires the work of preparation before we get here and the work of participation after

we get here: mind, spirit, body engaged. If we think of Sabbath as only rest, then it's easy to justify not coming to worship because we're wiped out and getting here and joining in can be so difficult.

But rest is also an essential part of Sabbath, the kind of rest that helps us unhook from the pressures of day to day production, so that we can remember that life consists of more than work.

Driven to achieve, possess and earn, we lose touch with the simple delight of being alive. Relentless activity puts undue pressure on God's creation and leads us to think of the creation as a thing we must extract stuff from rather than a gift we're meant to enjoy. So God calls us once a week to renew our connection to the Creator through the work of worship, and our connection to the creation through restful, appreciative, delight. When we keep Sabbath in this way, the promise is we will receive true life.

Since life is the intent of the Sabbath, Jesus was willing to let his disciples pluck grain and to heal the man with the withered hand. But in no way was he tearing down Sabbath practice. He was honoring it. That was his argument to the Pharisees, not that they were too uptight about the law and ought to relax, but that they weren't true enough to the heart of the law. And the heart of the law needs to be kept because life flows from it.

Here are a few conclusions I draw:

I'm a lousy Sabbath keeper. Even though I worship every Sunday, I don't rest in it as the intention of the day demands. This is a shame because I deprive myself a measure of the life God intends to give to me. I'll let you draw conclusions about your own practice.

Also, if Sunday is the only day we have to crash, we're working too hard. We may love our work, but that's not the point. The point is we should not work so hard during the week either at our job or our home that we have no energy left for worship. Worship has always taken energy and always will. So wearing ourselves out, even happily, gets in the way of receiving the life God intends to give us through Sabbath practice.

Another one: gathering together for worship in shared space and time, resting from work which is too eager to claim us, and being committed to both helps to keep our identity as God's children intact. The layers of worship space, worship time and our serious engagement build up in us a sense of whose we are, who we are and what we're here for which is hard to replicate any other way.

Finally, Sabbath day needs to be the biggest day of the week. When we honor it the most it will bleed over and shape the other days rather than the other way around. When we keep it well

Year 1, 01/29/2017, Greeneville, Tennessee 10
Luke 6:1-11, "The Heart of the Sabbath"

it's influence covers all time, and that's what we want because
Sabbath Day is the day of life.

One question: what one change could you make to improve
your Sabbath practice?

Caveat of having to work on Sunday.