

The Manifest Complexity of Sabbath
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 6:1-11

"There are people and forces out there that want to 'keep it simple.' They aim to simplify through technology and media. Their goal is to distill complicated tasks into simple soundbites and create simple thinkers. Our task is not to embrace simple thinking or simple actions. We are called to manifest complexity."¹

Isn't that just the best thing you've heard in a while? It comes from the blog of Milwaukee pastor Steve Jerbi. Manifest Complexity is the name of his blog, and I wish I had thought of that title first, because it is just brilliant.

In that spirit, let's take what may seem like a few simple actions taken by Jesus and his disciples on the Sabbath, and let's manifest the complexity.

It's a familiar pattern in the gospels... Jesus and his disciples are roaming around on a Sabbath, they encounter a problem, or someone with a problem that needs help, and they do something about it.

None of the Gospel writers seem to paint sympathetic pictures of religious leaders in their day, especially the Pharisees, which makes sense, given the complicated relationship Jesus seems to have had with them.

Before I get all self-righteous and start wagging my 21st century finger, let's consider the manifest complexity of being a Pharisee.

The Pharisaical tradition arose as a Jewish faith response after the destruction of the Second Temple, which was destroyed by the Roman Army in 70 A.D. in part, to punish them after the revolt of the Maccabees. For hundreds of years, a centralized priestly authority was housed at the Temple, but now it was destroyed. How would their faith survive?

¹ The blog Manifest Complexity can be found at <https://manifestcomplexity.wordpress.com/>

It was the Pharisees that saved Judaism from being completely crushed by democratizing their religious experience. They offered people modes and means of devotional practice that could be followed anywhere by anyone without direct oversight or mediation by a Priest.

So the challenges they make towards so many of Jesus' actions could just be sincere concerns about the welfare of the people and the shared ritual practices available to them. They're just trying to make sure that Jesus and his followers observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.² After all, it's one of just ten rules written in stone for them.

We know that Sabbath-keeping is really good self-care; whose interests are served when we are overworked, over-extended and just plain exhausted? Certainly not God's.

Sabbath held a spiritual purpose for the people; it helped them remember to be thankful to the God who freed them from slavery in Egypt so long ago. It was a break for everyone in the household, from the eldest to the youngest. Even the slaves and animals rested. Perhaps it even served like a safety valve for those who were in charge, so that they did not accidentally become an oppressor themselves.

Sabbath observance was an issue for the early church. As the church began to include more and more Gentiles, the question of the faith's relation to its Jewish roots evolved. Clearly, the early church considered the Hebrew Scriptures to be its law. What was maybe a little less clear is how to see that law in light of the Christ Event.

Sabbath can manifest its own kind of complexity. On January 1st, a new French law went into effect, allowing employees to ignore work e-mails after hours. The law, dubbed the "*right to disconnect*," was intended to help workers better balance their work and personal lives.

Now, I understand the value of electronic Sabbath, my family likes to hassle me about having my phone near the dinner table, but I'm nervous to set it down too far away if I am waiting on an important text or e-mail.

There has to be some contingency plan, for those times when something comes up that is not officially covered, and people have to figure out what to

² Deuteronomy 5:12-15

do. In Jesus' day, it was customary to turn to the Pharisees and scribes in such situations, because they were the ones who remembered all 613 laws of Torah, and how tradition and precedent had worked out before. They were the ones who could help them figure out what was faithful.

Which means that maybe the Pharisees weren't really trying to be difficult... they were just doing their job. I doubt that they looked at the hungry disciples and wanted them for faint from hunger. I imagine them weighing how important the Sabbath was and thinking, *"That man with the withered hand has been that way as long as we've known him. What is one more day? This commandment is important."*

And that's not wrong, but it's not all right either. The Pharisees seem to be holding on to the letter of the law, but forgetting the spirit of it all together.

Jesus seems to weigh things out differently. He too knows the Torah and the commandments. And when the Pharisees seem to get all caught up in the requirements of the law, Jesus remembers its purpose.

The Sabbath is meant to be a gift to people. It is meant to provide a pause in the constancy of work. It is meant to be a chance to clear our heads of all the voices that clamor for our attention so that we can make space for the voice and direction of God.

That rest and clarity is meant to help us live more fully into God's ways of justice and compassion and peace.

So maybe Jesus was inspired by the law. Maybe he remembered God's liberation of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and he was inspired to give some of that same freedom to the man with the withered man. Instead of doing the cautious thing, Jesus thinks, *"Why should he wait even one more day for liberation?"*

Sabbath is important, nowhere will you find Jesus saying otherwise.

It's just not more important than showing mercy and relieving the suffering that is right there in front of him in that moment.

In one of religion's many complexities, it is in practicing Sabbath and re-centering himself in God that Jesus heard the cries that called him to break the law.

And it is for us that in practicing Sabbath our hearts can be led to see the places where, like the Pharisees, we may not be wrong, but we aren't right either.

If we want to see things from a different point of view, if we hope to bring healing or be healed ourselves in this broken world then we must get close enough to touch and be touched.

That is why, on our Sabbath, we come here to worship we get up from our pews and walk around embracing and looking in one another's faces as we pass the peace. It is why everyone is invited back each Sunday to participate in a community that is intentional, that requires time, and the energy to listen to others and the ability to share of ourselves.

The truth is, as Christians we look to Jesus for how to act, but we aren't Jesus. And some days we feel more like a Pharisee wanting to do what's right, or a disciple that needs to be fed, or an outcast hoping to be made whole again.

And perhaps we learn to be a little bit wary of those moments when we feel like we are completely wrong or completely right. Sometimes we will be one or the other, but more often we will be called to look beyond simple answers. And that's how we learn to unbend, and remember the freedom that comes with mercy and compassion. Amen.