

**God, Neighbor, and Land**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Mark 2:23 – 3:6**

Imagine you are a poor fisherman, or a day laborer, or just someone who we'd call food-insufficient – that means you are someone who isn't 100% sure where your next meal is coming from. And imagine you've been walking for days, traversing the hilly countryside of the Golan Heights. Sometimes, through the kindness of strangers, you find a place to crash. Other nights you aren't so lucky, so you ball up your cloak for a pillow, and sleep underneath the stars.

And imagine that a few weeks ago, you met a man who changed your whole perspective about the universe. He explained the scriptures to you in a way that made total sense – he opened your eyes to God's presence in your midst. And in his company, and in the company of those who also follow him, there is so little talk of petty things. And there is so much talk of important things. And you feel connected – to God, to your neighbor, to the land.

And imagine it's early on a Sabbath morning. And you are hungry. Famished even. And on your way to the synagogue you pass through a beautiful grainfield. There's a cool breeze, and as the morning sun seeks its perch in the sky, its rays create the most beautiful waves of amber. And you even feel the morning dew on your toes. And the man you follow says, "Give us this day, our daily bread." And all of a sudden, a grainfield becomes a supper table. And you stand in the presence of people you love. And you pop the grain heads in your mouth as if eating popcorn. And you find yourself surrounded in laughter, and in fullness, and your sense of weariness, your sense of bone-deep travel fatigue is suddenly-stilled. You are transported to a banquet. There's new energy at this banquet, perhaps the kind of energy the Israelites experienced eating manna in the wilderness. And here in this moment, you are connected – to God, to your neighbor, to the land.

And I want to ask you two questions?

If you ever found yourself this hungry, would you stop to ask the day of the week before partaking?

And if you ever felt this connected, would that feeling dissipate because of something as insignificant as the day of the week?

Friends, I fear the day that comes, be it Sunday or any other day of rest, where those who hunger, and those who long for connectedness are denied their needs, because their needs do not comply with the hours of operation.

Torah, that is the law, or the particulars of God's covenant with humanity, includes the practice of Sabbath – setting apart one day a week for rest. And Torah, and its particulars like Sabbath, were created to disrupt humanity from the mundane, not-so-holy practices of everyday life. Torah, and its particulars like Sabbath, were created to help keep humanity connected to God, to one another, and to the land.

When I read today's passage, it occurs to me that Jesus lived in a such a way as to make every day about his connectedness to God, to his neighbors, and to the land. And in so doing, Sabbath, while still

worthy, was relegated to secondary status. Because every day became an act of resting in God. When neighbors are fed there is rest. When neighbors are fed together, there is peace. When a neighbor is healed there is cause for celebration. When neighbors are healed amidst community, healing becomes collective hope for all that God can do and be. And when there is peace, and when there is healing, there is a land that is as it should be: one that feeds; one that employs; one where everybody's got a stake; one where God is present.

Contrast Jesus with these Pharisees. We call them Pharisees in today's story, but they live in any age. Their sense of righteousness is bound up not in connectedness to God, neighbor, and land, but in application of the law. And it's ironic. They enter their temples, and they read text after text after text where God calls for, longs for, I would even say demands communities that care for one another. That means the marginalized, the ones most vulnerable – in their day it was widow, orphan, and stranger – these people were to be treated with dignity, and offered empathy, charity, and compassion. Debts were to be forgiven, lands were to be restored, and cloaks could not be seized.

The self-deemed righteous prayed for these things. Every day. And especially on Sabbath. And they preached them too. And they still do today.

And on this Sabbath morning, they see what they claim to long for. There's a mini-Jubilee right in front of their eyes: Jesus and his disciples enjoying the land, God, and neighbors they are connected to. And the vulnerable are healed, too. But have you not heard, do you not know? You aren't allowed to sell chicken sandwiches on Sunday. And you are most certainly not allowed to offer glimpses of God's in-breaking realm.

And so the trap is set. And one day soon, the sticklers for the law will punish God in their midst.

As I prepared for today's sermon, and read through this lection several times, I couldn't quite make up my mind about how to feel about these Pharisees. They made me angry. They made me sad. They made me feel lots of things. But here's where I settled.

I think they were the victims of their own privilege. To ask why someone would dare eat, or busy themselves plucking grain on Sabbath, is to have never been hungry. And to scoff at the notion of healing someone on Sabbath, is to have never known the urgency of wellness while experiencing poor health. And to enforce the rigidity of Sabbath in order to maintain your standing, is to have never known the freedom of God's equality. And to fixate on God's law, and the powers that perverted interpretations provide to the mighty, is to miss the breadth of God's mercy and grace.

And I hope that one day, even Pharisees will experience God's creativity, and that such creativity will make the Sabbath something that also connects them to God, to neighbor, and to land.

I also did this week's preparation amidst Wednesday and Thursday's tweetstorms. And one thing I found interesting was a pervasive theme, whether on the left, or the right, or in the middle. There seems to be a notion that hurtful tweets are only words. And that tweets shouldn't be so big a deal as to cancel our favorite TV comedies, or eliminate the advertising revenue of late night talk show hosts, or sideline the careers of our favorite athletes, celebrities, or politicians. And for goodness sakes, tweets need to stop being SO politicized.

Well, at the risk of being too political, tweets are a big deal. Racist ones. And ones with insensitive four-letter words. And ones that are reckless. Even when they deliver with savage precision the clarity of what we deem to be most righteousness, they are still harmful. And they are still wrong.

Here's why. Abusive and insensitive tweets dehumanize people. When we taunt with race, or gender, or sexuality, or ethnicity, or any other man-made separator, we seek to distance ourselves from our connectedness to neighbor. We seek to make someone less than human, so that we can make ourselves a little more than human.

Roseanne Barr's tweet probably isn't an affront to a lot of straight, white males. But to anyone who's endured racism, or been the victim of fear-mongering, it's another painful, forceful thrust against equality. Samantha Bee's monologue about Ivanka Trump may well have had some salient points. And it may well have delighted millions of self-deemed progressive women. But her cruel and crass vocabulary choice only helped to revive a word rooted in violence and oppression against women. And to anyone who's endured such violence, it's more salt in the wounds. And when our leaders tweet derogatory things about immigrants, or other nations, or conquests of every variety, each character they type chips away at the self-esteem of God's beloved.

So if you think it doesn't matter, ask yourself how many times your welfare has been affected by something as insignificant as the color of your skin, or the gender you identify with, or the neighborhood in which you live. And even if you can honestly answer no to that question, there are at least a dozen people you love who can answer yes.

Good friends, Sabbath points us back to God. It reminds us of our connectedness to God's world, and to our neighbors, and to our land. And I think Sabbath reminds us that what we do when it's not Sabbath – those times when we work, or tweet, or play, or indulge, or run, or jump, or drive, or heal, or even pick grain tops – none of these activities are all that much good, if they're not in a spirit of connectedness. And I think when we live in connectedness, we are reminded that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.

So close your eyes. And imagine you are hungry. And imagine you long to be connected.

Now open them. Friends, there is good news. We belong to a God who will feed us. And we sit amongst a people who long to be connected to one another. And we have a chance to be people who are connected to our God, to our neighbor, and to our land. Even on Sundays. Especially on Sundays.

Amen.