

Practicing Sabbath

A busy world that never stops – can we?

My grandfather worked in newspapers – as a subeditor – as did my older sister – revising stories and laying out the pages of the newspaper. Much of that work is now done overseas to cut costs and even so, newspapers are struggling to survive. What's changed?

Many people today get their news from Facebook, from Twitter or other social media. The news cycle now runs 24 hours a day and seven days a week, without a break, and newspapers can't keep up.

Work never stops either. Unlike in previous generations, work follows you everywhere you go on your mobile phone. Younger people often seem addicted to their phones, checking who has put up or responded to a post on Facebook or Instagram or checking emails from work. Ironically, leisure – taking a break from the demands of work – is now considered an 'industry'.

Contemporary life for many people is full of pressures that don't slow down when you get older – there's grandchildren to mind and endless medical appointments to keep. What does it take to actually take time out and to realign our lives?

This morning we'll consider **God's** answer to our busyness – which is the idea of **Sabbath**, a day of the week where we down tools as it were and take time out from our normal routines.

... But it seems that Jesus got himself into big trouble – consistently – by doing things on the Sabbath that were considered unlawful.

Understanding the Sabbath

The initial basis of Sabbath thinking in the Bible comes from the **creation account** in Genesis:

On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day ... So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Genesis 2:2–3).

This idea of working for six days and then resting on the seventh day to enjoy God's creation is listed in the **10 commandments**, the fifth of which forbids that any work be done on the seventh or Sabbath day – by people or animals – and instead calls people to remember God's mighty acts of redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave ... Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

(Deuteronomy 5:12–15)

So it becomes a day of worship.

Later Jewish groups like the Pharisees enlarged on this basic Sabbath principle by detailing 50 or more definitions of what constituted 'work'. In Christian practice, you may remember restrictions placed on Sunday, our Sabbath day, back in the 1950s and 1960s ... no work, no sport, no shopping, no buying petrol – and in the Church a long list of other prohibited activities. Does anyone remember those days? The Church was acting much like the Pharisees in defining what could or couldn't be done on Sundays.

One reason why the Sabbath law was such a hot issue in Jesus' day was that it had become one of the main **identity markers** of Jewish life that helped distinguish Jewish people from their pagan neighbours – along with circumcision for males and the food laws. Keeping the Sabbath had become a test of loyalty to Israel's God. So when Jesus broke the Sabbath law, the Pharisees considered him **disloyal** to Israel and to God.

I wonder what identity markers we maintain as Christians? One that comes to mind for conservative Christians is the traditional view of marriage as being between a man and a woman. I suspect it's one reason why many conservative Christians fought tooth and nail to preserve this understanding and will not consider allowing same gender marriage ... for them it's a line in the sand that marks them out as Christian.

[Jesus' audacity to heal on the Sabbath](#)

Coming back to the time of Jesus, there was much importance attached to what one did or did not do on the Sabbath day.

... Yes, it was a social and religious marker

... Yes, it was the day of weekly worship and teaching in the synagogue

... but for Jesus it was also the opportunity to bring healing and wholeness to people he came across, like the woman in our story today. His argument is that if it's OK to free **animals** on the Sabbath, then how much more appropriate is it to free **people** who are bound by sickness!

In an earlier passage in Luke's Gospel – in chapter 4 – Jesus also goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath – and preaches about his mission of bringing **release to captives** and **freedom to the oppressed**, when he quotes a passage from Isaiah.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me **to proclaim release to the captives**

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This is a key part of God's agenda now being instigated by Jesus in his healing ministry. So when people rejoice at what Jesus is doing – bringing release, wholeness and restoration – this is actually a most appropriate thing to do on the Sabbath day – **it's part of the good news that Jesus announces and puts into action.**

But the synagogue leader is not impressed and insists that the Sabbath is a day of rest and worship – not work. In his way of thinking, healing people and setting them free is **work** and not **worship** – and is therefore forbidden.

So there is a clash between following the rules that have developed around the Sabbath and offering compassion and practical help. As in much of Jesus' ministry, he rocks the boat and challenges traditional ways of thinking and acting. Showing compassion and setting the woman free from her ailment takes higher priority than being limited by rules (**slide**).

To underline his approach, Jesus calls the woman **a daughter of Abraham**, a person included in the blessings promised to Abraham, a valued member of God's family. It's similar to when Jesus restores Zacchaeus – the short but corrupt tax collector who climbed up the tree to see Jesus over the crowds – he is called **a son of Abraham**. In both cases, a person on the edges of acceptable society is welcomed by Jesus – and affirmed as welcome in God's family. Such life-giving and life enhancing ministry is what the Sabbath is intended for according to Jesus.

Practicing Sabbath

So how might we retain the essential **nature** and **benefits** of taking a Sabbath without choking it with rigid rules? First, it's good to follow the cue from the **creation story** and to take **one day** each week **to rest and be refreshed** – to be reminded that the world keeps going quite happily without our contribution. Whether the day is Sunday or some other day, it's helpful to spend some time enjoying creation – going for a walk and observing the beauty around you, doing some gardening or just taking in the diversity of nature. This is some of what I try to do on my day off. And as the weather improves in spring, it's a delightful time of year to enjoy the beauty and diversity of nature.

But it's also good to follow the cue from the Deuteronomy reading and to remember and celebrate **God's mighty deeds through Jesus** – especially the freedom and joy of new life that we have in Jesus. This is **a call to worship** – to praise and thank God. One of the practices in our family – learned from living among Jewish people both in Melbourne and in London – is to celebrate a **family Sabbath meal**. We try to do this once a week – often on a Friday night – but it could be on Thursday, Saturday or Sunday – whichever night is available. We light a candle, break bread, and pause, briefly, to remember Jesus and what his life means for our lives. We then eat a good meal, often with a glass of wine, and share stories of what's happening in our lives. It's closer to how the early Christians celebrated their love feast – as a shared community meal – that later morphed into the celebration we know as Communion.

Another option in practicing Sabbath may be **prompted by Jesus' actions**. He saw a woman and had compassion on her. He freed her from her burden, naming her as a daughter of Abraham, as someone **worthy** of receiving the blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants. By contrast, many of the people in the village probably ignored her and treated her as unworthy and even as an outcast. So

perhaps a challenge for us on **our** Sabbath days is to see where **we** can bring **wholeness, restoration or justice** to others. We could, for instance, take the opportunity of the Sabbath day to visit someone in need or to lobby for more compassionate treatment for asylum seekers.

Our world often seems so hectic and we seem to get caught up in its busyness and non-stop activity. God's remedy is to deliberately choose to practise the Sabbath – to take a day where we can let the world pass us by, a day where we can enjoy creation and rejoice in all God has done for us, and a day where we can offer compassion and healing and wholeness to others, a day to remember that we are human **beings**, not just human **doings**.

Amen.