

Sabbath Essentials (3Feb19) Luke6:1-16

A question about requirements of how to observe the sabbath may not be the most natural category for us.

But this week was pervaded with the category “non-essential services.” What’s required for us to keep functioning, and what can be readily set aside as superfluous or non-essential?

As the University of Wisconsin made a rare decision to shut down in the cold, professors and classes and learning were put on standby, but food and dorms and transportation and direct infrastructure connections were kept running. I don’t know how the engineering building or psychology department would feel about being told they’re non-essential, not really core to keeping UW on this bit of life support.

Of course it was city services, too. A glance at the city website told me that free mending, knitting, children’s hairstyling 101, scrabble, and basic computer help were all programs that were cancelled, and evidently deemed non-essential. But buses tried to remain in service. Police and Fire were on, and Public Works employees were providing residents with safe drinking water, picking up trash, and keeping streets, sidewalks and bike paths cleared (though in the midst of it, not even I was trying to use those cleared paths). It’s shocking to me that what we count as those vitals essentials, Palestinians are regularly forced to try to do without access to.

In my house, since Acacia works there, we were weighing whether the library should or shouldn’t count as essential. Clearly people could suffer through not picking up their latest murder mystery novel to read while hunkered under a blanket. But library buildings are often warming shelters, places for some of our poorer neighbors to get out of the cold and spend some free (literally free) time.

Shocking our culture’s typical sense, heck, even the mall was closed! How to shop for those unnecessary essentials we keep on purchasing?!

And so what about church? Essential or non-essential?

I want you to know we made sure your staff had options, that nobody was having to come to work if they thought it would be dangerous or detrimental to their family, though Anthony and Kaisa did show up to keep at their tasks of caring for our community. As we began considering language for new policy about this, we thought about how to cover “essential tasks that can only be performed at the building.” That means it’s tough to print bulletins or shovel sidewalks from home. But it could raise a subsequent question of how many cleared walkways or prepared bulletins we need if nobody else shows up.

That makes me figure that church is pretty optional. We cancelled a couple meetings this week, or actually postponed them. That isn’t exactly saying they were non-essential, since we’ll still get around to that work of planning worship and discussing building improvements and even the socializing of gathering for lunch. Bible study did carry on, with me figuring that those who wanted to brave the weather or wanted to huddle inside could opt for their own decisions.

All of this has me pondering overall the place of church. That I can’t ever compel anybody to come here—even in the nicest weather or with the most well-planned events or most consistent communication—makes this seem non-essential.

But there’s also always the question for me of what we offer that nobody else does. The most inflated historical truth claim has been that “there’s no salvation outside the church” and ends up making requisite presence here like the ticketing agency to get you into eternal life.

There could be a sense our practice here is tuning us in to source and destination in a way nothing else can. Or maybe with a statement that “God is love,” we would say that all love flows from God, and that makes what we do here essential. There’s even some reason to say that all humanitarian impulse and work for justice and peace has arisen out of the gospel we proclaim. (Though, of course, we much more regularly hear the contrary claim attributing to religion the injustices of war and racism and environmental degradation and hierarchies and oppressions.)

Maybe to ask it differently, instead of wondering whether church holds an essential place in our culture, we could ask what the essence of church is for you. What counts as the value and core of your experience of faith? And what is unnecessary or what is unessential and just gets in the way?

If you consider quiet prayer as the essential experience of church, then that might be at odds with a perspective centered on welcoming everyone as themselves, including chatty and active children. Again, if you consider being exposed to new cultures and expressions as essential embodiment, that mostly does not coincide with a central essence of singing some standard old hymns. Is church essentially about upright morality? Or essentially about community, which involves reconciliation that ignores wrongs? They may not be diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive, but are different in essence.

I think this gets closer to the core of what Jesus is addressing in our Bible reading today. Asking what is essential about church for us may edge toward the question of what was essential about the sabbath for him and his people and his time. It's sort of a question of recognizing importance, what other things could get in the way, what had to be set aside as nonessential.

We shouldn't, then, shrink this as a question of Jesus against Jewish faith clearly, or write off the Pharisees as too interested in legalistic details where Jesus has chosen the better part. Both sides ask what it means to observe the sabbath fully, what the essential services are, and in that how best to be relate to God. Just what does it take to focus on the essential relationship with God?

In one regard, this tradition goes back to these people's escape from slavery in Egypt. They asked for a pause from their labors for the opportunity to worship. Doing work would be to recommit to slavery and to spurn God's liberation. That fits exactly with our opportunity to be gathered here this morning, though it might feel a little more direct if we think about our weekend as being hard-earned through struggles of organized

labor. If you pick up hours or have an employee to work on the weekend, is that just a little extra cash and function of the economy, or essentially scabs and strike-breaking that fly in the face of liberty?

In another regard, the tradition of the sabbath goes back to the beginning of the Bible and the creation story, that the seventh day marked creation's goodness, of God celebrating work and life, to enjoy the accomplishment. That fullness is what the image on our bulletin cover is exalting.

Yet it makes a difficult tension, in the story and for us. We know that the work of creation is not complete, that all is not pure goodness, that for all to be able to enjoy as they ought to be able to, still requires some work. Jesus interrupts the rest so that creation can be more fully what it is intended to be, for hungry bellies and for a disabled and excluded man with the withered hand.

I think Jesus even raises the point that doing nothing is still doing something. He asks about destroying, doing harm, taking life. The comment seems to mean that failing to act on behalf of the man is equal to hurting him. Inaction is essentially injury.

On a pulpit swap, I get to bring my Lutheran identity into this UCC gathering, and will share that this reminds me of Luther's Small Catechism where he similarly notices that the 5th Commandment, you shall not murder, isn't kept only because you haven't killed anybody today, not just avoiding harm, but participation in assisting the good, the full spectrum of helping in all needs. So refusing to give away your extra coat may be murder for the person in the cold. Refusing to give up your privilege may constrain life of those who are deprived. Doing nothing about these things inhibits the goodness of creation.

So if Jesus is active for good, we may say we should follow his effort for healing and justice, that what is essential for our relationship with God isn't actually to be sitting around dawdling here on a Sunday morning, when instead we could be out doing the good God intends, sharing the harvest, reaching out for the sick, integrating

those who have been excluded, striving for the healing and wholeness of creation.

But even Jesus doesn't resolve that tension. He doesn't give up on sabbath worship. He still gathers with the praying community. So there is still place for us to gather today, to rest and celebrate, to remember what got us here, to enjoy liberty. We still need this focus on God, this intentional regrounding in the relationship and essential orientation toward the good so we know what to do.

With that, I also want to hold onto one more tension. Our main tension isn't between sabbath tradition or the ability to do work. Ours isn't whether we can do good. Ours isn't whether your presence here is necessary to earn salvation.

Our tension is among varied essentials, of the place of this sabbath worship and connection and renewal in our relationship to God and neighbor and creation amid all the other essentials of our lives. None of us gets the perfect attendance award, and all of us know the competing claims on our lives and time and all the ways a weekend can be filled and the directions we're pulled, or even how the fullness of life makes us want to claim that the liberty of Sunday morning is in the one chance to sleep in, to read the paper, to have leisure, to claim it as sabbath rest, even without the part that is renewed relationship with God. Sometimes being here is risky. And we almost all recognize that Sunday doesn't have the sacred place in our society it once had, as worship attendance dwindles and other opportunities abound.

So what about our practice has to change? Where is the place of church in a changing culture? How do we continue to claim and to share sabbath? How do we observe and practice, maybe in new ways, church as an essential service?