

Being Available 24/6
By Martin Copenhaver
Still Speaking Devotional: April 28, 2013

Missing the Point

May the words spoken and the words received, be only in your service, great God of love. Amen.

The Bible is full of people, just like us, who have a habit of missing the point. Yet God in the Hebrew scriptures and Jesus of the Gospels never gave up on us. But we are called back and called in to re-understand and re-connect.

This morning's story is about the Sabbath. It is rich and complex, as are most of our scripture stories. What I don't want us to miss is that the ones who challenge Jesus are the religious and political leaders, pawns of the empire to some degree, who have their own agenda for making a case against Jesus. They are those who understand the threat that he poses, and have personal reasons for seeing Jesus' actions as politically rebellious. They are the ones who will cooperate with the empire to have him executed as a criminal against the state.

That's there, but this is also a story about the Sabbath itself, and this is what I want to focus on this morning.

The Bible describes the point of Sabbath-keeping in a couple of different ways:

First, Sabbath is a reminder that even God understood the need for rest and to delight in the creation. This comes from the origin stories in Genesis. In the very first chapters of our scripture, God created for 6 days, and then rested. Scripture cautions us to remember the Sabbath and keep God holy. It is a time to focus on who and what is holy.

A devotional writer a few years ago was reflecting on this Bible verse from Isaiah 58: "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day... then you shall take delight in the Lord." (Isaiah 58:12-14). He wrote: A friend of mine, speaking of the time she was a pastor, says she felt that she had to make herself available at any hour, every day of the year. Laughing at herself, she said, "There used to be a time when only God was that important." He went on to say: "It is precisely the reminder that 'only God is that important' that is the basis of the practice of keeping Sabbath. We are not indispensable, but we are valued nonetheless. It is good to have that reminder on occasion. In fact, it is essential."¹

We can miss the point. Like this pastor, I often miss the point, and feel I have to respond to all the demands of the congregation. Every email, phone calls, meetings—right now. Eugene Peterson, in a book he's written about ministry,² talks about the importance of Sabbath-keeping

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver, "Being Available 24/7," UCC Still Speaking Devotional, April 28, 2013

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), "Prayer Time" chapter

for those in ministry. He reminds us that the Sabbath in Jewish tradition begins as it's described in the Genesis origin story: there was evening and there was morning, a day. One of the first things humans do in this rhythm of Sabbath is to sleep. And while we begin our Sabbath day sleeping, God is busy creating. When we wake and after our period of Sabbath, we are simply joining that which God is already at work doing. We ourselves, don't invent the work of God.

How does the church miss the mark of Sabbath keeping? Sometimes it is the institutionalizing our own set of rules. Like worship must only last for 60 minutes. Or we don't have time for anything other than the briefest of opening prayers at meetings because we have business to accomplish, failing to see that taking time with God is exactly what directs the business we have.

How do you or your family miss the mark of Sabbath? For some it might be being so scheduled that there isn't time for worship in community. Or . . . ?

A second rationale for Sabbath-keeping described in scripture comes from Exodus 20:

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

In this sense, Sabbath was a reminder of the humanity of the Jewish people. When they were slaves, they were dehumanized, as objects for production. Here, Sabbath re-humanizes us. Sabbath is a gift from God, we're told in Exodus 16 (16:28-30). We are valuable for our being, not just our doing. To take time for rest, for "wasting time" with God, for enjoying the people and creation around us. Notice that it's a communal practice. You, as my people together, remember this.

Notice also that it is not only about recognizing the value of and need for a work/rest rhythm for the Jews, but everyone and everything. Not only the economically free persons, but those who are bound in labor to you. Not only those who belong to your cultural, religious, political group, but those who are immigrants or residents from another place or those who practice a different religion. And not only humans, but the rest of creation. Animals are in need of a work/rest rhythm. In other parts of scripture, the land itself is described in terms of Sabbath, that if the soil is overworked, it will stop producing so it must be kept fallow every 7 years.

Everyone and every part of creation is worthy of regular and dedicated rest. Everyone and every part of creation is of value simply because we exist, not because of what we can accomplish or do for another part of creation. None is a resource to be exploited for our gain. We surely had a stark reminder with our polar vortex and now this wide temperature swing of the way creation groans because we have forgotten to value creation and have thought of her as a resource to tap for our own desires.

When Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, he challenges the religious leaders who seem to have missed the forest for the trees. The rules said Sabbath-keeping was being in community to listen to God's word and to worship, but otherwise no work was to be done. Therefore, healing, they point out, is prohibited. But Jesus had a different message. A line we would hear in this story from Mark's Gospel but which is missing from Luke's account might be helpful here. In Mark's Gospel Jesus says: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) Jesus, reminds us that if the practice of Sabbath-keeping is injurious to a person—such as being burdened with an illness for yet another day—then we've missed the point. If Sabbath was created for the benefit of humanity and creation, surely a sign of God's compassion, then showing compassion on the Sabbath is exactly what would delight God.

I love how the passage we read today ends, with Jesus taking a Sabbath, a true Sabbath, one that is scriptural. He, like any minister who works on the designated Sabbath day, went apart to pray, to be with God, to rest, to take time for refreshing himself as human "being" rather than human "doing." And, when the Sabbath was over, he went back to healing and teaching and feeding and being the compassionate hands of God.

May we do the same. Amen.