

Imagine you are a poor fisherman, or a day laborer, or just someone who we'd identify as food-insufficient in 2024 – 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 for the evening. 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 person 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 neighbors, to the land.

And imagine it is 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 feel the morning dew on your toes. And the man you follow says, "Give us this day, our daily bread." And suddenly, 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 neighbors, to the land.

And I want to ask you two questions:

If you ever found yourself this hungry, would you stop to ask what day of the week it was 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 neighbor, and to 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. The generosity of a grainfield will lead to the gravity of Golgotha.

In preparing for today's sermon, and reading through this lection several times, I've wondered how to feel about these Pharisees. They make me angry. They make me sad. They make me feel lots of things. But here's where I ultimately settle this morning.

I believe they are 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 urgent, desperate desire for wellness amidst the feeling of brokenness. And to enforce the rigidity of Sabbath to maintain your own 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 got to thinking about something else in reading this text. Both here at Millbrook, and at Sardis where I served before, people always ask me, "What is the aim of our congregation." And my answer has been consistent. It usually goes something like this:

We want to be a source of sabbath. We want to be a community that helps people find spiritual rest in the places and spaces where they can be their authentic selves, and express their authentic selves, and share their authentic gifts with others. And we want them to be able to do all of this at a pace that works.

Think about today's text? Picture the space, the pace, and the sharing of gifts. The banquet is serendipitous. It just sort of happens. Right out in the front of the church yard. And it lingers. And so does the healing. Jesus engages the neighbor with a withered hand, not after consulting Robert's Rules of Order, not after the choir finishes their anthem, not

discretely in the back hallway, but immediately, as the Spirit leads him. This is a connected community.

Now juxtapose this fluidity and generosity with the hustle and bustle of 2024. We are living in a world that insists upon rigid spaces and exhausting paces. There's an urgency to everything. And a finality to everything. And so many expectations.

The November election is 156 days away, but you'd think it was this afternoon. You would also think that this will be the last choice we ever make, and that it's the only way we can affect anything of significance.

In coverage of the Trump trial, a ticker told us how long the Jury was deliberating. Come on, come on, hurry it's been more than an hour! We've got more headlines to churn!

It's playoff season for basketball and hockey and the time is ticking. 48 or 60 minutes to definitively say and do all that matters. And for the rabid fan, responsibilities, indeed all sense of time and purpose disappear.

We keep a Nine to Five, and can you believe the audacity of big box stores closing on holidays. The kiddos need to be down before sunset, not to mention fed and bathed, and the garbage cans should be on the street.

And our busyness seeps into our rest. Sabbath becomes a calendar item; worship a chore to check off the list; community not something to happily cultivate, but just another obligation. God, people, and land become disconnected.

Good friends, when we observe it well, Sabbath points us back toward God. Sabbath reminds us of our connectedness to God's world, and to our neighbors, and to our land. And I believe Sabbath reminds us that what we do when it's not Sabbath – those times when we work, 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 performed in a spirit of connectedness. And I believe when we live in connectedness, we are reminded that the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity 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 a people who are connected to our God, to our neighbor, and to our land. Even on Sundays. Especially on Sundays. May it be so!

Amen.