

Keeping the Sabbath

You may remember that, back in March, I shared a part of the movie "Frisco Kid." Gene Wilder plays a young Jewish rabbi who comes to America in the late 19th century to take a congregation in San Francisco.

He arrives in New York and, almost as soon as his feet touch American soil, he's mugged and robbed. With no money to pay passage across the country, he starts walking. Predictably, within a couple of days he's worn out and hungry.

Just as he seems destined for an untimely demise, he stumbles into the camp of a small-time bank robber (Harrison Ford). Ford becomes the unwilling savior of the young rabbi, who sticks like glue through the remainder of the movie. Harrison feeds him, protects him during a barroom brawl, and when all his resources run out, he robs a bank to continue to support the two of them. Wilder returns the bank loot, but in the process, gives away their position, and a posse starts after them.

They're riding as hard as they can to stay ahead of the posse, when suddenly the rabbi stops and gets off his horse and starts walking. Turns out it's Friday at sunset—the beginning of Sabbath—and the rabbi refuses to ride on the Sabbath. Somehow the two manage to elude the posse all through the Sabbath, and finally make good their escape. Our text for this morning helps explain the rabbi's action.

<p>DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15 (NRSV) <i>Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But 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, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or</i></p>	<p><i>the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember 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.</i></p>
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The Sabbath was observed in Israel at some level beginning at Sinai. Early on, the observance was simply the cessation of work. The idea was to give everybody a time of rest—including, even, the work animals. The introduction of worship and liturgical observance doesn't appear in the Hebrew Scriptures until late in the period of the monarchy.

It's also about that time—specifically during the time of Isaiah—that we first find examples of disrespecting the Sabbath. Religious observance had become more important than ethical and moral considerations. For example, merchants and farmers and land owners would rest on the Sabbath and participate in the ritual observances; but they required their employees and servants—and their animals—to continue to work. Isaiah confronted that practice (58:1-9):

Shout out, do not hold back!

***Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.***

They heard that part about resting; but, they missed all that other stuff: "...your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." The just application of the commandment is: take a day of rest; but, also, give a day of rest.

The Torah said work should cease, but there was no specific definition of work beyond: "people should remain in [their] place" (Ex. 16:29), should "kindle no fire in all your habitations" (35:3), and should "not bear a burden" or "carry a burden out of your houses" (Jeremiah 17:22). What does "burden" mean? And there were no provisions in case of emergencies.

It was the duty of the Jewish Scribes to interpret the law; and they took their jobs very seriously. They spent their days stooped over parchment, shoulders aching, eyes burning from constant work under the dim light of smoky oil lamps, filling scroll after scroll with commentary about the law: defining, describing, until, by the time of Jesus, two complete multi-volume sets of commentaries had been written: the "Mishnah" and the "Targums". Several volumes were dedicated specifically to this one commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

In those volumes, rest is defined negatively, that is, by *prohibiting* certain behavior. "Carry no burden out of your houses." How do you define, "burden?" Several pages are dedicated exclusively to the question, "What is work?" What activities must be avoided on the Sabbath?

"Carrying a cup of honey more than six steps" is work. So, Jewish mothers would set the Sabbath table on Friday before sunset.

Oh, they had it down pat. They tried to cover every conceivable contingency of human behavior. But even though they were hair-splitting legalists, the Pharisees of Jesus' time could find loopholes better than a Philadelphia lawyer!

In the Gospels, Jesus faithfully observed the Sabbath by attending Synagogue and teaching. Still, he was involved in Sabbath controversies with the Pharisees.

Once, on the Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples were walking by a field and plucked some heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees apparently interpreted this activity as reaping, which was one of thirty-nine primary tasks prohibited on the Sabbath.

In good Pharisaic fashion, Jesus responds with Scripture, reminding them that David broke the law by eating the bread of the presence when he was hungry. He concludes, "The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus points out that the priests in the temple regularly work on the Sabbath, and says, "something greater than the Temple" is going on here (12:6). And he alludes to a passage in Hosea that says of the Sabbath observance, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (6:6)

Another time, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and the Pharisees are in his face. In their traditions, healing was permitted on the Sabbath only if life were in danger. Jesus expands that principle to permit any good act on the Sabbath (Mk 3:4). In Matthew's version, Jesus says, "If you are permitted to rescue your sheep from a pit on the Sabbath, you should be permitted to do good for a human." (12:11-12)

On and on we could go with incident after incident in the Gospels in which Jesus broadens the laws concerning the Sabbath.

Rest is not defined by prohibitions, but by permissions. It is not defined by ritual observance but by moral interaction with people.

On this Labor Day Sunday, when most of our people are not here, I want to affirm their choice to get away and rest—to break the patterns of the daily grind and to refresh body, soul and relationships.

Following the trajectory of Jesus' response to the Sabbath, keeping the Sabbath is not about rigid ritual or some hard rule about "going to church" every Sunday and feeling guilty if we miss. Sometimes we need a break from all requirements.

Still, Sabbath rest is not just a passive absence of work. If we follow the trajectory of Jesus' comments, sometimes rest is proactive. It *is* doing good on the Sabbath:

- Meditating on good things, like, "*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*" (PHILIPPIANS 4:8 ~ NRSV)
- Good things, like manifesting the Fruits of the Spirit: "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.*" (Galatians 5:22-23 ~ NRSV)
- Good things, like visiting someone in the hospital or nursing home—being a part of the healing process—doing something good as a part of Sabbath rest.

When the alarm goes off—and sometimes even before it goes off—I pop up

out of bed and pull on the sneakers and head out to door for a 2- or 3-mile walk/jog. Truth? Most of the time, I'd rather stay in bed. But I know that exercise, along with nutrition and rest, is a part of a balanced, healthy life. And I actually feel better after I walk.

Like exercise and nutrition and rest is a necessary part of physical health; keeping the Sabbath involves spiritual discipline, and the exercise of our spiritual gifts.

For some, it may sound more like work than rest. It's a part of that foolishness of faith that actually believes Jesus when he says: *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* (MATTHEW 11:28-30 NRSV)

Prayer slide