

“Engrained”

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Mark 2:23-3:6

When I moved to New York City for my first job out of college, I made my initial home in a tiny bedroom with no window, on the Upper West Side. The woman who owned the apartment was a fine flatmate— easy to get along with, and happy to share foods that we both ate. So we had a habit of going to the grocery store together so we could split costs. I remember walking through the produce section of the Fairway, when passing the fruits, she plucked a full, rounded grape off the bunch and plopped it into her mouth. She did the same thing with a cherry, liberating its pit from her mouth and tucking it into her pocket. I’m pretty sure a berry of some sort also found its way into her mouth.

I was *horrified*. It would be one thing if someone who didn’t have the money to buy fresh produce did that; I would understand that entirely; but she wasn’t in that position. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed. It didn’t seem they had. I thought about the pesticides that hadn’t been washed off yet— if you steal fruit, maybe it should be organic. I didn’t make a big deal of it to her— our arrangement was only for a few months until my intern housing opened up, and I needed it to go well as I had no other options, and indeed that summer in her apartment went fine otherwise. But I never forgot the moment I realized she was a grocery grifter.

When I think of the Pharisees as they noticed Jesus’ disciples casually plucking heads of grain— and eating them— on the Sabbath, when I consider their reaction, I remember how I felt that moment I noticed my roommate and her supermarket swindling habits. *The law does not allow this!*

Granted, my roommate was just a roommate, and only temporarily so; she was not someone who held a growing authority in a faith that I staked my life upon. Jesus, on the other hand, recited scripture, conferred with the rabbis, and lived out the faith in ways that captured everyone's attention. So if he flouted the law, wouldn't all just unravel? Let's look at the law a little more, before we consider the ways Jesus tested the boundaries of that law.

The law set forth in Deuteronomy, to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, was something ingrained in them and in all Jews. God's reason for requiring this day of rest were two: the rule set forth in Deuteronomy is tied to the production economy, which was tied to slavery— "Remember," the instruction gave, "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." So, taking the Sabbath was a way of stepping outside of a means of production that thrived on the exploitation of bodies and labor, and reminding the people that God intends something different.

In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, God gives this reason for the Sabbath: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord God consecrated the seventh day and made it holy." Exodus reminds us that *even God* needed, and took, rest. The commandment ties our rest to a holy creative power that ties to all that exists.

Before we get into the position of judgment for the Pharisees seemingly legalistic attitudes, let me clarify that there is a lot of generosity within ancient and contemporary Judaism to waive the regulations of Sabbath in favor of circumstances that affirm life. A modern example: If you have been in a hospital in this part of New Jersey or New York City, you have probably noticed a Sabbath Elevator. On the Jewish Sabbath, this kind of elevator stops, automatically opening and closing on every floor so that ritually observant Jews do not have to press a single button elevator. Doctors and other medical professionals can work on the Sabbath because their work is life-saving work, which takes precedence over rules for rest on the

Sabbath, but if there is anything that can lessen the burden of their work—like automated elevator stops— then that helps them satisfy halakha— that is, Jewish ritual law.

Within the Torah, there was a concept of a phrase called Pikuach nefesh— in Hebrew that means “to save a life or save a soul.” Jesus reminded his questioners of this principle when he responded to them, Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” – and his question silenced their challenges.

Still, it could be fair to ask whether the man with the withered hand was at risk of dying. Could Jesus waited until the next day to heal him? Were the disciples so hungry that waiting until the next day to gather grain would have starved them?¹

If you live in New Jersey, and you find you need to shop for something that isn't related to food or medicine, and it's a Sunday, you learn to just wait until Monday. Or go to New York City. New Jersey may be the only state that limits commerce so drastically on Sundays, which is the Christian Sabbath more than it is a Jewish Sabbath— Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday made that day most holy for Christians. I have to admit, it took some getting used to. But I do appreciate it; even though with soccer taking up our Sunday afternoons, and though I spend Sunday mornings in worship, it is also my job, the fact that I know I'm not going to make a Target run is a reminder that there is no need to pack one more thing into this holy day.

Lady Gaga recently revealed that while she was on tour in 2022, she did 5 shows while sick with COVID. I do not say this because I want to publicly shame her for putting others at risk for COVID- she did have a meeting with all her dancers and everyone else on stage with her, and gave them permission to opt out if they did not want to be exposed to her germs. And she would have been far enough removed from the rest of the stadium,

¹ Nanette Sawyer, “Jesus' Very Jewish Question About Sabbath” in *Christian Century*, May 31, 2024.

plus anyone going to a show in a megastadium had to know they were likely sitting near *someone* who has COVID and accept that risk. But what I do want to critique is our capitalistic drive that refuses the chance for rest if it is at the cost of making money or providing a product.

Within the Hebrew Bible, there are many examples that show us that life is more than production. In the book of Ruth, we see the story of two destitute women, after Naomi's husband dies, and her two sons die as well. Naomi asks the question, "what is my life worth, now that I have no sons or husband to show for it?" But where Naomi sees emptiness, her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth sees fullness. Ruth travels with Naomi to Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem, and there, Ruth was permitted to glean the fields in order to earn a subsistence living. Gleaning was a practice when the poor were allowed to enter privately owned fields during the crop harvesting, and pick up any leftover crops they could find after the initial harvest had been taken. In today's terms, it would be like Shoprite giving away all of their slightly imperfect foods to the poor. In Old Testament time, this was not only allowed, but mandated by Jewish law. When I imagine the disciples plucking grain from a field that is probably not theirs, and on the Sabbath, I think about the compassionate notion of sharing the fruits of the field that are part of our ancient scriptures.

I am pretty sure that Jesus was not trying to undo a core law of God's covenant with the people, one so important it made it into the Ten Commandments. Instead, he was pointing to the law's primary purpose, which is compassion. The Sabbath was made for Humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. It is a gift of compassion from God, to the people- a reminder that tells us that despite what the world tells us- that we are never enough unless we have something to show for it- we are enough.

Jesus' bending of the Sabbath- to satisfy the hunger of the disciples, and to care for people who needed healing- was furthering compassion, not denying it.

My colleague in DC shared a story about an 11-year old girl in her church. This child had been born very prematurely, and the church prayed hard for her strength and survival. Now, at the brink of puberty, her differences— her small size, her physical weakness— have become marks of prey in the shark waters of middle school. Some of the children she has grown up with have started calling her “Ewww!” whenever they see her. The parents shared with their pastor that on her own, their daughter began making a list, titled: “20 reasons why I am not Ewww.” The #20 reason she listed was this: “I am a child of God.”

Sabbath reminds us that we are each children of God, worthy of value— not because of how we look, or what we produce, or how much we earn, but simply because. Sabbath reminds us to see others that way, too.

Tricia Hersey was in seminary, working full time, raising a child, and relying on public transit to get to everything because she had to sell her car to afford graduate school. It troubled her that she was underperforming in seminary. There was no way she could read a thousand pages a week as her studies required. She wasn't getting enough sleep, and had found places at her graduate school— a nook in the library, a bench on the quad, any cranny she could find where she would nap at any point between classes. She finally came to realize, as she said, I was exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually, and I just didn't see any other way except to take a radical leap and say: ‘I don't care, let the chips fall where they may,’” “If I fail out of school, that's fine if I don't finish that grade — because I'm going to bed.”

Thus began the Nap Ministry. Tricia Hersey anointed herself as the Nap Bishop. She even organized public napping events, as a kind of performance art, and was stunned to find just how many people showed up, just to nap together. As a Black woman Hersey had grown up hearing that she had to work ten times harder to be seen and treated equally to her White peers. Choosing to opt out of that system, which had been ingrained into her, was difficult. But it was also revolutionary. She felt like she got her life back when she learned how to allow her body the rest she needed. Her book is called *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*. I look forward to reading it and learning how to honor the sacred call to rest for myself, and for others.

There are many messages ingrained in us about our worth, tied to what we do, what we make, and how we perform. But Jesus feeds us with something more. As we prepare for Communion, let's remember the disciples, plucking what they needed for their bodies from the grain field. Jesus reminds us that we are always given permission to come to his table and be fed with what we need. The communion meal is an act of restoration. The grain and the grape offer us a sabbath from our physical and spiritual hunger. We can take time with our sacrament, to feel its grace wash over us and renew us, and know that we are not renewed in order to go out and produce more. We are renewed to know that we are loved implicitly. We are valued implicitly. We do not have to earn our place at the table. Such grace reminds us to offer that kind of love and acceptance and compassion to ourselves, but also to the world.