

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 21, 2022

---

## Compassion Over Rules

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, I'm a "one" on the [Enneagram](#) matrix, which means (in an overly-simplified way) that I am very much a rule follower. Nothing bugs me more than seeing people (even myself) breaking the rules. And not just the big ones either, but even informal, unspoken ones! I'm not just talking about felonies and misdemeanors; I get annoyed when people getting on an elevator don't make way for those getting off of it. They're breaking the rules! Don't they know that letting people off first is more efficient? Don't they understand that if we all follow the rules we'll all benefit from them? Argh! I'm getting worked up just thinking about all the times people haven't followed the let-people-off-first rule! Don't even get me started on drivers around here and their inability to use their turn signals!

Rules are important! They are what help communities to exist in healthy ways. They serve as common reference points that allow us to anticipate what the people around us are doing. I drive up to a four way stop but arrive later than another car; because of the rules I know that the other car has right of way and we avoid an accident. Rules are a gift!

The rules God gave humanity are certainly a gift too. The ten commandments, and Christ's summation of them as essentially, "love God and love your neighbor,"<sup>1</sup> are a **very** good gift to us. This gift is meant to help us live in healthy communities and healthy relationships. But as I have pointed out before, we humans excel at taking the good gifts that God has given us and twisting them into weapons with which we can oppress others.

This has been happening for as long as we have had the gift of the Law. We see in the time of Christ how those in positions of privilege and power used the Law in order to maintain, or even expand, that power and privilege. That

---

<sup>1</sup> cf Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27; John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

whole business about the money lenders in the Temple?<sup>2</sup> That whole system of exchanging regular money into money “acceptable” for Temple sacrifice, for a nominal fee of course, was designed to enrich the Temple and the Temple leaders. It went far beyond what was described in the Torah regarding acceptable sacrifices and how the Temple and its leaders were to be supported.

Jesus regularly has to deal with this perversion of God’s gift to humanity. I’ve already alluded to the cleansing of the Temple, but that wasn’t the only time he had to call this nonsense out. We find him having to deal with this again in our text for today. And its regarding something even more obviously a gift from God than the Law...the Sabbath!

The rules that had arisen with regards to the Sabbath were a result of many generations of rabbinical interpretation and argument. There were some who claimed to have calculated exactly how many paces a person could walk on the Sabbath before the journey fell into the “work” category. All of these rules about Sabbath-keeping, however, left off one important detail that Christ will remind his followers of in Mark 2:27 (NRSV), “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” Or, to put it another way, Sabbath was made to be a gift to humanity, not a burden or curse! It’s something we fundamentally **need**.

This wasn’t a new thought either, in Exodus chapters 20, 31, and 35 we read that Sabbath was consecrated by the Lord as a day of rest, on which no one in the entire community was supposed to work. You can find similar language in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy about Sabbath being about rest for both humans and livestock. But it’s not just about rest, we are also enjoined to keep Sabbath holy. How do we do that? By dedicating time on Sabbath to attend to our relationship with God, attending to the divine.

So, Sabbath is about rest and relationships. Our Isaiah text today also encourages us to take “delight”<sup>3</sup> in the Sabbath. It should be a time of joy as well as rest; and of course, that makes sense! Spending time attending to ourselves (by resting) and taking time to attend to our important relationships (being in community) will generally lead us to delight and joy. Sabbath-keeping then is less about rules regarding work and more about giving an entire day over to doing the things that keep us healthy and give us joy.

---

<sup>2</sup> cf Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-25 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 58:13 (NRSV)

Things that generally have to do with either rest or with relationship. This is the gift of Sabbath.

The leader of the synagogue in the Gospel text today has clearly fallen into the temptation of rules and rule-keeping. We cannot know his motivation, but we can speculate based on what we know of humanity. Perhaps he was a “one” like me and it was his ego taking control; leading him to anger at the sight of rule-breaking. Or perhaps it was outrage at the perceived slight to the holiness of the Sabbath and the synagogue entrusted to his care. Or perhaps he took issue with the things Jesus was teaching and wanted to catch him in hypocrisy (the charge Jesus levels against him). Or perhaps he had a personal vendetta against the woman who was bent over. Or perhaps he saw the challenge to Sabbath-keeping rules as a challenge to the system that kept him in privilege and power in his community. Or perhaps it was something else entirely.

I trust this examination of the leader’s potential motivation will invite you into your own mirrorwork on this topic. Why do you follow the rules? Why do you bend or break certain rules? What are the values that inform your rule-keeping or rule-breaking? What rules benefit you personally? How might the rules that benefit you be oppressive to others? Where does your hypocrisy show up regarding the rules? Because, as Jesus points out again and again in the Gospels, we all have our hypocrisies.

Jesus gives us a different metric for Sabbath-keeping in this text, a reminder of the original intent of Sabbath: compassion. If Sabbath is about care for self and care of relationships, then compassion is integral to Sabbath keeping. How can we care for ourselves or others without compassion? And indeed, many of the interpretations that eventually led to the hypocrisy Christ points out, started from compassion. Those early Rabbis and priests were arguing that it wasn’t enough for Israelites to not work on the Sabbath, but they were also not to cause others to work on the Sabbath either (this is why Orthodox Jews won’t even switch on a light during Sabbath, since doing so would cause someone down at the power plant to have to work). These interpretations were grounded in compassion...giving rise to rules that insured Sabbath rest and Sabbath relationship-tending for everyone in the community. How compassionate! But then...twist, twist, twist, and compassion gives way to power and privilege, compassion gives way to control.

Jesus sees the bent over woman and rather than responding with judgement and condemnation based on the rules, he responds with compassionate care for his neighbor. And I'm willing to bet he took a great deal of delight in freeing this woman from her terrible predicament. And imagine the woman's joy, and that of her family, at her freedom! This is what Sabbath was made for. This is what we are called to take delight in. On Sabbath the community gathers to tend to their relationships with one another and their relationship with the divine; and that leads to healing and wholeness on a remarkable level.

This is how followers of the Way are to keep the Sabbath. We are called to treat it as a true gift from God, not a chore full of rules and traditions. We are called to take delight in the Sabbath, not use it to beat down others. Sabbath means gathering together in community: community that compassionately cares for one another; community that seeks healing and wholeness for all; and community that delights in one another and in God. I pray that you find delight in the Sabbath this day! Amen.