

# *Unsettling Mercy*

a sermon  
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Mark 2:23–3:6

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What is Sunday for?

Is it for play?

Is it for leisure?

Is it for lying around doing nothing?

What is Sunday for?

Sports?!

Movies?!

Binge-watching TV?!

What is Sunday for?

Work?

The work you can't get to while you're working?

What is Sunday for?

Family?

Friends?

What is Sunday for?

Worship?

Praise?

Prayer?

For many of us, there's a lot going on in our lives. There's so much to do. There's so little time. All that activity, all that pressure, it all conspires against Sunday being what Sunday should be, and makes us forget what Sunday should be.

It's a cruel irony that as our culture has elevated Sunday in importance —

for family,

for sports,

for entertainment,

for the self,

“it's the last day of the weekend!”

“play hard, play well,

tomorrow it's back to work!” —

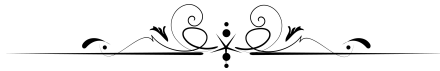
this week-ending exaltation of Sunday has turned it

into another form of bondage,  
another manifestation of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses,  
a subtle form of social control,  
a less subtle form of social segregation,  
a bait-and-switch of spiritual dimensions.

And we leave one week and enter another

depleted,  
exhausted,  
empty in our hearts  
and dry in our souls.

I shouldn't have to tell you: this is not the way things should be.



In the Bible passage Ed just read, Jesus says some things that, for his time, were very controversial. What he said was so radical, or heard as so radical, that it got people mad, very mad, so mad in fact that they wanted to kill him.

Of course, we know that eventually they did.

Yet we might not really get the controversy. We might not really appreciate the challenge of what Jesus is saying.

Because we don't honor the sabbath.

Come on now, really we don't.

We don't because, to be precise about it, the sabbath is *Saturday*. The day on which the people were to refrain from work, the day named in the fourth commandment, the day when Jesus and his disciples were getting into hot water, that was *Saturday*, not Sunday.

So, yeah, we here at Trinity Reformed Church don't honor the sabbath day ... if by "sabbath day" you mean Saturday.

In this passage, we catch a glimpse of a struggle that the earliest Christians had. This struggle was over their relationship to the synagogue, to the worship practices of the people of Israel; it was over the question of whether and to what extent they were to keep Jewish laws of ritual and diet and work.

With the teaching of Jesus in this passage, we find a principle that loosens the strictures of Jewish law on Christians, including the strictures of the sabbath. This was a principle of *mercy*, which Jesus forcefully spoke against all legalisms, thereby unsettling them and those who enforced them.

Here, simply put, is that principle of mercy: the law of sabbath rest is for human flourishing. It is to bless us, not to burden us.

*"The sabbath was made for humankind,  
and not humankind for the sabbath;  
so the Son of Man is lord  
even of the sabbath"* (Mark 2:27–28).

This principle was important for the early church. Because right from the start, right after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Christians gathered together for worship on Sunday. They did that for a really good reason: Sunday was the day of resurrection, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. So, right away Sunday was celebrated and embraced as *the Lord's Day*, you know, the day belonging to the Lord Jesus. Eventually, Christians understood Sunday as the *new sabbath*, the day of worship and rest hallowed by Jesus because on that day he was raised from death to life.

So, in a most literal and precise sense, we don't honor the sabbath.

But let's be honest. Even in the extended and mercy-laden sense of "sabbath" highlighted by Jesus and embraced by the earliest Christians, with Sunday being understood as the Lord's day, the Christian sabbath, we do not honor the sabbath.

For us, Sunday is much like any other day, filled with work of perhaps a different sort than what occupies our weekdays but work nonetheless:

housework,  
homework,  
yardwork,  
paperwork,  
work on bills.

Sunday is, for a good number of us, a busy day to catch up on all the many things our regular work kept us from doing the other days of the week.

Am I right?

Or it is treated differently than we do the days on which we work, but its focus is entirely on ourselves: our own needs, our own desires, our own appetites.

We use it for ourselves.  
We place ourselves at its center.  
We might call it "the Lord's day,"  
but really it's "me time."

Am I right?

In all this, we are either appallingly ignorant of what Jesus teaches about the sabbath, or we have wildly misunderstood him.



We grasp onto that piece about the sabbath being made for us rather than us being made for the sabbath. Hooray! We like that! But then we think it's all about us. We make the day entirely about self-serving activities and selfish entertainments, maybe even patting ourselves on the back for keeping this commandment. And then, after church, over lunch in the restaurant, where we are attended to ably and courteously by youthful servers, we cluelessly wonder why so few young adults are going to church these days.

We have missed a big part of what Jesus says. We miss that he places *mercy* at the heart of the sabbath commandment. We miss that he makes concern for others, especially those who are vulnerable, a main animating concern of sabbath observance.

And rarely do we pay attention to the other part of what Jesus said: “[S]o the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

*Jesus* is lord of the sabbath. Not us. He is. It is *his* day, not ours. We find the meaning and purpose of this day of rest when we place him at the center of it.

And Jesus is lord *even* of the sabbath. Did you catch that? “The Son of Man is lord *even* of the sabbath.” He is master of the sabbath *as well*. As well as what? Of what, or whom is he also the Lord? He is the Lord of the sabbath and of *us*.

If we are truly to hear the gospel word at this point, then we must hear *all* of what Jesus says.

Because the message of Jesus here is about mercy, to us, for sure, but especially to those, among us and not, who are most in need of mercy:

to the hurting and despairing,  
to the broken and wounded,  
to those who have fallen and need lifting,  
to those whose burdens have grown heavy and need lightening.

The message of Jesus is mercy.

Yet this merciful word from Jesus is also meant to unsettle things, to disrupt and trouble all those

who impose rules arbitrarily on the weak,  
who deploy religious decrees for self-interested ends,  
who turn God’s blessings into ever more elaborate forms of bondage,  
who use God’s law to harm rather than to heal,  
to kill rather than to give life.

If that all sounds a bit abstract, let me put some unsettling meat on those bones.

I’m thinking of female genital mutilation, a horrifying practice too-common in some African countries and engaged in not just by Muslims but also by Christians.

I’m thinking of so called-conversion therapy, in which so-called doctors (quacks, really) use a variety of techniques, including electro-shock therapy, to try (and fail) to make gay people straight.

I’m thinking of racially slanted and animated forms of drug policy and enforcement that have led to the mass incarceration of black men far out of proportion to their numbers in the population at large.

I’m thinking of the death penalty (to which I am opposed in all cases).

I’m thinking of all these things, all of which have been approved and encouraged by Christians, who have twisted scripture to support such things. I find it appalling.

Jesus is the Lord, even of the sabbath. The rest he blesses is for good, not for ill; for all, not just for some. And for that reason this merciful word of Jesus is unsettling, because it unsettles all selfish and self-serving uses of the day of rest.



Jesus can do this. He can speak mercifully and disturbingly. He can declare his unsettling mercy. Because he is the Lord of us and of the sabbath.

And so we can know Sunday as a day of Christ's mercy. Mercifully, he wants us to rest. Mercifully, he wants us to accept that we need rest.

Rest is part of God's merciful design: that we are made to be active *and* to pause. We are not made to go and go, on and on, without stopping.

We cannot be who God made us to be if we do not rest. We are of little good to others if we do not rest.

This is unsettling to some. Perhaps to many. They are threatened by it. A few are angered by it. They are disturbed by those who know the truth and live it in sabbath rest that we are all small and weak and created, that we are all under God's judgment and God's blessing, that we are all

more than our work,  
more than our play,  
more than the sum of our possessions,  
more than the number or size of our hobbies.

This is the disturbing witness that the faithful will bear as they rest.

A colleague of mine, Jim Keat, had this to say about sabbath recently:

"Sabbath is a day to stop and breathe, to rest and reflect on why we do the work that we are called to do (and to make sure that we're doing the right work and not just following distractions)."

So, when Jesus talks about the sabbath, he speaks of mercy. Yet the mercy we would know of this day is also unsettling. Jesus, Lord of the sabbath, has placed mercy for others at the heart of the day of rest. So there is a kind of activity in this rest. Those who love Jesus and would serve him are called to look after their neighbors. They are urged to bear one another's burdens. They are told to be ready on the sabbath

to heal the sick,  
to restore the broken,  
to feed the hungry,

all those things that Jesus himself does.

And all of these not as a new law, another burden, yet another obligation or job, but as the readiness and restlessness of love that proceeds from a heart at rest in the Lord, whose mercy blesses us and unsettles us for good.

My friends, may God bless you with restoring rest, and give you strength to participate gladly in Christ's unsettling work.