

# Sermon preached at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Oakland, CA

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Gary Pence

**Deuteronomy 5:12-15** *Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But 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 the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember 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.*

**Mark 2:23-3:6** *One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” <sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Human One is lord even of the sabbath.”*

*<sup>3:1</sup>Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. <sup>2</sup>They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. <sup>3</sup>Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” <sup>4</sup>Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. <sup>5</sup>Jesus looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. <sup>6</sup>The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him.*

I'm so happy to be leading worship and preaching in this church this morning. It's an honor, really, because this is a historic church, 131 years old this year.

It's one of the oldest Lutheran churches on the west coast. But that's not the only reason this church is historic—the fact that it is really really old. On that score I could count as historic too.

No, St Paul is historic because you stood by your pastor when he was booted off the clergy roster because he was gay, and you kept him on despite the risk that the congregation itself might also be expelled from the denomination—at least two other congregations had suffered that fate.

Fortunately the national church did not remove St Paul, and this parish's public stand along with that of other congregations laid the way for the ELCA to reverse its rulings at a churchwide assembly in 2009.

This is a historic church because it did what was right even when it required opposing the established customs and rules of its church body. St Paul's and Pastor Ross Merkel made history.

A few Saturdays ago the world witnessed another historic moment, when Prince Harry married Meghan Markle in a transcendent Anglican ceremony held at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle.

Maybe some of you watched it. I did. Not live in the middle of the night. On YouTube after we got up. It was going to be a grand and glitzy wedding, a glorious show of traditional British splendor, with a magnificent gothic building, monumental organ and fine orchestra, ethereal anthems by a choir of men and boys, ornate vestments, ancient ceremonial. And it was all of that.

But what made this wedding historic was the union of a British prince with a divorced, feminist, activist African-American woman and her reception into the very traditional, time-bound royal family. And this young couple designed a wedding that broke with tradition.

Meghan Markle walked down the aisle accompanied only by ten adorable

little bridesmaids and page boys. Prince Charles met her and accompanied her a few steps to the altar, but did not give her away. The bride's promise to obey her husband, traditional in Anglican rituals, was omitted.

For the first time African-British voices were present and heard at a royal wedding—the Kingdom Choir, a black gospel group from London, sang “Stand by Me,” the brilliant 19-year-old cellist Shaku Kanneh-Mason performed cello solos, a black Anglican priest read prayers, and the African-American presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, Michael Curry (no apparent relation to Stephan Curry) preached a rousing and animated sermon marked by the rhythms and cadence of black preaching.

It was so different from the typical staid and sober Anglican sermon that the audience of royals and nobles looked on with what I took to be mingled shock, horror, amusement, and, certainly for Harry and Meghan who had chosen him, delight. CNN reports that Harry could be seen saying “Wow” to Meghan as Bishop Curry's sermon ended.

Bishop Curry focussed his sermon on love. Directly referring to slavery, he talked about how throughout history love has transcended social boundaries. “We must discover love,” he said, “the redemptive power of love.” Quoting Martin Luther King Jr., he added, “When we do that — discover the redemptive power of love — we will make of this old world a new world.” And he said all this with such passion and zeal that some of the celebrity skeptics present were almost ready to join the church.

And—oh!—the couple recessed, not to Handel or Mendelssohn, but to the Etta James version of “Amen/This Little Light of Mine,” a gospel song that became synonymous with the civil rights movement.

Well, for British royalty, the British nobility, and the British people, that was a historic wedding. This was a country which had recently voted to leave the European Union because many citizens feared the influx of black and brown-skinned newcomers across their open borders. And to such a country this wedding preached racial and ethnic diversity. It showcased for all the world to see the beauty of the many colors of the new Britain. The royal family itself, the symbol of the nation, was now robustly and proudly

multi-racial.

St Paul's and Ross Merkel made history here. On that Saturday in London Prince Henry Charles Albert David, brother to a future king, and Meghan Markle, former star of "Suits" now named Duchess of Sussex, made history for Great Britain and maybe for the whole world.

Which brings us to the gospel for today—two stories that portray Jesus in conflicts over sabbath practice with some Pharisees, two stories of ancient events so historic that we are still reading them today.

In the first, Jesus' disciples are walking through a field on the Sabbath picking heads of wheat, presumably rubbing them in their fingers to extract the wheat kernels and popping them in their mouths. In the absence of a handy Burger King, they resorted to concocting some sort of trail mix I guess. The grumpy Pharisees predictably say that what the disciples are doing is harvesting grain. "That is work, and all work is prohibited on the Sabbath."

But when it comes to debate, none of Jesus' opponents are ever any match for him. In this case he one ups them.

"You think my disciples are wrong to pick some wheat clusters and feed themselves when they are starving hungry just because it's the Sabbath? Well, guess what King David, our national treasure, did. When he and his companions were hungry, they entered the Temple, got the holy bread off the altar—sacred bread that only the priests were allowed to eat—and ate it himself, and his companions too. What my disciples are doing is way less shocking than that. And, anyway, the sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around. And the ideal human one (me!) has authority to interpret the sabbath for my human siblings."

On another occasion, Jesus is in a synagogue on the sabbath again, and sees a man with what's described as a "withered" hand. Probably it means his hand was paralyzed, maybe a case of what today we would call conversion hysteria. Jesus recognizes that he's being watched and we're told he was angry and frustrated with these opponents, so he anticipates their coming attack by trapping them with a question that shut them up,

“Does the Torah command us to do good or harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

Then he doesn't actually do anything. He just tells the man to stretch out his hand. The man does it, and his hand is healed. Was that work on the sabbath? If it was, why should anyone care? The opponents are struck to silence. They just go off, regroup, and continue trying to figure out how they are going to bring Jesus down and destroy him.

The sabbath was made for humankind. The reading from Deuteronomy, chapter 5, suggests that the sabbath was made for the animals as well. The Israelites are commanded to do their work and all their labor for six days, and then take the seventh off. And the command spells out who is to be included in that day off—

- you (the Israelites, both men and women),
- your sons or daughters,
- your male or female slaves,
- –now get this—your ox, donkey, or any of your livestock,
- and any resident aliens.

And then to drive the point home the text adds, do this “so that your slaves —both male and female—may get to rest just like you. After all, you were slaves once in Egypt. Treat them the way you would have wanted to be treated.”

So the sabbath wasn't established because some narcissistic sort of male God wanted humans to spend a whole day every week dwelling on him, praising his greatness, stoking his ego with the adoration that he craved. Some humans are like that, but what kind of a sad, pathetic god would that be?

No, it appears that the sabbath was established so that the whole creation could get some rest. And to make sure the Israelites got the point they were told, “Don't make your slaves keep working while you are lazying on the couch watching TV. Don't make your oxen pull plows or your donkeys carry burdens or expect your cows or sheep or chickens to do anything for you. It's a day off once a week for everyone and everything.” It's as though God

was anticipating establishment of the 40 hour work week.

So in our Gospel text we have Jesus and his disciples taking care of themselves—picking some grain to eat, and taking care of others—healing a man’s hand. If we think of Bishop Michael Curry’s sermon, we could say that they showed love to themselves and love to others, something good to do on any day, sabbath or not. Law was made for the sake of love. Law serves the purposes of love, not the other way around.

I want to expand that idea further. Although the gospel text this morning speaks only about the sabbath, I think the principle Jesus cites, “The sabbath was made for humankind,” can be applied to religion in general, and certainly to the whole of the Christian faith and life. Christianity exists to serve humankind. The Bible, our creeds, our dogma, our doctrines, our theologies, all exist to serve humankind, in fact, to serve the animals, the plants and trees, the rocks and rills, the whole creation.

When I was a child, the Christianity I was taught certainly mentioned plenty enough John 3:16 and the idea that God has loved the world so much as to die for us and for our world. But, even so, so much of what I was taught seemed to focus on obligations and warnings. To be a Christian you must believe, think, or do this and you mustn’t believe, think, or do that, and there were lots of “thats.” Believe the right thing. Think the right thoughts. Do the right deeds. If you don’t believe the creeds and catechisms, if you don’t think pure thoughts, if you don’t do deeds that are god-pleasing, God will be very mad at you, and terrible consequences will follow. That’s the Christianity I think I was taught.

It’s so liberating, then, to read that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. Maybe all this religious stuff is not imposed on us to please God after all. Maybe, instead, it’s simply offered to us to help us to love and care—for ourselves and others, to help make the whole world what Martin Luther King liked to call “the beloved community.”

A teacher I once especially loved used to describe Christians as people “hooked on the story about Jesus.” That leaves a lot of wriggle room to fill in the details. And a good thing too. Because the truth is that every one of us constructs our personal faith in a way that fits our experiences, our

strengths, and our needs. We might wonder or worry whether we understand our Christianity “correctly” or whether we even believe any of it.

To be hooked on the story of Jesus means that the biblical stories have become part of the fabric of our existence, that we keep coming back to them and wrestling with them and trying to understand them and what they imply for us and our lives today. And those stories usually ask more questions of us than provide simple answers.

During these long ordinary summer weeks of the church year, we could do worse than to let each week be a time to ask ourselves how these stories that we read and hear incite our love and inspire our care for ourselves and other people and the whole of creation—for our families, our co-workers, employees, our neighbors, the refugees and immigrants that find their way to our shores, the animals that share our world and who look to us for our care and concern, the planet itself that is our luxuriant yet fragile home. In these stories Jesus suggests what is core to our faith—trust in the power of love, the redemptive power of love, Jesus’ love for humankind, our love for ourselves and for others, love which—when it is let loose on this old world—can make it a new world, can make us and all things new.