

Gurgle, gurgle, the disciples' stomachs were rumbling. All that walking around, all that listening to their Teacher, all that . . . well, EVERYTHING! It had been a long day and the disciples were way past their lunch break. Still there was no time to stop—gotta keep moving—can you relate? And so they did—folks, this is the first drive-thru ever recorded in history. As the disciples file through the fields of wheat, they pluck off heads of grain, rub them in their hands, and pop them in their mouths as they go.

And while the disciples' stomachs gurgled, the tongues of the Pharisees were clucking. "Tsk-tsk, Jesus, your disciples should know better—they're violating the Sabbath!" As far as plucking the grain goes, that wasn't the issue—Deuteronomy 23(:25) says, "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain." So, *that* wasn't so much the problem. What was a problem, however, was the fact that they were doing it on the Sabbath. Any meal preparations, including plucking heads of grain, should've been done yesterday, the sixth day of the week, the day of preparation. Today's just not the day to be doing this sort of thing.

Some years ago, a young pastor got up on Sunday morning only to find that the overnight snowfall had blocked the roads. This meant that in order for him to get to church, he'd be forced to lace up his ice skates and make his way down the frozen river. So, off he went, successfully making it to church before the bells rang for the start of service. When he arrived, the elders of the church were horrified that their preacher, a pious man who solemnly observed the Lord's Day, had arrived in ice skates. Well, they proceeded with the service as usual, but immediately afterwards held an emergency meeting. Still appalled, they asked their pastor for an explanation. The pastor simply stated that it was either skate to church or *not* go to church at all—there wasn't much choice in the matter. Finally, one elder asked him, "Did you enjoy it?" And when the preacher answered, "No," then the board decided it was alright.

While the disciples' stomachs are rumbling and the Pharisees are clucking their tongues, perhaps you and I are shaking our heads in disbelief, "Huh?" I mean, isn't this all a little ridiculous? Who cares if the disciples are plucking grain? Who cares if the pastor skated his way to church? . . . Okay, but tell me, who would disagree that God's Law *is* binding and necessary? That it has its place and ought to be enforced? I certainly hope all of us here are in agreement about that.

So then, Jesus *is* in the wrong, right? It sure looks as if He's gotten Himself into a sticky situation, doesn't it? Well . . . maybe, except Jesus points out how He's not the only one. "Hey fellas," He quips, "haven't you done your homework? Remember, David—yeah, that really important King of Israel; the guy who's said to be 'after God's own heart'—well he did this too. In fact, what David did puts us to shame. David didn't just pluck a few heads of wheat, but went so far as to grab some of that bread of the Presence—you might know it better as 'showbread'—which was reserved for the priests only. So there, just back off, alright!"

We never say anything like that ourselves, do we? Y'know, find exceptions to the rule to excuse ourselves. David ate the bread—actually he did worse than us—so it's okay now if we pluck grain on the Sabbath. It almost sounds like Jesus is saying if we can only just find some biblical precedent, then we could justify any action. Polygamy? Sure. (J/K) Concubines? Yeah, let's bring 'em back. (J/K) Even eating showbread? It's not just for priests anymore. (J/K) But is that actually what Jesus is doing here?

If it was, then Jesus' ministry would've been over in one fell swoop. He'd be breaking the Law, first of all, which would mean that He's no prophet of God. And second, He wouldn't be our sinless Savior anymore, especially since He'd have a strike against Him. But maybe most of all, He'd be encouraging lawlessness, giving everyone a free pass to ignore all of God's "Thou shalts" and "Thou shalt nots." After all, what Jesus does today wouldn't just be a minor infraction of some rabbinical code, but breaking the Third Commandment, as in *the* Ten Commandments. So that just can't be what Jesus is doing.

So what *is* Jesus doing then? What Jesus is doing is helping the Pharisees, and all of us here today, to see the proverbial forest for the trees. These teachers of the Law, were so worried about how people kept the rules that they forgot how the rules were supposed to *keep* the people—as in “The Lord bless you and *keep* you.” The Law was never meant to be used as a weapon, the way they were using it. But the Law was meant to be a blessing, of benefit to the neighbor. Which might explain why “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is the Great Commandment. And as Paul later puts it, “Love fulfills the Law” (Romans 13:10).

See, the Law was divinely given for us to serve our neighbor. All we have to do is imagine what things would be like if it were okay to lie, or steal, or murder to see that. The whole point of the Law is to ensure that nobody gets hurt but everyone gets helped. And when everyone follows the Law, not only is your neighbor helped, but you are too since you are somebody else’s neighbor. That’s the way it’s supposed to work—it’s brilliant!

But that’s what the Pharisees need to be reminded of today. The way they’re applying the Law isn’t to help their neighbor, but is actually doing their neighbor harm. Even on the Sabbath, the disciples couldn’t find rest from their hunger. That’s what Jesus points out when He says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was put into Law in the first place to guarantee people could get a day off, catch a breather, but most of all be refreshed with the life-giving Word of God. If there was no such Sabbath set in place, then it could be the death of them, people might burn out, or worst of all their souls languish in spiritual starvation. Perhaps there’s a symbolism to the disciples’ physical starvation. However, these Pharisees don’t show love to them at all, but rather use the Law like a weapon. Sure they enforce the Sabbath . . . but without love, the Law still goes unfulfilled.

We so often forget too, don’t we? We forget that the Law is meant to bless our neighbor, not to be a weapon used against them. Once, I was in a security line at the airport and—you know how it is—it was moving incredibly slow. Well, one young man was desperately pleading with folks in front of him to let him slip by them because his plane was already boarding. Most people showed the young man compassion and were sympathetic of his situation, so one-by-one they each made an accommodation and moved out of the way for him. But not one man—this man kept insisting that what he was asking was unfair, and therefore wouldn’t budge. After all, the young man should have to wait in line like everyone else—tough luck if the plane leaves without him. Where would the world be, anyway, without such rules of fairness?

While this man had a point, he also seemed to have missed the point. The rules were put there to protect everyone, to help them—but what about this young man? Were the rules helping him? Being forced to stand in line and miss his flight, did that help him any, or did it only do him harm? Not to mention, did it really do anyone else much good either? Remember, airport lines were made for man, not man for airport lines.

Now I don’t know about you, but for me—right now—the Law sure feels like a weapon alright. I’ve never had to stare down the barrel of a gun before, but it’s almost as if I’ve got one pointed right at me. I mean, just thinking about how many times I’ve aimed the Law at my neighbor and used it against them, well, how could I not have it coming to me? Rather than helping them, I’ve hurt them—and it would only be poetic justice for my own weapon to be turned against me. Getting hit with the Law is just what I deserve.

But if you’re anything like me, waiting for the bang, bracing yourself for the stinging shot—then forgetting the purpose of the Law isn’t the only thing we’re forgetting. No, we’ve also forgotten how *Jesus* never forgets how it’s to be used. He always remembers how the Law is to help His neighbor and never to harm them. So, to prevent any harm from being done to us, Jesus jumps out in front. As soon as the Law goes off, Jesus takes the bullet that has our name on it.

After all, those thorns, those nails, that cross were all meant for us. It was you and I who should’ve been separated from God. All of us should’ve taken the heat instead of Him. But His love fulfills the Law for us. In fact, He even fulfills the Sabbath for you and me by resting in the tomb on the seventh day. Jesus lets the Law do its worst to Him, so that it can only be for our best. And as each of us gives a great sigh of relief, I think we all agree Jesus truly is Lord of the Sabbath as we find rest in Him.

06.03.2018
Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4)
Mark 2:23-28

Rev. David V. Miller
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

Today, if you're like David, if you're looking for Sabbath, there's no better place to find it than in the Lord's house. David and his men found rest for their hungry stomachs as they ate the bread of the Presence. The bread of the Presence was called exactly that because it was constantly in the presence of God. It was baked by the priests and set on a table before the Lord in the Holy Place of the tabernacle. It would be there for about a week, and then priests and their families would eat of it when it got changed over. And it was understood that when they ate of it, they were sharing a meal with none other than God Himself.

Interestingly enough, the Bible tells us that we all are part of a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Thanks to Jesus Christ, you and I are made priests to our God, and if there was an equivalent to the Holy Place in this church you'd be sitting in it. So, if you've come here this morning hungering and thirsting for righteousness, looking for rest for your soul, there is a bread of the Presence waiting for you. It's not just a bread that's set in God's presence, but one that actually delivers His real presence—His true body and blood. It is the same body and blood that has perfectly fulfilled the Law out of love for you. Now, as you find nourishment, sustenance, and life in Jesus, may He be Lord of your Sabbath.