

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
4 Lent A; March 26, 2017
Gospel: John 9:1-41

Creation of the World

Last week, our guest preacher helped us reflect on the importance of sabbath-keeping, of creating space in our lives for rest and renewal. Keeping the sabbath is the fourth commandment, she reminded us. It's one of the core principles of Scripture. And now here we are a week later, and already Jesus messes it up. He heals a blind man on the sabbath. He skirts the law, and the Pharisees are angry.

“Sinner!” they call him, for breaking the divine command. But here's the thing. The Pharisees had twisted the meaning of sabbath. They had made it solely about restricting human activity. It had become no more than a set of rules to follow, and you could even argue that they used it as a means of preserving power. But the original intention of the sabbath was much greater. It was a time of rest, of course, but it was never meant to hinder compassion or restrict life. Just the opposite. When God rested on that seventh day, creation flourished, and God's dream began to grow.

You see, the Pharisees were making the sabbath all about us, about human action. But really the sabbath is about God. It's about making time to join in God's dream. The great rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote that sabbath is about turning our attention from the world of creation to the creation of the world. And that means it is precisely the time for healing – healing of ourselves and healing of those around us.

To prove this point, consider the connection between the sabbath and the jubilee. One of the key teachings in the Old Testament is the concept of Jubilee. It's a time every 50 years when the Hebrew people let their fields lie fallow, to let the soil rest and prepare for new growth. It was also a time when prisoners and slaves were released, when debts were forgiven, when the poor were lifted up. In short, it was a time of renewal for the whole community. It was like a society-wide sabbath, and it was about participating in God's work of re-creation.

This is the sabbath that Jesus is preaching. Elsewhere, in the fourth chapter of Luke, he's explicit about it. Jesus says he himself is the Jubilee; it's a vision that is coming to be through him. That's his lens for the sabbath. It's not a set of rules and restrictions but a vehicle for new life. And now you see that Jesus and the Pharisees were speaking different languages. The Pharisees were focused on the letter of the law. They were operating with a framework of sin and judgment, of human action and inaction. They had removed God from the equation. And that's why at the end of the story, Jesus concludes that it's really the Pharisees who are blind. They're so focused on right and wrong that they are blind to the dream of God. It's a dream that's unfolding right before their eyes – a tidal wave of compassion, and love without border or boundary – but they are stuck building levees.

It's easy to pick on the Pharisees, but sadly this is a familiar story. Too often we place limits on the dream of God. It's fine and good to limit ourselves, to seek rest when we need it and keep the sabbath in meaningful ways. That's great. But woe to us when we place limits on God's grace. When that happens, Heschel warns that faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain. Because God's Spirit is always working. God's dream is unfolding all the time and all around us. Our primary task is to notice it, and to remember... In our busy moments and in our sabbath moments to remember that we are part of this vision – not just the world of creation but the creation of the world. Amen.