

Do We Know Our 'So That?'

Friends, long-time and new, as we find ourself in a time of worship on this beautiful late spring morning with land that has been in relationship with animal and people for millennia before us, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, send your clarifying Spirit among us as we wonder about the 'so that' toward which we are living. In the name and the way of Jesus, our friend and teacher, we pray. Amen.

Beloved people, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: do we know our 'so that'? As individuals and collectively (in our families, as a congregation, and in other groups of which we are part), we make countless daily moves in speech and action. And we move with varying levels of awareness about the potential or realized impact of our words and actions. Today's readings challenge us to wonder how often we are consciously motivated by an impact we can envision resulting from the given move we make. I have been struck in recent days by how these readings speak directly to our present moment as a congregation. Through our strategic visioning process, we are working with the Holy Spirit to develop a clear sense of our core values, vision and mission by which to assess the moves we make now and into the future.

Let's dive in to take a closer look at the readings for today. Most scholars agree that Moses is a prehistorical, mythical figure in our stories as Jewish and Christian people. Moses' influence in our faith traditions does not seem diminished by his origin within the Hebrew people's imaginations as they made sense of their journeys with God and with one another.

In the reading for today from Deuteronomy, the writer depicts Moses speaking on behalf of a universal all-encompassing God to a specific group of people in their time and space. We heard:

“Moses convened all Israel and said to them: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant but with us, who are all of us here alive today.”

I love how Moses calls out the capacity of a divine, all-loving God to speak to a people in a fresh way that is relevant to the current moment in their lives. In recent decades, mainline denominations such as Congregational, UCC, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, American Baptist and others have been experiencing a trend of fairly steady decline in membership, activity, and overall vigor. As present-day scholars in the field of church leadership study this dynamic, they have recognized one of the all-too-common sentiments driving a local church’s decline as a variation on this statement: “But... we’ve... always... done it... that... way.”

In my three years of ministry thus far with you – the people who have become and are still becoming St. Croix United Church, I have been heartened by how that sentiment is not a prevailing one among us. Instead, we seem to keep learning how to ache with our losses and grow alongside one another as we unfold new experiences. It is telling that the following is one of the core values we have discerned during our visioning process this spring: balancing tradition with innovation. May we continue to hold that open posture Moses encouraged, borrowing from his words to remind ourselves of this: *“The Lord our God made a covenant with us [in the St. Croix Valley]. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant but with us, who are all of us here alive today.”*

Now that we’ve considered Moses’ preamble, let’s take a closer look at his instructions about Sabbath rest. We heard:

“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 the 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.”

An important ethical aside: Social justice warriors have taught us in recent decades have taught us about the harm we do when using language such as “slave” and “alien.” Those objectifying terms dehumanize people. We are learning to use humanizing terms such as enslaved people and immigrant people.

From this passage I drew our question for today: Do we know our ‘so that’? The ancient Hebrew (or Israelite) people made sense of the power of God among them by recognizing that, by following their tradition (their culturally-embedded custom) of resting from all work for a full day on the seventh day of each week, they could honor a creative, loving God by creating opportunity for rest for all – from the most powerful to the most oppressed among them. There’s was a God of justice. They practiced Sabbath on a weekly basis SO THAT all could experience rest.

Let’s shift to our gospel reading for today. It is one of so many passages that Christian have sometimes used to dehumanize Pharisees (or Pharisaic Jews) – those who practiced strict adherence to the rituals and written codes of their religious tradition. Let’s listen again for the question they posed to Jesus. We heard:

“One Sabbath, [Jesus] was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’”

Fair question. Jesus and his disciples picking heads of grain (the fruit-bearing part, the edible portions of the stalks) was considered harvesting. Harvesting was considered work and so unlawful on the Sabbath. The question they asked was ‘why?’ Jesus seemed quite open and willing to engage with them. We heard:

“And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, how 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?’ Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath...’”

Jesus seemed to be saying with unflinching faith that where there is human need, God is present in the meeting of that need (any day of the week). He also seemed to be saying that strict adherence just wasn't his thing. Jesus didn't attack the pharisaic tradition of strict adherence. He simply poked a hole, letting in some fresh light and air, inviting them to see their way of being from an outsider's perspective. **I wonder today: who does that hole poking for you? Who tends to be able to let some fresh light or air into your way of life, challenging you to consider your movements from their other perspective?** I encourage us to thank those individual persons. There are likely one or two hole pokers who will come to mind for each of us if we pause to notice (in the midst, sometimes, of annoyance) the gift they bring to our lives.

Why did Jesus say *“The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath”*? What was Jesus’ ‘so that’ undergirding that statement?

I think Jesus wanted to influence those around him to loosen their grip a bit, soften their hearts in the direction of self-compassion that undergirds any practices of Sabbath rest including our gathering together in this moment in this space.

In the latter part of the gospel reading, we hear this healing story:

“Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They were watching [Jesus] to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” 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. He 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.”

Again, over the centuries, we Christians have made such a stink about the Pharisaic tradition and demonized them for phrases in scripture such as “they were watching Jesus... so that they might accuse him.” But would we demonize elementary school hall monitors or state troopers – both on the lookout for rule-breaking in order to keep things in order? Would we really demonize any of them? The Pharisees took their role seriously as keepers of their tradition. And, once again, Jesus simply did not feel ultimately bound by the rules his ancestors had created while making sense of their journeys with God and one another.

Why did Jesus reach out to touch the man with a withered hand with healing, tactile presence?

Because Jesus knew in his bones that his call to embody God' love was stronger than the codes he and his neighbors could create to rule and confine their ways of living out God's love. Jesus lived in the way he did SO THAT others would discover more abundant ways of life.

May we follow Jesus's way of doggedly pursuing the visions we feel called to by the Holy Spirit – both individually and collectively – because that Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Deut. 5:1-6a & 12-15, Mark 2:23 – 3:6