

One Sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?"

Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him.

Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there.

Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand."

He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles:

Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

My friend Billy, to whom interesting things happen, is one of my preaching buddies. He tells this story- in fact, he tells it every time he has a chance. "Newfoundlands are generally a very large breed of dog, and ours is very large. They're supposed to be very intelligent and friendly. Ours, Cosmo, is ... at least a very friendly dog."

Billy and his wife, Shari, were walking Cosmo out on a frozen lake outside Cortland NY some years ago now. They had heard that the lake was frozen enough for snowmobiles to be racing on it, and they went out for a look to see.

Well, most of the lake was frozen deep and solid, but not all, and it didn't take too long for Cosmo to venture right out to the middle of the lake where the ice wasn't strong enough to hold a 150 pound dog.

Cursing the dog and cursing himself for letting the dog off the leash, Billy stretched out over the ice on his belly, and just as he came within a foot of reaching Cosmo's paw, he heard a crack behind him.

His wife was behind him, and the cracking soon surrounded them both. They were sinking. Billy remembers thinking, 'this is a stupid way to die, trying to rescue a dog who can swim better than I do.' He says he and his wife screamed for help for a minute- but knew full well there was no one around to help. Somehow he pulled himself and his wife on to a solid surface of ice that didn't give way. They stood there, shivering and shaking uncontrollably.

By now all the thin ice had been smashed, and Billy could just reach down and give Cosmo a lift out of the water by pulling the scruff of his neck. Cosmo just stood there and shook as he'd been out for a refreshing swim, and then bounded off, as frisky as ever.

Covered in frost, Billy and Shari made their way back across the lake, out onto the county road, trying to flag a ride home. Walking back that extra mile in freezing clothes is not what they had planned to do. But every time a car came by, the driver just waved at this nice couple who were out walking such a happy, frisky dog.

Eventually back in the hot shower, Billy had two overpowering feelings. One was that he had gotten away with something. The second was joy; pure joy. ***You belong to God now*** — a silent voice said to him. ***It's a whole new life.***

Thereafter- for a few weeks, anyway, he felt that all of life was a bonus. A dry towel was there for him after his shower... a bonus! Shari had set the table with sandwiches on paper plates... a bonus! Monday mornings were ...a bonus! Strangers to meet were a bonus. It was all extra, given by God as a gift. And not the least part of the story is how he tells it, again and again and again.

Now, I believe that's a Gospel Story, of new life, given over again. It might not appear in your New Testament, but it could.

The Senior Pastor with whom I first worked, Dick Hobson, used to put it like this: 'The last verses of the Bible are still being written, and I'd like to add a verse or two of my own.'

We receive gifts of God in our lives, sometimes unnoticed, often forgotten. The bonuses we receive, as my friend Billy put it, are signs of God's presence breaking in to everyday life.

Jesus' entire life was a 'breaking in' event of God into the world of humanity, which delighted, confused, upset and drew people in to his way of living. Jesus' message continues to do the same for us today. A Bonus!

Jesus made a breakthrough... not through the ice, but into the hearts and lives of those around him. It was sometimes a messy process; difficult, and for most everyone, unexpected.

To those who caught on to what was going on, who saw God's kingdom breaking in to everyday life, it was refreshing. Jesus' ongoing ministry, teaching and everyday miracle working was a bonus for them- they knew the one they followed had God-inspired insight and a gift for making life very, very special.

Seeing with new eyes like Jesus took risks, and was subject to interpretation at every turn, with consequences yet unforeseen. To those who didn't catch on, who didn't have new eyes to see like Jesus, they were left in the lurch, angered about what they saw happening around them. For them, change was too hard to take.

This story of Sabbath controversies from Luke's gospel is not so much about good guys and bad guys, or right and wrong, as it is often portrayed. Disagreements about Sabbath practices, what was holy, when, was endemic to Jewish culture in Jesus' day and time — and with good reason. The Romans occupied and governed Palestine then with an iron fist. They strove to prove themselves culturally superior in every way. So the Pharisees, on the other hand, strove to differentiate themselves and their people from the pagan Romans. They did their jobs, best they could, and made rules according to their interpretation of the Law.

This story was included in Luke's account not to make the Pharisees look bad, but because Sabbath observance was a primary issue for the early church, which clearly considered the Hebrew scriptures (including the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy) as part of its own its scriptures. What was less clear was how those scriptures (along with the Sabbath commandment) were to be interpreted in light of Jesus as Lord.

The precipitating events were straightforward enough, a needed bite of food on a long journey, grain fresh off the stalk; a long-needed healing of a withered hand and a healing performed, even without Jesus' touch (ever notice that?)

Neither case was enough to create a major controversy on its own, but together they were part of an ongoing back and forth between what needed doing right now and how things had always been done before.

Jesus made a breakthrough... doing things differently, cracking the ice of traditions that froze people into keeping God tightly bound and controlled. When the Pharisees questioned the disciples plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, and then opposed Jesus' healing a man's withered hand, their arguments appeared so trivial that they withered under Jesus' transparent grace.

Underlying Jesus' actions was not a will to oppose the Pharisees at every turn, but rather a profound understanding of and respect for the Sabbath. When Jesus said, "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath", he meant that the day is to be life affirming, not a laundry list of do and don'ts, demands and requirements to be checked off, one by one.

Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around. The day is meant to be life-giving, not life-draining; a gift, a time apart from the usual demands of daily life, to rest in God's presence, to enjoy the goodness of God's creation, to do what is good and what renews life.

Sabbath is necessary because life is more than a daily grind.

Our story this morning doesn't end with a concluding argument about the Sabbath's importance, but instead provides real examples of what happens AFTER the Sabbath, (and why it's important to recognize the gift of Sabbath in the first place.)

So, first, after Jesus' healing, the Pharisees were angered and began their plotting.... The plot thickens, slowly but inexorably, which moves us all the closer to Lent- a week from this coming Wednesday.

Next, afraid— (maybe not the best word, but it gets the message across)- Jesus took some time away, to sort things out, to settle them down- to let God's plan come back to him, out of the fray of agitation and controversy.

And what he then did is remarkably understated in Luke, but all the same amazing. Realizing that he wasn't going to be able to do everything himself, the feedings and the miracles and the teachings and everything else, he chose the Twelve disciples by name... including even Judas Iscariot, (prelude to a new chapter yet to unfold.)

For each of these tasks, the Sabbath was a necessary source of focus and energy, used as it was meant to be, as a gift from God. So what all of this means, for us, is this; here is the takeaway from this whole story.

The reality is that ***there is no Sabbath without community, and no community without Sabbath.***

Jesus called his disciples to share their lives together because he needed them. Jesus called them all together to share God's presence, support and abiding love.

So it is that we can better count our blessings and share our woes when we are together. The Sabbath support we get from our togetherness always exceeds the support we try to manufacture on our own.

And equally important, a community cannot exist without a time to breathe; just to 'be', to acknowledge, appreciate and celebrate our togetherness.... So together, we hear the words ***"You belong to God now... you have life a whole new life ahead of you"- a bonus, each and every day- to give thanks to God in your living.'***

We are called together as the body of Christ every time we gather. Recognizing that can be a breakthrough, a bonus to us...in Jesus' name, today and always. Amen.