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Wholly Holy  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
June 2, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Mark 2:23-3:6

I got a call from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation this week. They asked me if we have any seniors here at Chapel in the Park United Church. I said that we had a couple. So they proposed that to save time, I should do a driving test during worship some Sunday. So are you ready for a driving test? One question only.

What does this sign mean? Wrong! You all failed! But relax because perhaps you will be able to pass this test by the end of this sermon. Because if you failed that simple driving test, perhaps it's because you don't read the Bible properly. Are you confused? Good, because I certainly am. So let's start again and focus on our texts. And we'll forget all about speed limits.



Consider the words from Deuteronomy. These are words about how to deal with the sabbath. The words say, "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work". So in that rule, "holy" is seen as the opposite of "work", as if work cannot be holy.

This idea has been embraced in many different ways over the years. Prior to Sunday shopping, most Canadian Christians thought they followed sabbath rules. And we thought that even if we went to a restaurant on a Sunday. I was always surprised how good church people would expect others to wait on tables and cook on Sunday while we all thought we were observing the sabbath. I was happily in that group too of course. But some groups have taken things much more seriously.

For example, do you know that most stoves have a "sabbath mode"? Observant Jewish people feel that they cannot turn their stoves on or off during sabbath, because that would be "work". And modern stoves automatically turn themselves off after 12 hours for safety reasons. "sabbath mode" simply overrides the 12 hour automatic turnoff.

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This allows people to use their stove as a warming oven for the entire sabbath. On some models, sabbath mode also disables the internal light, so that when you open the oven door, the light will not come on. Because some people consider turning on a light to be “work”. I wonder if anyone considers opening the door as work? Clearly, there are many different attitudes as to what constitutes “work”.

But in many ways, the contrast between holy and work seems ... simplistic. Why can't work be holy? Does it bother any of you that I have to work on Sundays? And even if you got rid of me, what if we had a snowstorm late on a Saturday night? Would we leave the snow alone on Sunday morning because we don't want to do “work”. Or would we realize that for personal safety, we want somebody to do the “work” of shovelling the snow in front of the church on Sunday morning?

Many of us were born when there was no such thing as Sunday shopping. But even if you go back to the time of Jesus, this problem existed. The pharisees complained to Jesus when he healing someone on the sabbath. I always wonder why Jesus didn't point out that the act of complaining was work for the pharisees. In some parts of the Bible it seems like their main job! So by complaining to Jesus the pharisees were working on the sabbath too.

The distinction between “holy” and “work” lifts up the broader topic of social norms. For example, there are 2 completely opposite attitudes about what you should wear when you go to church. One attitude - very traditional - is that you should dress up on Sunday. Perhaps you wear your “Sunday best”. The idea behind that is that Sunday morning is a very special time. And out of respect, you want to dress up for the occasion. And there is nothing wrong with that.

But the other attitude is to come to church wearing normal clothing - also as a sign of respect. Respect for the reality that God is in our midst 24/7, not just 1 hour per week. And respect for yourself, that God takes you as you are, and therefore, the church should take you as you are too. Both approaches for how we should dress (dressing up or not) to come to church can demonstrate respect. And I love how both of those attitudes find a home here at CITP.

Social norms can be tough to figure out. How many of us followed the story that

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started in 2016 of NFL football players kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem? I was fascinated by the whole thing. Because it lifts up the whole issue of what it means to show respect. And what allegiance means? And what is it that we should be respecting anyway? As you may recall, according to Donald Trump, kneeling during the anthem was disrespectful. Meanwhile, players and others are saying that they were respecting what is behind the anthem, rather than the anthem itself. They were respecting the idea that the USA is - or at least should be - a place of justice, equity, freedom. The players were honouring what the anthem represented, and Trump (the pharisee) was more interested in rote obedience.

When I was in late high school, I had a friend who liked to cut grass. And I liked to cut grass. So just for the fun of it, often he would bring his lawn-mower to my place and we would both cut my lawn together. And then we would take both lawn-mowers to his place and cut his lawn together. We enjoyed it! But one time - by chance - the only day we could get the grass cut was a Sunday. And my friend was part of a strong Baptism family. And his family really struggled with the idea of us cutting grass on a Sunday. In the end, my friend and I “won”, partly because we convinced his mother that it was really entertainment for us, not work. And presumably partly because she wanted the grass cut. How do we tell if “holy” and “work” are incompatible?

Jesus clearly had his own struggles with that too. We have numerous stories where Jesus heals somebody on the sabbath and the religious authorities were not impressed. In today’s story, Jesus and his friends are caught harvesting grain on the sabbath and the authorities are not impressed. In this case, however, Jesus does not respond that his work is holy. But instead references a story in the Old Testament where King David and his troops ate food sanctioned for religious purposes only. It’s an interesting twist. For one thing, Jesus is comparing himself to David, which might be the main point of the story. But also, if you read the story in 1 Samuel 21, David did not take the bread. The priests gave the bread to David, which means that the priests were the ones who broke the rules. Perhaps Jesus used the story to speak to the hypocrisy of the pharisees, who broke the rules any time it suited them.

The separation of work and holy is very subjective. And so is the idea of holy.

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This is apparent in the simple fact that the Jewish sabbath does not occur at the same time as the Christian sabbath. And it's not even just a different day - it's a different understanding of the word "day". The Christian sabbath is midnight to midnight, while the Jewish sabbath is sunset to sunset. And let's not forget that the last month has been holy time for at least 1.9 billion people - our Muslim friends who celebrate Ramadan. And yet, we completely ignore this holy time ourselves. Although I did enjoy two wonderful Iftar meals and met some new friends. The idea of "holy" is very subjective, to the point that some people even believe in "holy war". Which always strikes me as odd. Because war is about the most unholy activity I can imagine.

If we think of holy and sacred, we might think of sacred spaces. Many church sanctuaries are considered "sacred space". Personally, what makes this space feel sacred to me is the wonderful light that comes streaming in. You are not going to hear me say that churches cannot be sacred space. But sacred is not limited to religious buildings either. The word "sacred" really just means "set apart", in the sense of something that is apart from our normal lives. The opposite of "sacred" used to be "profane". But in today's language, I think a better contrast is between the sacred and the mundane. The ordinary, the everyday.

The professional mystic - Sadguru - has an interesting take on this. When we reflect on what sacred means. What does sacred look like? Sadguru gives us the image of a sailboat. Along with the question of what it is that grounds us. Because surely the sacred is what grounds us. Perhaps someday I will be able to show images on these screens. But for now, I will rely on your imaginations.

Here's the first image: Picture a sailboat. It is anchored in a calm harbour. It is in quiet, peaceful water. It is effortlessly swinging back and forth in a gentle evening breeze. It is stable. It is secure. For some of us, that is what sacred looks like. Calm. Tranquil. Peaceful. Secure.

Here's the second image: Picture a sailboat. It is beating into the wind. It is galumphing over the waves and water is spraying everywhere. If the pilot sheeted the jib in a bit it would heel over nicely. It is safe - sort of. Certainly it is not stable or secure. In fact, I think I just heard the dishes fall out of the cupboards and smash on the floor. This

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sailboat is embracing the wind, which to a sailboat is like the spirit. It is doing what it was built to do. It is pushing into new waters. It is charging ahead. It is having a good time. It is not grounded by an anchor but is grounded by its purpose. For some of us, this is what sacred looks like. Fully connected and engaged in and with the chaos of life

Sadguru invites us to reflect on these sailboat images with a simple question. Do you want to be anchored, or do you want to set sail? Your answer to that question might help you understand what sacred looks like to you.

Which sailboat image feels like “sacred” to you? Does sacred mean calm or chaos to you? I would love to hear your ideas over coffee time today.

In the separation between holy and work, perhaps the important thing is not the exact definition of holy (which is highly subjective) or the definition of work (which is very hard to pin down). Perhaps the important point is simply the fact that we need separation in our lives. In Colossians 2, St. Paul says, “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Paul points us to something more important than following sabbath rules.

June is Pride month. I don’t want to say too much about that today - since it was only 2 weeks ago that we discussed “The International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia”. But our attitudes towards people with non-traditional genders and sexualities say a lot about our understanding of rules and the sacred. I have had discussions (ok, arguments) with many people who have told me that the Bible condemns homosexuality. And of course, it does if you take a literal reading and ignore most of the Bible. There are 5 verses in the Bible that do condemn homosexuality. But there are literally hundreds of verses in the Bible where it says that we should love each other, and embrace people as fellow travellers on this journey of life. The larger meaning behind the rules in the Bible are about loving and respecting each other. We should not simply latch onto 5 verses that are homophobic and ignore the other 31,097 verses that preach tolerance.

Our closing hymn is a call to keep challenging ourselves to become more open-minded. Something we can all do as we celebrate Pride month this year.

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[reference: speed limit sign again]

Laws and rules are important, but not as important as the purpose behind those laws. Which is why you all failed the driving test earlier. Because the purpose of speed limits is to enhance everyone's safety. So a speed minimum is the minimum speed you are allowed to drive. Unless some other road feature (e.g. an accident or a snow storm) means that you need to slow down more than that. Driving safely trumps driving above the minimum speed limit. Driving safely is more important than forcing yourself to stay about the declared minimum speed. Perhaps you will pass your driving test next time.

And when Jesus heals people on the sabbath, he tells the pharisees the same thing. That healing is holy work, and that doing the work of God is more important than blindly following rules about the sabbath. Rules are fine, but we cannot ignore the meaning behind those rules. Remember, Jesus says that the sabbath was made for humans. Humans were not made for the sabbath.

What rules should we follow? I'll just close by reminding us all of the story where a lawyer asked Jesus what the most important law was. And Jesus replied, Love God, Love your neighbour, Love yourself. Even if it's on a Sunday!

God is still speaking. Keep listening, keep acting, keep loving.

*Amen.*