

Changing to Honor Tradition

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Luke 6:1-5 GNT ¹ Jesus was walking through some wheat fields on a Sabbath. His disciples began to pick the heads of wheat, rub them in their hands, and eat the grain. ² Some Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what our Law says you cannot do on the Sabbath?”

³ Jesus answered them, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his men were hungry? ⁴ He went into the house of God, took the bread offered to God, ate it, and gave it also to his men. Yet it is against our Law for anyone except the priests to eat that bread.”

⁵ And Jesus concluded, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

We know that Jesus was always on the move, walking from one village to another, encountering people on the streets, in their homes, at their workplaces. At this point early in Luke’s account of the life of Jesus, Jesus has recruited just a few helpers: Peter, James, John and Matthew. But he is already drawing a crowd; a steadily-growing group of students — “disciples” — follows Jesus as he travels.

On this occasion they’re walking through a wheatfield. I think it would help if you picture yourself doing this: you’re walking through the rows of grain, the stalks passing through your fingers. You pull on the full, mature head of the stalk and some grains of wheat come off into your hand. You rub your hands together, separating the outer layer from the grains, you blow away the chaff and pop the grains into your mouth: an instant on-the-go granola snack!

Well, as the group of disciples followed Jesus through this wheatfield on their way from one place to the next, that’s just what they did. And it was perfectly acceptable — anyone could do it, as long as you were just using your fingers to get a handful or so and not wielding a sickle to do some serious harvesting. You wouldn’t be accused of stealing if you just used your hands instead of a tool.

But there was a problem. It happened to be the Sabbath day when this occurred.

The Jewish custom of observing a Sabbath every seventh day was central to their identity. On the Sabbath Jews were to refrain from thirty-nine activities that the rabbis had categorized as “work,”¹ things like cooking or cleaning, building or slaughtering, carrying or smoothing.² For Jews, abstaining from work one day each week served as a public profession of faith to the society around them. The “day off” was intended for worship and for rest — rest for oneself, one’s animals, one’s fields, everything.

¹ G.B. Caird, *Westminster Pelican Commentaries: Saint Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, 98.

² https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/ accessed 3/1/2022

Well, on this occasion some traditionalists noticed that the disciples were separating grains of wheat from their stalks. Ordinarily, they'd think nothing of it. But this was the Sabbath. So they called to the disciples, "What do you think you're doing? It's the Sabbath. Harvesting and threshing are forbidden activities on the Sabbath."

Really? Would anyone really argue that pulling some grains with your fingers was harvesting, and rubbing them in your palm was threshing? I mean, well, technically, yes. But in terms of agricultural production...? *Really!*

But before any of the disciples could respond, Jesus spoke up. He reminded the accusers of a story told in 1 Samuel Chapter 21³ about the great King David in his younger days. They would have known the story's details: David and his soldiers were being pursued, were out of supplies, and were famished. In the desperation of their time of need they took the ceremonial bread from the altar that was supposed to be eaten only by the Jewish priests. Yes, it was contrary to the rules, but the situation of human need took precedence over sacred ritual, rules, or customs.

Just by Jesus referencing that story, the onlookers were reminded that there are situations when even traditions and rituals take a backseat to addressing human need.

So why did Luke choose to include this incident in his gospel?

On one level, Luke may be addressing the kind of resistance the new Christian communities in his day were facing from the Jewish traditionalists. It helps to remember that in the early days of the Christian movement, followers of Jesus who were Jewish continued to participate in the synagogue community. But they were also beginning to feel some freedom from some of the strict Jewish rules and rituals. Some of the Christians' ideas and attitudes must have seemed radical to the Jewish traditionalists. That may be what this story is trying to reflect.

This story is also told in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Mark's version has Jesus saying something that doesn't appear in Matthew or Luke: in Mark Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath...."⁴ Jesus meant that the idea of observing a sabbath as a day of rest from work and a day of worship "was intended as a gift for humanity, not as an onerous duty."⁵

So are there any ways that we see a similar struggle today? Do we ever encounter conflict between the comfort and familiarity of sacred rituals, traditions and customs and the disruption caused by trying to address changing circumstances and emerging human needs?

Our journey through this pandemic has presented us with instances.

³ 1 Samuel 21:1-6

⁴ Mark 2:27 Anchor Bible

⁵ New Interpreter's Bible—Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 134a

The very act of congregating for worship was one of the first familiar, comforting traditions to be disrupted by the effects of the pandemic. So we turned to technology which was new to our form of worship. We offered worship experiences on a screen rather than in a room. It took some getting used to, and it still isn't the same as gathering in person for worship. But we maintained a measure of our sacred rituals and customs while adapting to address the changed circumstance forced upon us by the pandemic.

Then, too, we've modified some of the format and the content of our in-person worship services to accommodate concerns for reducing viral spread: we don't sing as much, we don't have printed materials in the pew racks or in our hands, we don't pass communion trays and offering plates and other items to one another. We're still able to engage in worship, but the format has had to change in order to do so safely and not be reckless in the face of a contagion.

How we communicate news of the church has changed: a few years before the pandemic's arrival our monthly newsletter *The Pulse* transitioned to be distributed electronically to most households while still being printed and mailed to households without internet capability. Since the pandemic the number of people who got their church news at church declined. So we've moved to a more concise version, the "*Weekly Pulse*," in order to share the latest church activities and pastoral news.

Another adjustment in tradition and custom is taking place right here in our church's sanctuary. This is the first Sunday we're featuring an adjustment that's intended to meet an emerging need while striving to preserve the familiar traditions of gathering for worship. This change is prompted by our desire for our time of worship to be welcoming of all of God's people, even the littlest ones, remembering that Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them...."⁶

If you've ever been a parent, you may remember the challenge of bringing a young child into a worship service. You want to worship, and you want to care for your child, and you want others to worship without being distracted by your young one's activity. Is there anything that would make it easier for parents to keep their little children with them in worship?

Yes. Our church has created a space for parents with infants and toddlers where they can be in worship in the sanctuary but also be in a space that allows the little ones to play and move around. This special area in the sanctuary is called a "Prayground." The floor of the "Prayground," is covered with a colorful rug where infants and toddlers can scoot and crawl and walk. The "Prayground" features noiseless toys for children to play with, and has special seating for parents.

⁶ Matthew 19:14 et. al.

The "Prayground" is a change from the tradition of front-facing rows of rigid pews designed for adults. But this change enables young children and their parents to be present and to engage in worship alongside the rest of the congregation. It's a change in tradition that addresses an emerging need for the increasing number of young families we've been seeing coming to in-person worship in this church.

Another area in which the church has had to adapt is in how we engage in charitable mission efforts to support and serve others. With the onset of the pandemic our free meals for the community had to come to a halt, unfortunately, but I imagine that those may be able to resume before too long, though maybe with some changes in how we conduct them. That'll be true with other programs we've supported in the past with hands-on participation; we still want to live out our commitment to being what's called a "Matthew 25 Congregation," trying to embody the words of Jesus who said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."⁷ We just may have to do it in ways we haven't done it before.

That's a lot that's inspired by this little story about an innocent granola snack-to-go. We see how traditions sometimes need to adapt to changes happening in the world around us. Indeed, we heard Jesus himself advocating the important of honoring tradition and custom while being open to innovation and inspiration. That is how we as individuals and we as the church can adapt to and address emerging, unforeseen need.

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⁷ Matthew 25:40