

## EPIPHANY 4 - LUKE 6:1-16

Our text for today focuses on the theme of questioning and asserting authority, centred on the Sabbath. We are presented with two Sabbath controversies: one deals with plucking grain and the other with healing. It's easy to dismiss Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees, who are generally presented as legalistic and self-righteous. So we tend to situate ourselves on the side of Jesus.

There are two main problems with these Sabbath controversies in our contemporary context: the first - the church's long misinterpretation of the Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus' activities on the Sabbath as being stiff and legalistic in their opposition. This has led to many anti-Semitic portrayals of Jews where concerns about the Sabbath issue are seen as "their" issue and not ours. The second - our lack of care about the issue in today's church. We have not observed the Sabbath - Friday evening through Saturday evening - as a day of rest for thousands of years. In our post-Christian world, we have become comfortable with not even observing the Lord's Day as a "Christian Sabbath."

The New Testament portrait of the Pharisees is something of a caricature reflecting tensions between the church and pharisaic Judaism at the time the gospels were written. This caricature tends to obscure the deeper concerns of the Pharisees, who established a reform movement at a time when foreign occupation and Hellenization threatened the Jewish faith and way of life. The Pharisees have been misunderstood and maligned by the church at least since the fall of the Jerusalem Temple when the church found itself in direct competition with Pharisees, as opposed to the priests, Sadducees, or Essenes, as heirs to Israel's traditions in a post-Temple age. Pharisees were the liberal, mainline Protestants of first century Judaism. While other Jewish sects claimed the people needed the priesthood and the temple to mediate between them and God, the Pharisees democratized religious experience.

The Pharisees offered the people modes and means of devotional practice that could be followed anywhere by anyone without direct oversight or mediation by religious leaders or clergy. The challenges the Gospel writers faced were sincere concerns about the welfare of the people and the shared ritual practices available to them.

Jesus was a Jew. The conflicts between Jesus and religious leaders are not interfaith debates (Christian vs Jew), they are inner-faith arguments - Jews dialoguing with Jews in a way often done in ancient Jewish circles. Why did Luke include these Sabbath controversies in his narrative in the first place? Luke was not trying to make Pharisees look bad. He included the story because Sabbath observance was an issue for the early church.

As more and more Gentiles were included in the church, the question of the faith's relation to its Jewish roots evolved. Clearly, the early church considered the Hebrew scriptures, which included the commandment to keep the Sabbath, to be its scriptures. What was less clear was how those scriptures, along with its commandment to keep the Sabbath, were to be interpreted in light of the Christ Event.

The commandment to remember the Sabbath day is grounded in the creation story in Genesis, where God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. Simply put, God's people are to rest on this day because God did. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment is tied to the experience of a people released from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh's relentless demands were that the Hebrew slaves keep making more and more bricks, under harsher and harsher conditions. Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can. So, when they cease working every seventh day, God's people remember that the Lord delivered them from slavery.

When the Pharisees see Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath - an action that constituted "work" - they ask, "Why are you doing what

is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus responds by citing a scriptural precedent - the story of David’s visit to the priest Ahimelech at Nob. “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?” David does not simply “take” the bread; he asks Ahimelech for some bread, and Ahimelech offers him the bread of the Presence because there is no ordinary bread available. Feeding those who are hungry, in this case, takes precedence over strict adherence to the law.

Jesus applies the same logic to plucking grain on the Sabbath. Quite simply, his disciples were hungry and needed something to eat. The Sabbath is meant to be life-giving, not a slave master unresponsive to human needs.

This logic continues with Jesus teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath, where a man is present with a withered hand. Jesus knows the Pharisees are looking for another reason to accuse him. Nevertheless, he asks the man with the withered hand to come forward, then says to the Pharisees and scribes: “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”

The answer to Jesus’ question is obvious. Of course it is lawful to do good and not harm on the Sabbath, to save life and not destroy it. The rabbis agreed that one must act to save a life on the Sabbath, even if it meant breaking a commandment. They may have argued that this man’s malady was not life-threatening, so the healing could have been done another day. In Jesus’ view, however, there is no reason for the man to suffer one day longer.

Jesus is attempting to state his commitment to the tradition while advocating and embodying change. This speaks to the tension experienced by many individuals and communities as they seek to be faithful in the midst of great upheaval. We have a sense that our practices are set in stone. But even the

good ones are subject to revision, and the reality is that our lives and traditions are more fragile than we want to allow or admit.

That the Pharisees debate with Jesus about what it means to keep the Sabbath shows that they take him seriously as an interpreter of law. Yet, the Pharisees' furious reaction and discussion of what they might do to Jesus seems to be more a sign of their fear rather than legitimate concern for the law.

The attitudes of the Pharisees were significant as they reflected the tendency of people, including those of their own community: to be closed to those they judged inferior, to prioritise external actions over inner meanings, to be reluctant to move on from the familiar and the comfortable to follow their conscience. The God of Jesus was a liberating, inclusive and merciful God.

Luke portrays the Pharisees as those who, in their attempt to protect the Sabbath, burdened it with restrictions. But, perhaps the important question for us is: Are we more like the Pharisees than we care to admit? How have we managed to turn God's gift of the Sabbath into a burden?

One could argue, that we have gone to the opposite extreme of the Pharisees. There are no restrictions on what we can do on our Sabbath day. Our kids have soccer and baseball and multiple other activities on Sunday. The stores are open, so we can shop until we drop. Or we can catch up on chores and projects around the house. And worship? That becomes one more thing to squeeze into a busy day. We may feel a tinge of guilt if we do not attend worship, or we may attend but find ourselves distracted by the many things we have to do. Instead of feeling rested and renewed, we begin another week exhausted.

Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for humankind. It is meant to be life-giving, not life-draining. It is meant to be a gift, a time apart from the relentless demands of daily life, a time to rest in God's presence, a time to

savour the goodness of God's creation and celebrate God's deliverance, a time to do what is good and what gives life.

Luke wrote these stories to teach believers that belief is not about following a list of rules but about a relationship with God that affects your relationships with others. Like Jesus, we honour God best when we affirm relationships with God and each other rather than imposing restrictions.

So, what is the point that Jesus is trying to make here? Is it that Sabbath observance no longer applies? Jesus does not say this. Jesus does not respond to the Pharisees by telling them that the Sabbath is now abolished. Jesus does not say that the Sabbath is now relaxed. Instead, Jesus is attempting to return Sabbath observance to its original and proper understanding. Jesus points to one of the original intentions of the Sabbath. In Mark's Gospel He says: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sake of the Sabbath." The Sabbath was instituted to benefit us, not to burden us. The Pharisees had shackled themselves and others with a strict system of Sabbath observance that completely blurred the original intentions of the day.

When we hear that Sabbath observance should not take precedence over human need, we might be tempted to think that the Sabbath is all about us. We need to be careful to balance the truth that "The Sabbath was made for humankind " with the truth that "The Son of Man is master of the Sabbath." The Sabbath is concerned with humanity's welfare, but the Sabbath is not about us. The Sabbath is about God. Our allegiance then, is not to a legalistic observance of a particular day; rather, our allegiance is to the "Master of the Sabbath ".

This is where the Pharisees erred. They saw Sabbath observance as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Proper Sabbath observance always points to God. One thing we need to avoid when planning our Sabbath

observance is meticulously legislating what we can and can't do on the Sabbath. This is what the Pharisees did, and this is a trap that even churches today fall victim to. You remember a time when you could not kick a soccer ball on the Sabbath; a time when you could not play cards on the Sabbath; a time when you could not watch TV on the Sabbath. There was a day when many of our churches treated the Sabbath the way the Pharisees did.

So, what has happened? What often is the case is that when the pendulum swings too far in one direction, it eventually comes back to swing too far in the other direction. We do not observe the Sabbath like Pharisees. Most of us treat the Sabbath the way pagans do. We treat it like any other day. We put in our hour at church, then we run around trying to get done those things we have put off all week.

The times may be changing, yes, but God does not change. Jesus did not abolish the Sabbath. He did not even say that the Sabbath was now relaxed. Jesus simply warned against legalistically observing the Sabbath, which often led to neglecting to do what was good and necessary.

The principle taught in this story is clear: It is appropriate to do good on the Sabbath. The man with the withered hand was not in any imminent danger. Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal the man. But by healing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrates that it is always appropriate to do good. Healing, deeds of mercy, are appropriate everyday.

Besides duties of necessity and deeds of mercy, there is one other Sabbath day activity mentioned in this passage: worship. Jesus "entered the synagogue and was teaching". The Scriptures have always been central to the Sabbath day. They were central in Moses' day, they were central in Jesus' day, and they should be central in our own day.

It should be clear by now that we don't simply break the Sabbath by engaging

in activities that we should avoid, but we break the Sabbath when we neglect activities that are prescribed. Worship, duties of necessity, and deeds of mercy must not be neglected on the Sabbath. Resting, even worshipping, is not easy when there is so much to get done. Some might say that they can't afford to rest for a day, yet the Bible says that you can't afford not to rest for a day.

Shortly after these controversies over the Sabbath, Jesus went out to a mountain and prayed all night. This was a significant moment, a big decision was to be made - the choosing of the Twelve - the twelve who he would call apostles. The details on who these Twelve were come from the Bible, from ancient church historians, from Messianic Jewish scholars, and from recent scholarship.

Most of them grew up around the region of Galilee. Simon Peter and Andrew were Galilean brothers, as were Philip and Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael. Just as John the Baptizer was Jesus' 2nd cousin on his mother Mary's side, Jesus had other cousins. Mary had a sister named Salome married to Zebedee from Bethsaida, whose sons were James and John. So, James and John were Jesus' first cousins.

Then on the side of step-father Joseph the Carpenter, Jesus had step-cousins, legally cousins, but not biologically. According to an early church historian, a man named Clopas, also known as Alphaeus, was the brother of Joseph the Carpenter. His wife, Mary of Clopas, was sister to Salome and Mary, mother of Jesus. Clopas or Alphaeus and Mary of Clopas had five sons: Levi or Matthew, Thomas, the twin, James son of Alphaeus, Judas Lebbaeus, Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot, all Jesus' cousins. So among the Apostles, seven were cousins of Jesus: The rest were Galileans who grew up with them, Philip and Bartholomew, Simon, Peter and Andrew. Judas Iscariot was a Judean. So all the disciples were Galilean except this one Judean. This may throw some light on his later history and why he might have been pushed out to be a traitor.

Most of these men knew Jesus from the time he was a child. They had watched him. They knew his character, his way of doing, his sinless behaviour. They had played with him, eaten with him, and worked with him. They had a relationship with him. These men knew him and followed him. Their following was based not on their ability to keep the rules, to mind the do's and don'ts, but was based solely on his character and his person. For them, believing was about a relationship with God and played out in their relationships with each other. "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself."

That hasn't changed. Following Jesus is not about how well you can uphold the legalistic demands of religious people. Following Jesus is about having a relationship with him, knowing him, enjoying him, working and playing with him. When we follow Jesus, when we have a relationship with him, he sends us out to do his will. Every area of life is submitted to him, and we live to serve him, enjoy him, and bring praise to Him in all that we are and all that we do.

The story is told of a Hasidic rabbi who had a great reputation for personal holiness. The rabbi had a habit of disappearing after weekly Shabbat services and it was rumoured among his disciples that each Shabbat afternoon, he would ascend the Holy Mountain, like Moses, and commune with God.

Wanting to know for sure what their teacher was doing, the disciples chose one of their own to follow the rabbi and find out where he was going. So after morning Shabbat service, the student followed his master at a distance. First, the rabbi stopped at his house and went inside. He emerged minutes later in ordinary peasant clothes. Even his distinctive hair style was hidden under a hood.

Then the disciple followed the rabbi as he walked out and into the greater city. The student watched as his teacher spent the rest of the day serving his gentile neighbours. He did chores for an old lady. He read a blind man his mail. He



bought and prepared dinner for a poor family. And after each encounter, he would say “God bless you. I will see you again next week.”

The next day, when the disciples gathered together, they asked the one who had followed the rabbi, “Tell us: what did you see? Where did our master go on Shabbat? Did he ascend to the mountain of God?” The disciple smiled and said, “No. He went higher. Much higher.”

Jesus doesn't send his newly minted apostles right out. They will follow him for a while longer, learning the true meaning of Sabbath and all the scriptures, from his life, his teaching, and his healing. It's the same with the church. Jesus has placed us in the world to proclaim and live out the Good News of God's salvation. We see Jesus tearing down barriers. He did this even among his apostles. He chose Levi, or Matthew, who had made his living collecting taxes for the Romans. He also chose Simon the Zealot - an anti-Roman terrorist. On the street, Simon would have tried to kill Levi. Jesus was intentional about tearing down barriers of hate, hurt, and mistrust that divide people. We would do well to imitate Jesus' example. We need to be the place where barriers between people are torn down and divisions healed.

Jesus knows that the world is already full of barriers and divisions. People grow weary of them. People need a rest from our striving, fighting, and wars. The world needs us as a witness to the Sabbath peace Jesus taught and lived out and even died for. May we be a people of rest, release, forgiveness, and healing.

**Amen.**

**PRAYERS of the PEOPLE**  
**Epiphany 4 Sunday, February 2, 2025**

Loving God, it is sometimes difficult to find the words to pray when our hearts and souls feel overwhelmed and weary from all that is happening in our world. We look for comfort and hope, but sometimes, the situations that surround us need a miracle. As we come to you in prayer this week, we pray for the world, for your Creation, and for all in need. Let us remember to be compassionate in our care and love for one another.

We pray for those who are suffering, traumatized, marginalized, and poor in spirit. We give thanks for our Global Mission partners and their lives in service to others even when it is often an inconvenience or places them in danger for their own lives. We give thanks for the firefighters and all first responders who are still working to extinguish fires in California, and in all situations where help is required.

We pray for those who mourn. We pray for those who died in two recent airline crashes this week: a tragic plane crash when an American Airlines flight collided with a Black Hawk military helicopter in Washington, DC. Where 67 individuals have been presumed dead in the deadliest US air disaster in more than 20 years, and the six people who have died in the plane crash in Philadelphia.

Creator God, in these politically difficult and increasingly uncertain and chaotic times we pray that you would keep us grounded in our faith in your unfailing and extravagant love for us, and for all people. We pray that justice and truth will be served, support given, especially to the vulnerable, and accountability be made integral to actions and decisions. We pray for family and friends, acquaintances and all who are impacted and affected by decisions that undermine the health, safety and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and countries. We pray that your great mercy and love will shine through even the darkest circumstances.

We pray for places around the world where death, disease and destruction are a daily reality. We pray for Uganda, where an Ebola outbreak has begun. For the many countries around the world including Ukraine, which are now being denied U.S. foreign aid, and for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Rwandan-backed rebels are seeking to assert control.

We pray for people, nature and countries throughout the world suffering catastrophic climate related events: fires, floods, droughts, and freezing temperatures. We admit that our silence and reluctance to change our behaviours makes us contributory participants to these events; Forgive us Lord, and lead us in your ways of care for the environment you provide for us.

We pray for the meek. We give thanks for unsung heroes who do not get the attention or acclaim that they deserve. We give thanks for the peacekeeping efforts that have enabled some hostages in the Israeli/Gaza war to be freed and reunited with their

families. We are grateful for Innocent James of Northern Tanzania who has been turning cement bags into backpacks that include a small solar panel which acts as a reading light. James has been able to employ 85 rural workers in his company, and has given new opportunities to under-served communities.

We pray for all peacemakers both at home and abroad. We pray for those who are holding firm to community building, despite increased worldwide pressures to end diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. We give thanks for countries like Sweden that have stepped up to give foreign aid to Ukraine, and for individuals like United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, who this week appealed for an additional \$500 million in donations to investigate, end and assist the survivors of human rights abuses around the world, including illegal detention, slavery and torture. We pray for all leaders in Israel and Palestine that a just and lasting peace will be found.

We pray for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. We pray for situations of injustice around the world, including this week's exposure of the shocking abuse and discrimination against migrant workers in Canada who were working under its Temporary Foreign Worker Program. We pray for those facing deportation, including many undocumented migrants in the United States being ripped away from the familiar, from family and friends, to be sent to destinations filled with uncertainty and no clear path to a future. We pray for those who are persecuted because of righteousness. We pray for the family of Yomi Adetula, a respected 54-year-old church leader in Nigeria who was shot at the morning church service on January 19th by a gunman reportedly affiliated with a cult targeting Christians.

In moments of such atrocities and heartbreak, we pray for a better society where all will come to know, respect and love one another as siblings. We pray for those who speak up against the horrors this world brings, and for those who continue to believe in your kingdom come, in the power of love to overcome all, where grace, peace, unity, belonging, and the well-being of all is experienced. Thank you for walking beside us when our common beliefs are now being challenged.

We pray for the merciful. We pray for communities which currently feel unsafe and vulnerable due to President Donald Trump's latest statements vilifying and threatening to do harm, including to the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, undocumented migrant workers, and people of colour. We give thanks for voices like Bishop Mariann Budde, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington DC, who speaks truth to power even when it means threats to their profession and even to their lives. Help us to seek and find guidance and assurance in the enduring power of your way through these prophetic voices.

We pray for the pure in heart. We pray for the many celebrations of diversity that are and will be occurring around the world – including Black History Month (February) though it is being threatened with being prevented from occurring in the US, and the celebration this week of the beginning of the Lunar New Year. We give thanks for

those who were strong voices, advocates, and allies in the past for all people of colour, for the multi-faith traditions that are practiced in our world. We pray that we may have more opportunities to get to know and appreciate one another as friends and companions in our life's journey.

God of the whole world, gather us into one as your people. We lift up our partner churches in the 4-way full communion agreement we share with the Anglican church in Canada; the Moravian church in Canada; the Evangelical Lutheran and Episcopal churches of America. We pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. In our BC Synod we pray for the congregation of St. Paul's Lutheran in Maple Ridge and their pastor Nicolas Alexandre, and Matsqui Lutheran church in Matsqui. We pray for their ministries and the people they serve. Strengthen them and us in faith, hope and love and help us to live that love out in our daily lives. We pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church – Peru and our sister congregation and pastor Ana Maria Jara. Thank you for being present in countries and circumstances that truly need your mercy.

We pray for all who are discouraged, lonely, suffering and ill, that the Spirit of God's love will strengthen them and bring them to wholeness; for all whose lives are disrupted by homelessness, addiction and violence. Keep them safe, guide them and help all governments and leaders to see and value their worth.

Eternal One, we praise you for being present and continuing your work of reconciliation and bringing wholeness and love into our world. Even as we live in the tension between righteousness and unrighteousness give us a vision of your world you are creating. Help us to know what is ours to do and give us the courage and resolve to be your hands and feet in service to others.

Lord hear our prayers of love this day for those around us, for those we hold before you, for the situations where your healing presence is needed. We ask all these things in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and our brother and who taught us to pray:

**Our Father ...**