

Alex Cain:

Our gospel passes today much like last week's, deals with healing on the Sabbath. And the lectionary cuts out those first few verses where we read of the man who has this condition of dropsy, ostensibly because that was last week's lesson, and the lectionary thinks that it's redundant, too repetitive to go over. But Luke, when he's putting together his gospel, thinks that his readers need to hear this again. And so we know that it's going to be beneficial for you and I to hear it again as well. Actually, there's an old preacher story about a pastor who kept preaching the same sermon, the same lesson, over and over again every Sunday. And there's a parishioner who, on the way out, stops by and says, "Pastor, why are you preaching the same sermon over and over again?" And the pastor says, "Well, I've noticed that you haven't learned this lesson yet." And so when you learn the lesson, then we'll move on to a new one. And so perhaps Luke here thinks that we haven't grasped the message yet. But also, this topic is so rich that it can't be mined all at once. And that topic is the Sabbath rest in the Lord.

Before we jump into this text, I just want to tell you what the outset, what I believe Jesus is teaching here.

Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, is not discarding the Sabbath, but demonstrating it. He's not erasing the Sabbath, but enlightening us to its fuller and true meaning, like the song that we sang, it's rich and full meaning.

He is saying that the Sabbath is for you and for your neighbor, and inviting you to experience a taste of that rest now, even as a deeper experience of that rest will come later.

So as Luke sets the scene, we are in motion. Jesus is leaving church, as it were, and he's walking to lunch or to dinner, some kind of meal with a group of Pharisees and experts in the law.

And that's because they're all going to dinner at a ruler of the Pharisees house, which is very swanky.

So then, suddenly, the Greek here is, "Behold!" It is trying to get our attention. Pay attention to this. Behold, there's a man who is in front of Jesus. And some

translations say edema, some translations say dropsy. Essentially, this is a condition where the body has excess fluid. And Jesus poses a question to the Pharisees and the experts.

He says, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?"

And they're silent.

Now, I don't know if you've ever been around a group of intense Bible nerds before, but that's a very unusual response. It's like if you're around a group of intense basketball fans and you ask them, "Who's the greatest player of all time?" And you're familiar with this debate. It's Michael Jordan, it's LeBron James, and the really nerdy person in the back says, "Coby Bryant!" And so it's like dropping fish pellets into a koi pond. You know, it's a feeding frenzy, but there's silence.

Jesus then turns, heals this man, sends him on his way, and asks them another question. If you had a child or an ox fall into a well, another place with excess of fluid, wouldn't you immediately pull them out on the Sabbath day?

And again, crickets.

Which seems weirder to us, right, in that question? Like, think how you would answer that question. If your child fell into a well, would you save them immediately, even if it was Saturday?

Like, what? What's going on here? It's so bizarre to our ears. Of course, I'm pulling my kid out of that well. Who cares if it's Saturday or any other day of the week?

But here's the situation. It's important to contextualize this, to understand what's going on in Jesus' day, because it sounds so strange to our ears. What we often think is that Jesus is showing the foolishness of the Pharisees following the Sabbath laws. That he's saying, "You silly Pharisees with all your laws, the laws don't matter, but you've made them everything."

Which is how we end up with an interpretation that says that this is just legalism. And then from there we leap to the statement that Judaism is a legalistic religion, that it teaches a works-based salvation, and that Jesus comes to oppose that and teach grace. And that seems harmless, right? I mean, after all, we're promoting Jesus in that teaching. We're promoting grace in that teaching. But that interpretation can be very dangerous. Historically, it's caused tragic, tragic events. It's the very interpretation that is the line of thought that paved the way for the Holocaust.

It painted the Jew...

people as villains who are these "Christ killers," and the church in Germany became a force for the expulsion of these foreigners from their national homeland. What's the point to this? Why am I telling you that? Friends, your theology matters. It has real-life consequences. Furthermore, that interpretation of the passage steers us away from the Sabbath, which is precisely the opposite of what Jesus is doing here. Jesus is saying, as I said at the outset, "Further up and further in. The Sabbath is important. Let's uphold it. It is richer than you understand it to be." And so to understand this passage more accurately, in a fuller sense, we need to know something of the historical and cultural context. During Jesus' day, there was this massive debate that's going on. I mean huge debates among the religious teachers, and it was such a religious society that the average person knows about this debate at all, but it's specially centered around the Sabbath. In the same way that Christianity has different traditions, but still under the umbrella of Christianity, but we have different interpretations. So I started off my Christian life as a Baptist, right? And now I'm an Episcopalian, and so I can pick on both groups here. And so while Baptists and Episcopalians are both under the Christian tradition, that Christian umbrella, they don't agree on something like the meaning or the proper recipients of baptism. There is a big debate between these traditions. Or on matters of Christian conscience, Baptists typically are stricter, not because they're mean and stuffy and they don't like fun, but because they think that that's what it takes to follow God in a God-honoring way. The adage that gets said in both a silly way and sometimes in a serious way is, "I don't drink, smoke, or chew, and I don't go with girls who do." While Episcopalians, on the other hand, we're not shy about those things. There's a debate between our two traditions. And believe

it or not, in this ancient debate around the Sabbath, the Pharisees are more like the Episcopalians in this analogy. They are the less strict group. The other group prohibited work on the Sabbath, full stop, period. They took it very seriously. They prohibited rescuing animals and humans on the Sabbath unless they knew for a fact beyond the shadow of a doubt that if they waited until evening, that person or that animal would die. Then they could rescue the animal or person. But they also prohibited healings on the Sabbath. While the tradition, the less strict tradition of the Pharisees, allowed rescuing animals and humans on the Sabbath. Thus, Jesus saying, "Wouldn't you do this immediately? Of course you do. That's what your tradition says." But they prohibited healing unless it was a life-threatening circumstance. And so you see how this context help us make sense of these bizarre questions that Jesus is asking this group of elite Bible teachers. The debate is in the air. He knows about it. So when this man with drops you, this man with edema comes across his path, he turns and says, "What do you guys think? Is it lawful for me to cure on the Sabbath?" And there's silence. But their tradition would say, "No, unless this man is about to die." But interestingly, Luke gives us no indication that this man is at death's door. After all, he's walking around in the streets. He's not holed up at home in his bed with his family members around him. Luke mentions nothing to the effect of him being in a dire situation. And so, according to the Pharisees interpretation, Jesus should wait until tomorrow or when sundown to cure this man. But that's not what he does. Not because he's disrespecting or obeying God's Sabbath, which is what the Pharisees were watching for him to do, but because he's upholding God's Sabbath. This is what the whole scene is about. Jesus is saying, "You think you know the right way to uphold the Sabbath, but I know what it's truly for. I know the richer, fuller meaning of the Sabbath." The Sabbath theme is something that develops from the first pages of the Bible to the last pages. And of course, Jesus being God knows how this theme develops. I'll briefly sketch it for us. In Genesis, a poem is written about creation. In our poetry, how we know one of the major markers, the major giveaways that it's poetry, is that it rhymes. Roses are red, violets are blue. I love you. So whatever that is.

But one of the major markers for Hebrew poetry is that it repeats itself. And so in Genesis 1, we get evening, morning, the first day, evening, morning, the

second day, evening, morning, and so on and so on and so on until you get to day seven.

There is no evening in morning. That's the day on which God rests from his work. He blesses that day, calls it holy. And the sense is, because there is no evening morning, it's a poetic way of saying, "This day of rest is a day that never ends. The rest continues on forever. That is the state in which you exist. It is unending peace, unending blessedness. But then that gets disrupted as creation starts to come undone and falls into the bondage of sin and death when the humans are deceived by the spirits. But God, being rich in mercy and grace, plans to restore all of creation and restore humans to that rightful place of ruling and rest. And so after Israel is freed from Egypt, that cycle of seven gets picked up again. Six days you work, on the seventh you rest. Six years, the land works, but on the seventh, the land rests. And on the seven time, seventh year, plus one, 49, 50 years, every 50 years, it was the year of Jubilee. And in the year of Jubilee, if you were a slave, you got released. If you owed debts, they were paid. If you were in a dire situation, you had sold your lands in order to survive, that land gets returned to you. It's a reset. The slate gets wiped clean. Everybody is brought back and restored to where they started to. Sabbath is about that restoration. It's about that rest. It's about that liberation for all people. In a word, Sabbath is about flourishing. But these expressions of Sabbath rest are only four tastes of that deeper rest that God will one day restore, that unending rest.

And friends, He invites you into that very rest. The writer of Hebrews picks up this theme, and he likens it to the Hebrews who were freed from Egypt but failed to enter the promised lands. They hardened their hearts, and they did not believe God. And thus, never entered that rest that was offered to them. And the writer says to us, to his readers, "There still remains a deeper rest for you. Do not harden your hearts and fail to enter that rest." What would that look like? How do we fail to enter the Sabbath rest that Jesus calls us to? This is what Jesus takes up as he arrives at the house and sees the Pharisees choosing the best seats for themselves. So, as is Jesus M.O., He tells them a parable, right? When Jesus starts telling a story, you know you've done something wrong. You know you're in trouble. Actually, I will not get to this point, but this is so hilarious to me. After Jesus tells this parable, the next section is a person at the table responds to the parables and says, "Oh,

blessed is the man who eats bread in the kingdom of God." And Jesus turns to look at him and says, "There once was a man who invited many people." I'm just like, "Oh no, what did I do? What did I say? I imagine that's what that man is doing." But he tells this parable to him, and he says, "When you're invited to a wedding banquet, don't choose the best seats. Don't honor yourself lest your host have to come to you and say, "You got to get up, man. There's somebody that's more distinguished than you, and they deserve this spot." He says, "Choose the lower seats and let the host come to you and say, 'My friends, you are not a mere guest, but you are my friends. Come, sit up in this more honored spot.'" He says, "If you honor yourself, you'll be humiliated in front of everybody. But if you act humbly, then you could be honored in front of everyone."

Not every wedding nowadays has more honorable seats and less honorable seats, but some still do. So this isn't too hard for us to relate to. But to really paint a picture for this, imagine that you were invited to what will surely be one of the biggest and most important weddings in America. That's right, Taylor Swift and Travis Kelsey's wedding. Imagine the social clout you would have of receiving the invitation to that wedding, the bragging rights, that's the best two truths and a lie that you will ever have for the rest of your life. No one's topping that story. Now imagine that when you get there, you try to appoint yourself as Taylor's maid of honor or Travis's best man, and they have to tell you in front of everybody, that's not your spot. That spot was reserved for somebody else. That would be humiliating. You would never live that down. The internet would tear you apart. But if you somehow arrived at the wedding and you were asked to be the maid of honor, you were asked to be the best man to Travis Kelsey, not only would you have the highest position in that wedding, second only to the bride and groom, but you'd be set for life. I mean, you'd never have to worry about money again, all the interviews and the social media followers and the brand deals that you would have just from who is this person that was invited to be the best man or maid of honor. And this is similar to how honor and shame worked in the ancient Middle Eastern culture. Back then, every dining situation, not just weddings, was an event to promote one social status. Who you dined with, both as a host and as a guest, said something about your honor and your shame. And this is why Jesus gets criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners. And then that's what Jesus turns around and tells them exactly to do. He says, when you host

a meal, don't invite the Taylor Swift's of the world, the ones that will make you look good, earn you a higher status in life. You can repay you more than what you have done to them from your invitation, but instead invite the poor, those with disabilities, the blinds, those who cannot repay you for the invitation. Now, friends, do you see how all of this is tied to the Sabbath rest? If Sabbath is about the restoration and flourishing of all people,

it is about the good of your neighbor and about the good of you as a neighbor. But if you're concerned with your own status, you're not thinking about rest. In fact, the word there is pride, and pride is inherently competitive. C.S. Lewis says that pride is not delight in having something, but it's delight in having something more than the next person. It's delight in having more intellect than the next person, more money than the next person, more talent than the next person, more status than the next person. That's what pride is. Pride is always working. It's never satisfied, never resting. And that is our culture to a T, keeping up with the Joneses, we call it. We need the newest phone, the nicest car, the house on the river or at the beach. We know all the right people, and we certainly don't associate with the wrong ones. This is what Jesus is warning and correcting the Pharisees about. But in so doing, He is also extending redemption to them. Repent from these very normal, by the way, but harmful practices of your culture. It will cost them a loss of status to do so, but good news to the elites often does. And Jesus says that they will be repaid in the resurrection. Jesus' offer to them is the same offer to you, friends.

Step off the treadmill of pride, of competition, of status seeking. Find rest in offering restoration to the most vulnerable as a foretaste of the deeper rest yet to come for all of us. Invite them to your tables as Jesus invites you to His. For in the resurrection, you will feast at the wedding supper of the Lamb, you, the poor in spirits, you, the oppressed in body and mind, you who were once blind, but now you see. And until that time, Jesus has given us also a ritual, a pattern in the Eucharist as a foretaste of that great wedding feast to come, where there will be unending peace, unending fellowship, where He will tell us that we are friends and not just guests, flourishing for all peoples. Come and find that rest in Him. Amen.