### “Sabbath Was Made for Humankind” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 2, 2024

**Deuteronomy 5:12–15**

12Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

**Mark 2:23–28**

23One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” 25And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” 27Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

How important are religious holidays and symbols? They are important for helping people feel connected, to feel that they belong to a faith community when they join in ceremonies. But the main lesson today is that the symbol should never be made more important than the reality that it is meant to symbolize. When that happens, then you begin to have idolatry: the object becomes the focus, rather than the values toward which the object is pointing. Jesus seems to be saying that the Sabbath should not be made more important than human beings. The Sabbath was meant to *serve* human beings, to give them a time for rest and worship, not oppress them.

Here, we see the kindly motive behind the Sabbath in both of our passages today. Deuteronomy shows that the Sabbath was made so that you may rest, and “so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you” (5:14). And Jesus points out the “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (2:27). This is a humanitarian point, that the Sabbath was meant to benefit people, to give them an opportunity for rest. For when we rest and put aside daily cares, we are free to reflect and think of lasting values such as our spiritual connections to God and to others.

A rabbi in Jesus’ time had a very rigid point of view. I see him embodying a type of fundamentalism when he criticizes Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). Think of how absurd this accusation is! This rabbi seems to accept that Jesus has the power to heal, but is scandalized that he would dare to do it on the Sabbath, when there is not supposed to be any work done. He takes no notice of the miraculous and stunning healing of a person who had been unable to stand upright for eighteen years (Luke 13:11).

Jesus points out that their law allows them the leeway of rescuing an ox or a donkey on the Sabbath. Should it not allow him to heal a woman who has been suffering for years (Luke 13:15–16)? Fundamentalism proves itself not only to be hard-hearted, but foolish, having its values out of order, being kinder to a donkey than to a woman. The rabbi wanted to treat the rules as all-important, overlooking compassion and goodness.

The rabbi’s intentions might be to follow God’s will, but he has become immersed in the outward observance of law and ritual, to the neglect of the purpose and spirit of the law. The spirit or purpose is the most important thing. An unspiritual literalism is deadly. Paul tells us that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).

And this is true today, as well. If people take religious symbols more seriously than the religious *values* for which they stand, then they can lose sight of the original goals and values. The same can be said for all rituals and teachings. They stand for something worthwhile, but should not be made into idols that oppress humanity. I’m going to give an example of an oppressive teaching from the Muslim tradition, but not to imply that Islam is the only faith that is guilty of distortion. There is a Muslim hadith, or traditional saying attributed to Muhammad, that says “Whoever neglects prayer, Allah will send fifteen punishments upon him, six in this world, three when he is dying, three in the grave, and three on the day of judgment.” One punishment is that “Allah tightens his grave until his chest ribs come over each other. Allah pours on him fire with embers” (https://islamqa.info/en/answers/20897/soundness-of-the-narration-about-fifteen-punishments-for-one-who-neglects-prayer). This is an excessively harsh concept of the enforcement of the command to pray. In fact, it has been repudiated by a number of Muslims, who consider it a false hadith. I was happy to learn that there are a number of Muslims who reject this quote.

Another example of taking symbols too literally is the reverence for relics. The history of relics in Christianity and other religions is a long story of magical thinking, attributing spiritual power to physical signs, instead of understanding them *as* signs, meant to point to something greater than themselves. There are a number of stories from the Middle Ages where people thought the Eucharistic bread had magical powers.

But, in fact, there are no physical objects, cathedrals, chalices, amulets, holy oils, magic words, or relics that carry power or give special access to the spiritual world. Our access to the spiritual world is through our spiritual values, our devotion, and our love. This issue comes up in a different form when the woman at the well asks Jesus whether God is to be worshipped in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim (John 4:20), as though there is a place more holy than any other place. Jesus’ answer shows that place does not matter, but rather “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). In fact, since the whole earth was divinely made, every place is acceptable for worship.

This issue of true worship versus distorted and materialistic worship comes up numerous times. Jeremiah challenged the excessive and superstitious reverence for the temple. He told the people they needed to “amend your ways,” and not “trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jer 7:5, 4).

The prophet Hosea also thought the people were excessively attached to sacrificial rituals, saying “Their heart is false . . . the Lord will break down their altars, and destroy their pillars” (10:2). Their “altars to expiate sin” have become “altars for sinning” (8:11). Hosea heard God say “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6), and Jesus affirms this statement by quoting it twice in his arguments with the Pharisees (Matt 9:13; 12:7).

Rituals can be useful practices for reflective worship, or they can become superstitious attempts to gain God’s favor. But it is really spiritual values and character that get one closer to God. Jeremiah saw worthwhile values in “not oppress[ing] the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed[ding] innocent blood” (7:6). Hosea saw such values in “faithfulness, loyalty, and . . . knowledge of God” (4:1). Jesus told the Pharisees they should not neglect “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23). These supreme values are what really matter, not rituals, charms, temples, holy days, and holy places.

Spiritual teachers tend to put the emphasis on values rather than rituals. The moral leaders and prophets of the Hebrews and Greeks tended to be critical of rituals because of the social conservatism and superstition the rituals promoted. Nevertheless, observers say that rituals contribute to social bonding, while also reinforcing social boundaries and hierarchies. Rituals can help reduce anxiety. Beyoncé and her crew always do a prayer circle before every concert (Karen Johnson, “The Surprising Power of Daily Rituals” <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210914-how-rituals-help-us-to-deal-with-uncertainty-and-stress>). Football players have a prayer circle, too. There is some auto-suggestion in such a ritual that can be calming.

Derek Jeter used to adjust his batting gloves before facing each pitch. It didn’t change his underlying level of talent, but it helped calm his mind.

If a ritual helps you to function better, helps to calm your mind, then, by all means, let it be a tool that you use. Just remember to keep the weightier matters of the law foremost. The basic underlying facts are the same; the ritual doesn’t create new conditions, but it may help soothe the mind.

So I ask you to become aware of symbols and rituals in your life, and to always keep the emphasis upon the underlying values and meanings, and not take any symbols more seriously than the thing they are supposed to symbolize. The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. The rituals and holy days are meant as reminders and teaching aids, not as idols that carry magical power. Try to distinguish the weightier matters of your spiritual life—the things with *eternal* importance—from the rituals and symbols that should be seen as teaching aids or reminders.