

“A Cotton Patch Gospel”

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UCC at The Villages
January 15th, 2012

Isaiah 61:1-11

Mark 2:23-3:6

‘Jesus finished by saying,

“People were not made for the good of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was made for the good of people.

So the Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27-28 [CEV]

Let us pray... O God,

We get caught somewhere between celebrating our unity as your people
and defending our limited vision of what that means.

Help us to see how you have created worlds in a wild diversity

that have come from your boundless imagination,

but unified by your love.

Amen

What does the word ‘Sabbath’ mean to you?

Specifically, it’s the name for the Jewish holy day of the week

when people gather to worship God and no other work was to be done –

and this is still strictly observed by traditional Jewish communities.

Generally, Christians associate ‘Sabbath’ with rest & relaxation –

like “God resting on the 7th Day” or our own ‘R & R’ from the work week.

But the Hebrew origins of the Greek word used in this Gospel text

is literally ‘hosts’ or ‘armies’.

When I paraphrased Mark 2:27-28 for telling as a story,

I wondered what ‘armies’ or ‘hosts’ could possibly mean.

So, I added a phrase to expand on the meaning of the word, ‘Sabbath’

as ‘the day for remembering the multitudes of Creation.’

As I see it, ‘armies’ or ‘hosts’ is a reference to the diversity of Creation

in terms of *multitudes* and that the purpose for the ‘Sabbath’

was not about God having to rest,

but rather about God pausing to reflect

on these worlds beyond worlds and worlds within worlds

that were created – and that we should pause, too.

Over the next few weeks, I will tell stories from the Gospel of Mark 2-5

which will provide a portrait of Jesus in the course of a 24 hour period –

a day in the life of Jesus which happens to begin on a Sabbath day

and continues on into the morning of the next –

a metaphor for God’s ongoing creation

of a diverse and expanding Universe.

Willard, p.2

The word 'diversity' has a contemporary context for us,
symbolizing racial tolerance despite our society's history
of racist intolerance.

Racial 'diversity' is a theme I will explore in this 'Sabbath' series –
later on in February, when we will hear dramatic monologues
about 2 African-American heroes from our society's black history.

What I hope we will see is that – as we consider the 'diversity' of multitudes,
the line between 'us' and 'them' begins to fade into
empathy for those who *appear to be* different.

This 'Sabbath' story is an adventure of discovery –
as people allow their hearts to be open to Jesus' way.

Today is unofficially 'Martin Luther King' Sunday which provides us
with an opportunity to talk about the civil rights movement –
and coincidentally, the revival of American folk music
and how this relates to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

'The Cotton Patch Gospel' is a popular, dramatic musical
based on a modern translation and paraphrase of Matthew and John
by a man named Clarence Jordan.

Like "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell",
it tells the story of Christ in the vernacular
to update our perception of its relevance.

In this case, the characters speak in Southern dialect
as if the events of Jesus' life took place in Georgia
with Jesus headed to Atlanta instead of Jerusalem,
where he would be lynched instead of crucified.

The tension between Jesus and the traditionalists
of his time is present in the text from Luke 4
when he went back to Nazareth and preached from Isaiah.

13b. [Jesus] went to Valdosta, where he had grown up,
and as he was in the habit of doing, he went to church on Sunday.

They invited him to preach, so he got up to read the scripture
and found the place in the book of Isaiah where it says:

"The Lord's spirit is on me;

He has ordained me to break the good news to the poor people.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the oppressed,

And sight for the blind,

To help those who have been grievously insulted to find dignity;

To proclaim the Lord's new era."

20. Then he closed the Bible,
and handed it to the assistant minister.

Willard, p.4

The eyes of everybody in the congregation were glued on him. He began by saying,
"This very day this Scripture has become a reality in your presence."

They all said,

"Amen," and were amazed at the eloquent words flowing from his mouth.

They whispered to one another,

"Can this really be old Joe's boy?"

23. Then he continued,

"Surely some of you will cite to me the old proverb,

'Doctor, take your own medicine. Let us see you do right
here in your home town

all the things we heard you did in Columbus.'

Well, to tell the truth,

no prophet is welcome in his own home town.

And I'm telling you straight, there were a lot of *white* widows in Georgia
during the time of Elijah, when the skies were locked up

for three years and six months,

and there was a great drought everywhere,

but Elijah didn't stay with any of *them*.

Instead, he stayed with a *Negro* woman over in Terrell County.

And there were a lot of sick *white* people

during the time of the great preacher Elisha,

but he didn't heal any of *them*— only Naaman the African."

28. When they heard that, the whole congregation blew a gasket.

This same Clarence Jordan & his wife Florence with another couple,

Martin & Mabel England, founded Koinonia Farm in 1942

which would eventually be located at Americus, Georgia.

They welcomed their black neighbors to come live and work

alongside themselves and other whites

growing pecans and doing Bible study.

They embraced the following principles:

1. All humankind are related under God's parenthood.
2. Love [in the form of pacifism] is the alternative to violence.
3. Share all possessions.

This was a direct challenge to those whose hearts were hardened by racism
and resisted such social experiments.

The people of Koinonia were severely tested as they were 'excommunicated'
from the Baptist church, their goods and services were boycotted locally,

their produce stand was bombed,

gunshots were fired at members' homes, and protest rallies were staged
against them by the KKK over the years.

Willard, p.5

But Koinonia Farm has survived and evolved –
even becoming the place where Habitat For Humanity got its start
when Millard Fuller & his wife came to live there in the 1960s.
The Jordans and Englands have since passed on,
but their vision has endured as an example of
Martin Luther King's "dream" come true
of black & white folks sitting down together in fellowship –
"fellowship" which is what the Greek word 'Koinonia' means.
Koinonia Farm survived even despite active efforts to destroy them,
but they had a vision and they were committed to make it work.
So what is our vision in this time and place?

We are certainly among those like Jesus who have a different approach
towards 'keeping the Sabbath'.
We can't compete with traditional churches by simply trying to be like them;
We have to be ourselves in order to survive.
And part of our message is this:
*To be open and affirming of others
is what it means to be a 'Christian' with us.*

Jesus spoke of God's Kingdom of Heaven, Paul spoke of the Body of Christ,
and Martin Luther King spoke of Beloved Community –
yet aren't they all talking about the same thing?
Dr. King wrote a letter of support to Dr. Clarence Jordan and in it he said:

*You and the Koinonia Community have been in my prayers continually
for the last several months.
The injustices and indignities that you are now confronting
certainly leave you in trying moments.
I hope, however, that you will gain consolation from the fact
that in your struggle for freedom and a true Christian community
you have cosmic companionship.
God grant that this tragic midnight of man's inhumanity to man
will soon pass and the bright daybreak
of freedom and brotherhood will come into being.
Yours very truly,
M. L. King, Jr.*

"The Sabbath was made for the sake of Humanity
and not Humanity made for the sake of the Sabbath.
Therefore, the Son of Man – the true Heir of Humanity is also the Lord of
the Sabbath, the day for remembering the multitudes of Creation."
Amen

*Our scripture lesson this morning is from Isaiah 61:1-11
and it anticipates a time ahead of peace and prosperity.
It also includes the text that Jesus referred to when he preached
to the people of his hometown, Nazareth.*

¹The Spirit of the LORD God has taken control of me!

The LORD has chosen and sent me
to tell the oppressed the good news,
to heal the brokenhearted, and
to announce freedom for prisoners and captives.

²This is the year when the LORD God will show kindness to us
and punish our enemies.

The LORD has sent me to comfort those who mourn, ³especially in Jerusalem.
He sent me to give them flowers in place of their sorrow, olive oil in place of tears,
and joyous praise in place of broken hearts.

They will be called "Trees of Justice," planted by the LORD to honor his name.

⁴Then they will rebuild cities that have been in ruins for many generations.
They will hire foreigners to take care of their sheep and their vineyards.

⁶But they themselves will be priests and servants of the LORD our God.

The treasures of the nations will belong to them, and they will be famous.

⁷They were terribly insulted and horribly mistreated;
now they will be greatly blessed and joyful forever.

⁸I, the LORD, love justice! But I hate robbery and injustice.

My people, I solemnly promise to reward you with an eternal agreement.

⁹Your descendants will be known in every nation.

All who see them will realize that they have been blessed, by me, the LORD.

¹⁰I celebrate and shout because of my LORD God.

His saving power and justice are the very clothes I wear.

They are more beautiful than the jewelry worn by a bride or a groom.

¹¹The LORD will bring about justice and praise in every nation on earth,
like flowers blooming in a garden.

Mark 2:23-28

²³One Sabbath Jesus and his disciples were walking through some wheat fields.

His disciples were picking grains of wheat as they went along.

²⁴Some Pharisees asked Jesus,

"Why are your disciples picking grain on the Sabbath?

They are not supposed to do that!"

²⁵Jesus answered,

"Haven't you read what David did

when he and his followers were hungry and in need?

²⁶It was during the time of Abiathar the high priest.

David went into the house of God

and ate the sacred loaves of bread that

only priests are allowed to eat.

He also gave some to his followers."

²⁷Jesus finished by saying,

"People were not made for the good of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was made for the good of people.

²⁸So the Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath."