

In one of his popular science fiction books in his DiscWorld series, author Terry Pratchett summed up the reason and purpose for rules in a single sentence. According to Pratchett, the purpose of rules is “so that you stop and think before you break them.” This purpose works well for Terry Pratchett’s DiscWorld series, where characters are usually up to remarkable, entertaining antics that often lead to very good outcomes, but require some creative maneuvering around the rules or laws in order to get to a situation that is better for all involved. In fact, sometimes characters are charged or directed to do such creative rule breaking from authority figures because they recognize it isn’t the rules themselves that matter as much as the well-being of society and when the rules are no longer functioning to support such well-being, things need to change, and a few folks brave enough to live into the intention of the rules – even if it looks like they are breaking them – can lead to the needed changes.

Although I don’t believe Terry Pratchett was a Christian, or person of any faith, I do believe his sentence about rules could easily apply to this morning’s Gospel lesson where it looks like Jesus was getting himself in big trouble for breaking the rules. Well, at least one rule, the rule about the sabbath. But if we look closer, we might see there is more going on here than irresponsible rebelliousness on Jesus’ part. There’s all the good news stuff of who Jesus is, why he came, and what it means for us who follow Jesus today.

According to theologian Walter Bruggeman, the observation of the Sabbath, a day of rest, was for the Jewish people in Jesus’ day an important part of their identity, it set them apart from their non-God following neighbors and was intended to send a powerful message about who God is and what God intends for humanity. The concept of a day of rest came out the deep Old Testament stories of Creation and the liberation story of the Exodus. We may be familiar with the Creation story, of how after 6 full and busy days of creating the sun and moon and planets and stars and world and everything in it, God took a day of rest, setting a precedence that creation of life isn’t just about production. Creation takes something out of you, even if you are God. Perhaps that explains why people often experience exhaustion after creating something like a book, or other work of art. For creation to continue, renewal needs to happen, which is why rest isn’t necessarily napping on a beach, although that could

be part of rest. Rest is engaging in the activities that renew us. It might be walks in the woods, it might be meditation, it might be prayer, it might be a good talk with a good friend, that sort of thing.

In addition to the creation story, there is the liberation of God's people from slavery under Egypt, where God's people were forced to labor for Pharaoh day in and day out, with no rest, no hope of any change, no future to imagine other than one that looked exactly like the day before: breaking their bodies for Pharaoh. If you read more about the Exodus of God's people in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, you'd find a section where God's people were given the command by God to observe the sabbath and to keep it holy because it was essential that they stop living as people under the rule of Pharaoh and start living as the people God liberated. Taking a day of rest, it turns out, was a powerful way to resist the beliefs and values of the pagan world that emphasized production, that saw the world as a hard place and the only way to survive it was to work yourself to death in order to produce whatever you needed or wanted. Maybe we can see this mindset isn't necessarily only part of the Old Testament, maybe it is still around in our day.

Taking a day of rest meant reminding the world that there is more to life than production. There is relationship to engage in. There is creation to notice and delight in. There is God and time to worship and be in relationship with God. There is well-being of society and individuals and time for rest is one of the ways to contribute to such well-being. Sabbath is life-giving.

That, according to Bruggeman and other theologians, was the intent of sabbath, its reason and purpose. To follow God's example and live into God's creation and show the world humanity is not ants marching, we are made in God's image.

But like many good intentioned practices, over time the sabbath became strictly regulated. There were only so many steps a person could take on the sabbath. No meals could be prepared. No work could be done. Regulation after regulation took the sabbath farther and farther from its intended purpose until we find ourselves reading about Jesus and his disciples getting in trouble for picking grain when they were hungry, as apparently you couldn't eat if you didn't prepare food ahead time on the sabbath.

But there is something else at work in this moment when Jesus broke the sabbath rule. The author of Mark is using this moment of breaking a rule to show us there is a conflict brewing between Jesus and the Pharisees. Remember, Pharisees were experts on the rules, and they dedicated their lives to living by those religious

rules and were sought out as experts and advisors on how to live a Godly life. By breaking the rules, Jesus was highlighting not just that the sabbath was over regulated, he was showing who he was. Remember, we heard Jesus respond to criticism by saying the sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around, but he doesn't end with that. He added that the Son of Man, a messianic term, is lord even of the sabbath. This is powerful stuff. Jesus was claiming his role as messiah. As messiah, he was liberating people and the sabbath from regulations in order to restore the intention of the sabbath to its life-giving purpose and is also a way to restore the relationship between humans and God.

In other words, breaking the sabbath regulations was an invitation by Jesus to think about its purpose and redeem it. The Pharisees may have thought about the regulations, but they were out of touch with the purpose or intention, which showed they were not in a good relationship with God.

This became even more clear in the next part of today's Gospel lesson when they were all in the synagogue with Jesus and a man with a withered hand, and Jesus asked a question that got to the heart of the intention of the sabbath: is it about life or death?

Did you notice how the Pharisees responded? With silence. And did you notice how the author of Mark interpreted their silence? He diagnosed them with a Biblical condition known as hardness of heart. It's a condition where a person is unwilling to listen to God's word and leaves them uncaring and unsympathetic. Perhaps it is a result of forgetting or ignoring the intention of rules like the sabbath. Unfortunately, it isn't a condition you only find in the Bible. So, if you thought the rebel or rebellious person in today's Gospel was Jesus, turns out the ones rebelling against God are really the Pharisees.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees silence and hardness of heart with anger and grief. Often, those two emotions are deeply connected. Anger is often an expression of grief. We might pause a moment here and wonder what about the Pharisees' hardness of heart made Jesus grieve, made him feel a loss so deep it woke his anger. Surely, he was not angry about the sabbath or the rules. Perhaps he was feeling the pain of loss sin creates, when a person chooses to go their own way instead of God's way, when a person chooses self over God, when the greed of a few wins out over the wellbeing of all.

Yet, out of his anger and grief, Jesus healed the man with a withered hand. Jesus wasn't being a punk, he was demonstrating life and well-being is God's intention and even if we human beings turn our backs on God and choose to harden

our hearts, God will still have God's way. Resurrection happened no matter how cruel or painful Jesus' death, no matter how deep they buried Jesus in the tomb, or how big or heavy the stone they rolled over the door. God still raised Jesus. Because God is always hoping, always believing, always cheering us on to choose life. Not life that is producing stuff. Life that God created, life that is rooted in God, who is love. God is always giving life, and hoping we'll choose to join God in living the life of God, loving God and our neighbor which is how we create the kingdom of heaven together.

While the last line in today's Gospel doesn't sound very hopeful, we know that God will choose life, even when we don't. And that choosing life is powerful, even when it looks like breaking a rule or two.

Maybe today's Gospel will help us find the courage to think differently about rules and instead of blindly following them, stop and think about their intent or purpose, and question if a rule is about life or death. I know of many people who leave the church because they believe the church is all about rules and fear being punished if they don't follow the rules. Perhaps today's Gospel also reminds us of the opportunity to examine if that is true for us as followers of Jesus or not and look for ways we can let rules be opportunities to choose life, the life God gives, and join God in creating the kingdom of heaven right here.