
Wholly Holy
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Mark 2:23-3:6

I got a call from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation this week. They asked me if we have a lot of seniors at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. I said that we had a couple. So they proposed that to save time, I should do a driving test during worship some Sunday. So are you ready for a driving test? One question only.

[slide: minimum speed limit sign]

What does this sign mean? Wrong! You all failed! But relax because perhaps you will be able to pass this test by the end of this sermon. Because if you failed that simple driving test, perhaps it's because you don't read your Bible closely enough. Are you confused? Good, because I certainly am. Let me start again and focus on our texts.

Take for example our words from Deuteronomy about how to deal with the sabbath. The words say, "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work". So in that rule, "holy" is seen as the opposite of "work", as if work cannot be holy.

This idea has been embraced in many different ways over the years. Prior to Sunday shopping, most Canadian Christians thought they followed sabbath rules. And we thought that even if we went to a restaurant or a movie on a Sunday. I was always surprised how good church people would expect others to wait on tables on Sunday while we all thought we were observing the sabbath. I was happily in that group too. But some groups have taken things much more seriously.

[image: sabbath mode]

For example, do you know that stoves have a "sabbath mode"? Observant Jewish people feel that they cannot turn their stoves on or off during sabbath, because that would be "work". And modern stoves automatically turn themselves off after 12 hours for safety reasons. "sabbath mode" overrides the 12 hour automatic turnoff. This allows people to

use their stove as a warming oven for the entire sabbath. On some models, sabbath mode also disables the internal light, so that when you open the oven door, the light will not come on. Because some people consider turning on a light to be “work”. I wonder if anyone considers opening the door as work? Clearly, there are many different attitudes as to what constitutes “work”.

[image: snow shoveling]

But in many ways, the contrast between holy and work seems ... simplistic. Why can't work be holy? Does it bother any of you that I have to work on Sundays? And even if you got rid of me, what if we had a snowstorm late on a Saturday night? Would we leave the snow alone on Sunday morning because we don't want to do “work”. Or would we realize that for personal safety, we want somebody to do the “work” of shovelling the snow Sunday morning? Many of us were born when there was no such thing as Sunday shopping. But even if you go back to the time of Jesus, this problem existed. The pharisees complained to Jesus when he healing someone on the sabbath. I always wonder why Jesus didn't point out that the act of complaining was work for the pharisees. In some parts of the Bible it seems like their main job! So by complaining to Jesus the pharisees were working on the sabbath too.

[image: dressing up for church]

The distinction between “holy” and “work” lifts up the broader topic of social norms. For example, there are 2 completely opposite attitudes about what you should wear when you go to church. One attitude - very traditional - is that you should dress up on Sunday. Perhaps you still wear your “Sunday best”. The idea behind that is that Sunday morning is a very special time. And out of respect, you want to dress up for the occasion. And there is nothing wrong with that. But the other attitude is to come to church wearing normal clothing - also as a sign of respect. Respect for the reality that God is in our midst 24/7, not just 1 hour per week. And respect for yourself, that God takes you as you are, and therefore, the church should take you as you are too. Both approaches for how we should dress (dressing up or not) to come to church demonstrate respect. And I love how both of those attitudes find a home here at SHUC.

[image: slant]

Social norms can be tough to figure out. Just think about all the lessons Meghan Markle had to learn before being allowed to become a princess. From lessons in sitting, to having tea, to how to eat. She even learned the “duchess slant”, a fact that was highly popularized. At least she had a mold that she knew she was expected to fit into. In our society today, It’s much harder to know what it means to fit in at all.

[image: NFL kneeling]

How many of us followed the story of NFL players kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem? I’m fascinated by the whole thing. Because it lifts up the whole issue of what it means to show respect. And what does allegiance mean? And what should we be respecting? As you may recall, according to Donald Trump, kneeling during the anthem was disrespectful. Meanwhile, players and others are saying that they were respecting what is behind the anthem, rather than the anthem itself. They were respecting the idea that the USA is - or at least should be - a place of justice, equity, freedom. The players were honouring what the anthem represented, and Trump (the pharisee) was more interested in rote obedience.

[image: lawn mower]

When I was in late high school, I had a friend who liked to cut grass. And I liked to cut grass. So just for the fun of it, often he would bring his lawn-mower to my place and we would both cut my lawn together. And then we would take both lawn-mowers to his place and cut his lawn together. We enjoyed it! But one time - by chance - the only day we could get the grass cut was a Sunday. And my friend was part of a strong Baptism family. And his family really struggled with cutting grass on a Sunday. In the end, my friend and I “won”, partly because we convinced his mother that it was really entertainment for us, not work. And presumably partly because she liked having a well-maintained lawn. How do we tell if “holy” and “work” are incompatible?

[image: homeless]

Jesus clearly had his own struggles with that too. We have numerous stories where Jesus heals somebody on the sabbath and the religious authorities are not impressed. In today’s story, Jesus and his friends are caught harvesting grain and the authorities are not impressed. In this case, however, Jesus does not respond that his work

is holy. But instead references a story in the Old Testament where King David and his troops ate food sanctioned for religious purposes only. It's an interesting twist. For one thing, Jesus is comparing himself to David, which might be the main point of the story. But also, if you read the story in 1 Samuel 21, David did not take the bread. The priests gave the bread to David, which means that the priests were the ones who broke the rules. Perhaps Jesus used the story to speak to the hypocrisy of the priests, who broke the rules any time it suited them.

The separation of work/holy is very subjective. And so is the idea of holy. This is apparent in the simple fact that the Jewish sabbath does not occur at the same time as the Christian sabbath. And it's not even just a different day - it's a different understanding of the word "day". The Christian sabbath is midnight to midnight, while the Jewish sabbath is sunset to sunset. And let's not forget that the last month has been holy time for at least 1.6 billion people - our Muslim friends who celebrate Ramadan. And yet, we completely ignore this holy time ourselves. Although I do usually enjoy a wonderful Iftar meal somewhere. The idea of "holy" is very subjective, to the point that some people even believe in "holy war". Which always strikes me as odd because war is about the most unholy activity we can imagine.

[image: sagrada familia]

If we think of holy, and sacred, we might think of sacred space. This image shows the interior roof of the Sagrada Familia. That's a basilica in Barcelona, Spain. And you are not going to hear me say that churches cannot be sacred space. But sacred is not limited to religious buildings either. Sacred really just means "set apart", in the sense of something that is apart from our normal lives. The opposite of "sacred" used to be "profane". But in today's language, I think a better contrast is between the sacred and the mundane. The ordinary, the everyday.

So what does sacred space look like today? What might it look like today? It's interesting that this theme came up today. I selected the theme for this service months ago and it's interesting that we are having this conversation today - when for the first time in a long time we have members of the congregation actual in the sanctuary again! I'm sure for many people, this sanctuary is sacred space. And we can and should celebrate that.

But what else does sacred space look like?

The professional mystic - Sadguru - has an interesting take on this. When we reflect on what sacred means. What does sacred look like. And Sadguru gives us the image of a sailboat. What is it that grounds us? I want to share 2 images with you. And they are both just fine. But for each of us, one image may resonate more than the other. Think of the word sacred and see which image you resonate most with. Or perhaps you can find value in both images.

[image: sailboat at anchor]

Here are a sailboat. It is anchored to the shore. It is in quiet, peaceful water. It will effortlessly swing back and forth in the gentle breeze. It is stable. It is secure. For some of us, that is what sacred looks like. Calm. Tranquil. Peaceful. Secure.

[image: sailboat beating]

Here is another sailboat. It is beating into the wind. It's a still photo so you perhaps cannot tell, but it is galumphing over the waves. If they sheeted the jib in a bit it would heel over nicely. It is safe, but not stable or secure. I just heard the dishes smash on the floor. But it is embracing the wind, which is like the spirit to a sailboat. It is doing what it was built to do. It is pushing into new waters. It is charging ahead. It is having a good time. This is an alternate image of the sacred. Connected to the chaos of life. Not grounded by an anchor but grounded by its purpose.

Sadguru invites us to reflect on these images with a simple question. Do you want to be anchored, or do you want to set sail? Your answer to that question might help you understand what sacred looks like to you.

[image: sagrada familia]

In the separation between holy and work, perhaps the important thing is not the exact definition of holy (which is highly subjective) or the definition of work (which is very hard to pin down). Perhaps the important point is simply the fact that we need separation in our lives. In Colossians 2, St. Paul says, "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." Paul points us to something more important than following sabbath rules.

[image: speed limit sign again]

Perhaps the laws and rules are important, but not as important as the purpose behind those laws. Which is why you all failed the driving test. Because the purpose of speed limits is to enhance everyone's safety. So a speed minimum is the minimum speed you are allowed to drive. Unless some other road feature (e.g. an accident) means that you need to slow down more than that. Driving safely trumps driving above the minimum speed limit. Perhaps you will pass this test next time.

And when Jesus heals people on the sabbath, he tells the pharisees the same thing. That healing is holy work, and that doing the work of God is more important than blindly following rules about the sabbath. Rules are fine, but we cannot ignore the meaning behind those rules. Remember, Jesus says that the sabbath was made for humans. Humans were not made for the sabbath.

What rules should we follow? I'll just close by reminding us all of the story where a lawyer asked Jesus what the most important law was. And Jesus replied, Love God, Love your neighbour, Love yourself. Even if it's on a Sunday!

God is still speaking. Keep listening, keep acting, keep loving.

Amen.