

“Something Greater”
Matthew 12:1-8

One day when I was eight years old, Jimmy Dixon and I decided to build a raft. Jimmy was my next-door neighbor and closest friend. We were always cooking up schemes, but this time actually carried through. We drew a sketch, rounded up materials and soon the sound of saws and hammers echoed in my basement. The raft that took shape was big enough for six or eight people and certainly too heavy for our neighborhood creek. We had not thought about how to transport it as neither family owned a truck and the nearest body of water, the Chattahoochee River, was miles away. Yet we weren't worried about such things, as we were eight.

As that day's labors wound down, we estimated needing a few more hours to finish it when we encountered a production problem: the next day was Sunday. Jimmy and I attended the same church. It was close enough that we often walked together. As we swept up the sawdust and put away tools on that Saturday afternoon, Jimmy announced he would come home after Sunday School and could resume work by 11. I knew my family would be staying for worship, which meant I could not join him until after lunch. The thought of having to wait two extra hours was more than I could bear. Why I felt the project was on deadline defies explanation, too.

The next morning, as Sunday School ended, I watched my friend start for home. I was so eager to join him that all sense left me and yelled “Hey, Jimmy wait up!” I ran over. “Don't you have to stay for church?” he asked. “Nah,” I answered, “my parents said it was okay.” Of course, I had not asked them. When I got home, my grandmother, who had stayed behind with one of my siblings running a fever, asked why I was back early. I repeated my lie.

Soon thereafter, I realized the foolishness of my actions. The pastor of our church was my father. How could I have possibly thought he wouldn't notice my absence? My only hope was for an Easter-size crowd, yet as I held my hammer on that August morning, knew that such a turn-out was unlikely. Instead, I grew increasingly confident that some kind of punishment was in my immediate future. It was, and the raft never saw a drop of water either!

While there are many pieces to that misadventure worth pondering, I share it primarily to set the stage for the Biblical scene before us that also questions certain deeds on the Sabbath. The term “Sabbath” come from the book of Genesis when God rested after six days of creation. Years later, God called for humans to honor the Sabbath with one of the 10 Commandments. “You shall not do any work [on that day],” God said. In the years that followed, humans developed rules as to what did and did not constitute work. For Jews, the Sabbath runs from sundown Friday to Saturday evening when the stars appear. The first Christians followed the same practice yet in the early years of the church, a shift was made to Sunday since it was the day Jesus' tomb was discovered to be empty. Thus, Sunday became the Christian Sabbath.

With that change, all kinds of rules emerged for what deeds were appropriate for Sunday. Even an eight-year old I once knew understood that skipping worship without permission and lying about it were not on the list of acceptable Sabbath deeds. Perhaps in your home, you could not go to the movies or mow the grass on that day. In the past, the culture supported limits, too, with most stores closed and no youth sports happening on Sunday morning either. Clearly, the world has changed in that regard, but the events recalled by our text remain relevant for us still.

It tells of a Sabbath day in the first century when the disciples were walking through a field and picked some grain to eat. The Pharisees, that group of Jews who took special pride in observing religious laws beyond what was required, say to Jesus, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” According to their definition, harvesting grain was

forbidden on that day. Experts of that era would have disagreed as to whether or not the disciples' actions constituted harvesting and there is a wide range of thought within Judaism still as to what is acceptable to do on the Sabbath, too. If you go to present-day Israel, for instance, there are hotel elevators that stop automatically at every floor from sundown Friday until the same moment on Saturday, as for Orthodox Jews, pressing a button is prohibited work.

All these centuries later, we can hear the Pharisees' superior tone as they confront Jesus. He responds by recalling a time their ancestor David had taken food set aside as a sacrifice for God and how priests in their day could break the rules of the Sabbath in special circumstances, too. "I tell you," Jesus continues, "something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,'" a citation from the book of Hosea, "'you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus wasn't disputing the importance of Sabbath rest. He recognized the need for humans to have a regular time when all labors cease. Yet Jesus was making a larger point. In saying that "something greater than the temple is here" part of what he meant was himself. At the end of this encounter when Jesus says, "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" he was affirming that his actions supersede any human understanding of the divine will.

Yet when he said "there's something greater" and recalled his father's words of "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," Jesus was also teaching about a different standard. One scholar put it this way. "The common ground between this sabbath text and Christian practice is not the issue of what is legal to do on the day of rest. Instead, we ponder where in our own situation is mercy more than sacrifice. Where is God's Law to be applied, not negated, in such a way that love is at the center?" (Boring, M. Eugene *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 279.) In other words, that being faithful to God's intention for the Sabbath calls us always to err on the side of building-up and protecting life.

As an example, I think we would all agree that "breaking and entering" is a crime. I suspect we would also affirm that taking food from a school cafeteria after hours and without permission is not right either. Yet when you add to those generally accepted norms a massive snowstorm and stranded motorists, such legal and moral standards aren't as definitive.

That was true just before Christmas in Western New York. A 27-year-old mechanic named Jay Withey left the safety of his own home during the storm because a friend had called for help and after getting him dug out, started back and became trapped himself. He knocked on the door of 15 homes to find shelter, but everyone declined to help. He returned to his truck and invited a stranded child and elderly woman to join him. They stayed in it overnight turning the engine on and off as temperatures dropped to 9 degrees. By morning, he was nearly out of gas.

It was then that he looked on his phone and saw that Pine Hill Primary School was nearby. Recruiting another stranded motorist, Withey grabbed a set of extra brake pads in his truck, trudged to the school and smashed a window to get in. They propped the door open, got the woman and child inside and then starting going car-to-car helping others who were also stranded, among them DeMario Johnson and his 71-year old mother, Addie. Once they were safely inside the school, she said to her son "We're going to jail." "Maybe not," he replied.

Using a table, the group pried open the door to the cafeteria and found cereal, juice, water and coffee. With the alarm going off Withey found the keypad and deactivated it, and then located the building's master key and unlocked the nurse's office and gym so that the group could get blankets and floor mats for sleeping. They spent hours in the cafeteria eating and getting to know one another. They shared what Christmas meant to them, where they'd gone to school, what they did for a living and how they ended up stranded in a blizzard. "We just

enjoyed that we had shelter, we had food and we had a new family,” Addie said later. “On Christmas morning, we all woke up and said ‘Merry Christmas’ to everyone.”

The group dug out each other’s cars, but before leaving, they boarded up the school window, cleaned and put away dishes and cleaned up the tables. “I wanted to make sure everything was back where it was,” Withey said, “that we weren’t disrespectful of the building. I didn’t want to overuse anything, didn’t want to cook any food that wasn’t necessary.”

He left a note: “To whoever it may concern. I am terribly sorry about breaking the school window and for breaking into the kitchen. Got stuck at 8 pm. Friday and slept in my truck with two strangers just trying not to die. There were 7 elderly also stuck and out of fuel. I had to do it to save everyone and get them shelter, food, and a bathroom. Merry Christmas—Jay.”

In an article describing those events, a police spokesperson is quoted as saying, “We watched the video surveillance and witnessed people taking care of people. There was a freezer full of food but no one touched it. They only ate what was necessary to stay alive. When they were finally able to leave safely, you never would have known anyone was there.” Neither the police or school district plan to press charges. In the days since, Withey has been universally praised for his quick action and on Friday his favorite professional football team gave him two tickets to the Super Bowl. (Epstein, Jonathan D. “Kenmore mechanic heralded for saving lives by breaking into school,” *Buffalo News*, 12/31/22 and Salecedo, Andrea “A man broke into a high school to shelter dozens from Buffalo blizzard,” *The Washington Post*, December 31, 2022)

It was on the Jewish and Christian Sabbaths that those events occurred at the Pine Hill Primary School; an example of something greater that brought honor to God and the kind of rest two dozen of his children needed. May our choices reflect that same kind of understanding and response, on this Sabbath and the other six days of the week, too.