

Jesus' very Jewish question about sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6)

Jesus is in alignment with many rabbis when he asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath?"

by [Nanette Sawyer](#)

May 31, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Sabbath is given and commanded as a day of rest, being modeled after the idea that God rested after all the work that God had done to create the world (Ex. 20:8-11). In Deuteronomy, sabbath is also described as a sign of liberation. Taking a sabbath rest is proof that we are no longer enslaved and forced to work without rest (Deut. 5:12-15).

Jesus is in alignment with many rabbis when he asks the question, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" *Pikuach nefesh* is a Hebrew term that means to save a life or save a soul. It is a principle in Jewish law that means saving a life takes precedence over most other Jewish laws, including observance of the sabbath.

The particular Pharisees around Jesus go silent when he asks this very rabbinic question. But they are not there for a real discussion, for wrestling with moral and ethical questions about healing and sabbath. They are there to conspire against Jesus and to collude with the Herodians, as these verses attest.

In an engaged dialogue about Jesus' question, one might ask probing questions about the situation. Is the man with a withered hand at risk of dying? Could his healing wait until the next day? Is the hunger of the disciples so great that they might die if they do not gather grain on the sabbath?

But in this passage Jesus seems to be expanding the concept of saving a life (or killing or allowing death to occur) to the larger categories of doing good and doing harm. This is a move also made by Jewish scholars and rabbis throughout history. People of good will, whatever their religious affiliation or ancestry, continue to wrestle with ethical questions of how to live a balanced, healthy life that also affirms and actively supports the inherent worth and value of all other life.

In these verses, Jesus teaches that sharing food with companions and friends is an act of doing good, equivalent or at least parallel to King David feeding his companions with consecrated food. Similarly, the compassion Jesus extends to the man with a withered hand is an act of doing good that may even save his life, especially if the man's livelihood depends on the use of his hands.

Jesus' acts in these verses do not strain him with unnecessary effort, and they contribute to freedom and flourishing of life. By his actions, Jesus teaches that the rest possible with freedom is not the same as passivity. He acts for liberation and wholeness. He also demonstrates that wholeness is not just for some but for all.