

Over the past few years with what seems to be an increasing frequency, I have intentionally putting myself into situations, or chosen to do things that are out of my comfort zone. Growing up, I was always sceptical of the unknown, and anxious about unexpected situations where I couldn't predict the circumstances or manage all the pieces. So, it seems completely backwards that I would intentionally put myself into these situations that were well beyond what I was comfortable with. There are times when I question my logic, but I have come to love deeply these situations and opportunities that make me uncomfortable. I've found that it's when I have no hope of managing a situation that I learn the most and I see how living becomes an act of faith. As I've come to jump headfirst into these opportunities, they have been the places where I have grown the most, where I have learned more than I anticipated and where I have learned a dependence on God in a different way.

This is something that has become a core piece of how I see the world, and the church. In order to grow, we must be challenged. Discomfort is an important part of life.

With our summer theme, borders and boundaries, I think that it's important to ask what are the borders we create and what role do they play. Where are the edges? What makes people uncomfortable? Have any of those edges been pushed this morning?

In the scripture reading, Jesus' actions make people, both the religious leaders, and Jewish people, uncomfortable. He is upsetting one of the most basic laws.

Remember the Sabbath and Keep it holy.

It's one of the ten commandments, not really a law that's up for debate.

And yet, in the eyes of those around him, he was breaking the law. He picked the heads of grain and he healed. He did that which was not acceptable. But, what Jesus didn't do was diminish the law itself, or the importance of it. The Pharisees are not villains in this story. They are questioning what Jesus is doing, and wouldn't you?! He was breaking one of the most basic laws in Jewish tradition, one that existed from creation, and was worked into the weekly rhythm of life. But again, Jesus doesn't say the Sabbath is irrelevant, or unimportant. Rather, he encourages the listeners to consider the purpose of Sabbath, to consider why and how they practice it. He makes his listeners uncomfortable and encourages them to think through their actions and to consider the things that are integral to their identity.

To me, there seems to be this key distinguishing piece between law that shapes identity and law that becomes rigid, creating walls; Walls which identify who doesn't belong. The law was integral to identifying the covenant people, God's chosen people. Keeping the law is intimately tied to how the Jewish people interact with the world around them. Jesus' criticism of the law comes from it's rigidity, when keeping the law would prevent someone from becoming whole, from being healed. When Jesus chose to heal the Man's hand, the Pharisees were confused, because if you were a faithful Jew, that wouldn't have been acceptable. Jesus chose to be faithful to God's will for the world, rather than the rigid protection of the law.

This is a tipping point when law shifts from identity defining to something that prevents faithfulness.

And I think that this is also what happens in communities of faith. As we seek to be faithful, we develop ways of doing this that best suit how we see and relate to God. But these patterns quickly become fixed into expectation, and it becomes like a law.

Every congregation has an identity, and each church has its own way of doing things, and thank goodness for that. But there seems to be a time when churches identify themselves and their methods as an act of faithfulness, but there is a shift to people defining themselves over and against something else.

Ie. We sing hymns because we love singing in 4-part harmony and we love the tune and find meaning in singing this way.

Vs.

Aren't you glad we don't sing that "throw-up" music, are hymns are so much more theologically sound.

It is here when the identity of a community becomes rigid, and creates a barrier rather than an invitation.

I want you to ask yourself: **What are TUMC's Sabbath laws?**

- Are things this way because it's an act of faithfulness, or has it become engrained as law?

This pattern of acts of faithfulness becoming law and barriers is one that has existed throughout time.

It happened in a Jewish context after the Babylonian exile, as the law was emphasized more and more.

In the early church, the widespread welcome was restricted and managed with hierarchy.

In early Anabaptism, the freedom of women was limited once the doctrine was solidified.

This is a pattern that is repeated over and over again.

Acts of faithfulness that form our identity, quickly become law.

When we are confronted with new questions in life, we have no choice but to try something new. We must ask questions of faithfulness, which may take us beyond a boundary we have clearly set, which may or may not have been set for a good reason. But, what if that reason is no longer relevant, or has simply become an excuse.

Some things were done differently this service to encourage you to think about why we do things the way we do, why we have set up boundaries and expectations. But, all the while remembering that this is still worship.

Our borders and boundaries keep us safe. They let us know what is in and what's out. But, if the wall gets too high, it becomes more difficult to see what we may be keeping out. And maybe, those people that are on the other side, are messengers of God?

It seems as though we often limit the nudging of the spirit to that which we know and what we have already identified as "appropriate?"

TUMC has their own way of doing things that is part of the make-up of the congregation and is rooted in the people and the history of this congregation. But I want to be so bold as to suggest that there are things that make people feel welcome or unwelcome, such as:

- The way we dress
- Our language
- Our demographic
- Our theology
- Our worship choices

And you can probably name others!

Some of these things are integral to the identity of the community and are not easily changed and shouldn't be. They all play a role in defining how TUMC sees itself, how others see it, and how TUMC sees God.

What are TUMC's Sabbath laws?

How do they shape our community?

Who is in? Who is out?

One of the things that Jesus was constantly doing, was emphasizing that God was present to people beyond the structures and limitations of expectation. In the passage today, it was not by practicing Sabbath perfectly that people achieved a relationship with God. Jesus stated that he was the Lord of the Sabbath, and prioritized saving people's life. This went hand in hand with a shift in the purpose of the law. The law then becomes an act of faithfulness, not the steps necessary in order to get closer to God.

As we spent time figuring out how particular worshipping communities hear God, it often feels as though we must follow a particular formula in order for God to move in our midst. But, this runs the risk of us thinking that God only works within our structure, within our set boundaries. And though I have no doubt that God is in the structure and present in how TUMC does things, do we trust God enough to believe that God can work *outside* of our structure and our version of faithfulness?

To ask a bit of a different question that follows close behind: Can we believe that the spirit of God can say different things to different people, or say it in different ways?

If we can't believe this, I think that we are limiting God to our own, narrow understanding of God. It's narrow simply because it comes from a particular context, at a particular time, with particular people. If we can't believe this, we are setting up a wall, so that people with a different understanding of God, or who have experienced a different nudging of the spirit feel unable to share. By believing that God speaks in one way, we are restricting God to who we would like God to be, and can keep those who see God differently from sharing their perspective.

What are TUMC's Sabbath laws?

Who do they keep silent?

As I mentioned at the beginning, I have taken to putting myself in uncomfortable situations, and one of these was when I was on the Outatown program at CMU, and one of the things that we did was going Bungee Jumping. Ever since I actually jumped off that bridge, it has become a central image for me as I ask myself the questions that I've asked you today. Though I am absolutely terrified of heights, and my legs shook the whole way to the top, when it came time to jump I knew I couldn't hesitate. When I jumped, I felt terrified, I felt like I had just made the worst decision and then I felt free. Though I was falling, I knew that I was tethered to something, and I would be safe. The screams turned to laughter, and now I know that I can go beyond what I expected for myself.

I wonder what would it look like for TUMC to jump headfirst into something that pushes our comfort zone?

When we jump, we must depend on God and trust that God will act.

When we jump, we hope that there will be something there to catch us at the bottom.

When we jump, we find out where our edges are, and what it is that we hold dear and what we can let go of.

When we jump, we remain tethered to the core of who we are but can see from a new perspective.

When we jump, there are no guarantees.

But living is not always safe!

God calls us to live a life of faithfulness,

But faithfulness that is not tied too tightly to our identity of what we do, or who we are, are how regular our church attendance is,

But we are called to embrace the identity of being a beloved child of God.

As children of God,

We are not promised a life of comfort and rules, but of freedom in the Spirit, that takes us beyond the borders of comfort as we seek a life of faithfulness.

Thanks be to God.