

Sabbath Liberation, August 24, 2025

God, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts open new pathways to you, our strength and salvation.

Last week was incredibly full, incredibly productive, and incredibly wonderful. We formed new, long-lasting bonds with a group of individuals living worlds away from us, not by asserting some sort of righteousness around Vermont living, but by discovering that our similarities quickly and boldly outshone our differences, having both now experienced each other's own lands.

We followed that up with a beautiful concert, in which this space did exactly what it was built to do, offering an acoustic blessing to talented local musicians and friends.

We then held a potluck dinner where we continued to build community around shared nourishment, once again trusting in each other and in God to see the power of loaves, fishes, and in this season, zucchini-based delicacies right in front of our eyes.

We await the joyful act of reconnection that is Gathering Sunday, after which, Hannah and I will both spend two weeks starting our formal theological education in St. Paul. The week we get back, we'll celebrate both a baptism and a wedding, both of which you'll soon receive information about.

With all of that filling our hearts and lives, when I hear this week's Gospel reading, I keep coming back to a small, seemingly insignificant yet quite powerful moment in last week's service. It happened during announcements.

Returning from a life-changing trip to Scotland and seeing our new active hands and minds area in about the same state as when she left, Rona very

casually yet wisely asked, *are we ready to use, or already using this space?*

And I froze. My initial response was “no, not quite yet, we’re not ready”...yet with a quick pause to allow for some meddlesome intervention on the part of the Holy Spirit, I dropped my objection, and described a little bit about the space. By the end of the service, I glanced over, and it was in use, and meeting a need.

Why the hesitation? It wasn’t that I wasn’t ready for the space to be a part of our worship, it was that it was something that had the potential to be a shift for us. Despite discussion in and approval by two committees, and being lovingly crafted by Mark Catlin and the trustees to perfectly fit in with the aesthetic of the sanctuary, it still stood against at least 60, if not 200 years of the established order of this space, an order established for good reason that has withstood many tests of time.

These are the times in which my status as the newest, and certainly least-formally-educated authorized UCC minister in the state jump in to my mind. If I’m going to do something that causes change, and might be controversial, I hold the standard for rolling it out to one of perfection that I know is unachievable.

This space did not yet have the perfect article in the weekly newsletter, with the perfect pictures to demonstrate its capability.

It didn’t have the perfect introduction with well-placed scriptural references, as well as examples of success from the many other churches who had implemented it.

In waiting and waiting, so fearful of breaking unwritten community norms, I was overlooking the potential for the very people who needed this space the most to be amongst us, still waiting, still unserved. What harm did a quick and imperfect implementation bring to the rest of our worship experience? Absolutely nothing.

In fact, the opposite. Visiting Pastor Sharell Shippen noticed it, in the moment for what it could be. *“ a lot of the things we do seem like small things that are not connected to our theology”*, she said. *“But in reality, everything we do with our kids comes back to what we believe to be true about how God’s reign should happen on this earth. It comes back to being true about how we think youth are an important part of our society and our church. Whether it’s doing a BBQ or giving them crayons in the worship space and letting them make noise, it raises their awareness and it makes them feel that this space is as much theirs as it is the adults.*

*And that”*, Pastor Sharell reminds us, *“is not something that’s common in every space.”*

A visitor dedicated to youth empowerment instantly recognized and appreciated who we are as a congregation despite my unintentional attempt to hold us back.

Isn’t that the power of what Jesus gives us? Another chance to get it right? Guidance to think differently, to own and recognize our mistakes, and a light being cast on those amongst us who we can’t see ourselves?

The woman in the temple had been suffering for 18 long years, a prisoner of her own body. She did not walk into that synagogue asking for a thing. She entered the temple to praise God, and she left transformed, still praising God. Jesus saw her pain, saw her need and acted on it. He equated ending human suffering with the same life-sustaining actions we perform each day, and he made it happen. It might seem easy to say his lesson was that people matter more than rules, but I think there’s more to it. People do create rules, after all, often for good reason. Don’t they matter, too?

Recall that Jesus was an observant, practicing Jew. He was a crusader for human rights, but not for abolishing Jewish law. It would be easy for this gospel to be used as an example of supersessionism, the troublesome belief that Christianity is a new covenant that makes all other covenants and therefore religions obsolete, but I don't see that happening here.

The Sabbath exists for good reason, and is a strong and powerful tool to bring us all closer to God. When I lived in Brooklyn, I ended up in Borough Park, home to one of the largest Orthodox Jewish communities outside of Israel. My words cannot adequately describe the peace that could be felt on this day each week. It was inspirational, and frequently aspirational...it made my hurried weekend life seem out of place, and that was so necessary.

In this week's reading from Luke, let's note that Jesus doesn't once ask anyone in the temple to break their own Sabbath, to do any sort of work whatsoever. He simply challenges the leader of the Synagogue to reflect on how an act of liberation at a time of prayer and praise could possibly be a bad thing. If we are to understand Jesus as being of divine origin, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Creator", then perhaps the true lesson here is to make sure that we are following the rules not out of blind obedience, but with an eye on their intention...making sure to take that Sabbath step back, and in that space allowing God herself to guide us to the truly redemptive work.

May we be blessed and fortunate enough to know when the divine Jesus warns us it's time to stay out of the way, and when the human Jesus tells us it's time to help out.