

The background is a faded, sepia-toned image of a handwritten manuscript. It features various words and symbols in different scripts, including Latin, Greek, and possibly Hebrew or Aramaic. Some legible words include 'wan-she-me-nogh', 'Hah-goo', 'me-...', 'mo-a-tick', 'go-nickka', 'pu-ne-ba...', 'Oblausais', 'La Malice', 'Ma-chi-we', 'Tho-wo-na', 'Se-baw.', and 'Hush-i-pi-'. There are also some symbols that look like stylized letters or characters.

# WHAT IS THE SABBATH FOR?

MICHAEL ANTHONY HOWARD

Luke 13: 10-17

August 24, 2019

Zion United Church of Christ

2716 W. 14th Street, Cleveland, OH 44113

Copyright © 2019 Michael Anthony Howard

All rights reserved. This document or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a review.

Cover art: *The Greenville Treaty of 1795*. [These are the signatures of the Tribal Chiefs of the Wyandot, Lenape, Shawnee, Ottawa, Miami, Chippewa, Potawatomi and Kaskaskia nations, when they signed the Treaty of Greenville using icons of animals as their signatures.]

Printed by Living Water Association, in the United States of America.

First printing, 2019.

Living Water Association  
960 Portage Trail  
Cuyahoga Falls, OH 44221

[www.michaelanthonyhoward.com](http://www.michaelanthonyhoward.com)

The world is not as God intends. The truth at the heart of the gospel is that God has empowered us to change that. This is what the Sabbath is all about.

## What is the Gospel?

I have the greatest job in the world. Since taking my position three months ago, I have traveled all over the northeast region of Ohio. Each Sunday I have been visiting different congregations throughout our Association, sharing what I think to be a compelling vision. Today, I'm sharing with Zion UCC, a historic congregation in Tremont. Like I am today, I have been inviting people to be a part of something that I hope will truly change our communities. At each church, each and every Sunday, I've been asking people the same simple question, "What is the gospel?" So, I want to begin the same way with you this morning. Please turn to your neighbor or jot down a quick note to yourself the following question. If you were asked to explain what the gospel is, what would you say? What is the gospel?

I am here this morning to share the gospel with you. The gospel, as I have come to see it, is a mighty and dangerous story. It is the story of all stories; the story of stories, you might say. The gospel is the story of the yearning at the heart of the universe. It is the cry at the core of creation. It is a mighty story because it is about the force that brought Creation into being. It is a dangerous story because it threatens to unsettle us and rework us; it is the force that works to turn God's dream into a manifest reality. The gospel is the good news of the freedom of the dream of God erupting through the confines of our everyday world. It is the story of the One who fully embodied that dream. It is the story of the dream of God taking on flesh and coming to life among us. And that means that the gospel is also about us—our calling, our redemption, our freedom, and our empowerment. It is the dangerous story about our being rescued from forces of domination that lead to death and destruction and awakened to the power of the Spirit of life that calls us forth to join in making the world new. Even so, the gospel is the story of the calling of the church. It is the story of how we have been called and empowered together by the Holy Spirit of God to embody—in our very bodies—that same dream, the cry at the core of the Creation, the yearning at the heart of the universe. The church exists, you see, to embody the dream of God.

## The Dreams of Tremont

I was reading the other day in a history book about the ancient peoples who used to inhabit this land, long forgotten, long before the Erie were here. I look at the mounds and try to learn about how their communities lived, and I ask myself: "I wonder what their dreams were for this land."

I read about the Six Nations, the Greenville Treaty of 1795. This is one of those episodes of human history where we get to see how power works, how dreams become realities, and how they can completely annihilate communities rather than empower and heal them. I think about all of the people whose families were represented by those who signed the treaty and had to journey to find new places to call home. By that time, these communities had spent almost two hundred years fighting to survive. Any dreams they might have had for this land were stolen from them by men like Moses Cleaveland. They were dreamers whose dreams for survival are to inspire us on our ways forward.

I read about the Connecticut Land Company, which had 36 founders and 7 directors. What about their dreams? And about how Moses Cleaveland was among them. I read about how he was sent with a team to map and survey the property they would now have access to. Still, they had to negotiate with the Massasagoes tribe. Moses Cleaveland wrote in his journal that they were beggars and that they asked for more whiskey. There were reports from people who had spent a significant amount of time with them that said they had 30 cabins that were nice, clean, and “unusually comfortable.” So Moses Cleaveland “negotiated” and surveyed the land, and drew these series of boxes like a first grader with ruler and pencil in hand. What were his dreams for this land?

I read about how the “treaties opened the floodgates” for settlers. In 1832, when the Ohio & Erie Canal was finished, Tremont was a part of Brooklyn Township. Settlers began coming in. Pilgrim UCC down the street, as you know, is the oldest church in the area, founded in 1859. The German immigrants began settling here, many from Pennsylvania. In 1867, a German Evangelical congregation was founded. What were their dreams for this place?

## The Gospel and the Dream of God

We all have dreams for the spaces we inhabit. As the Minister of Faith in Action for our Association, I’m interested in the role our understanding of the gospel plays in the dreams we have about the spaces we inhabit. I believe our scripture passage this morning calls us to focus on this, the gospel and the dreams we have for our community. The call, this morning, is to see our Sabbath practices as times together to begin making that dream a reality.

Our passage this morning is part of the Lucan Travel Narrative. One thing that makes Luke special is as a gospel is the journey. Luke has two volumes: Luke and Acts. Luke is the story of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Acts is about Paul’s journey to Rome. In this central part of Luke, the Travel Narrative, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. Jesus “set his face” — *prosopon*—to go to Jerusalem. Several rifts that divide the Christian world come into light in our different interpretations of the phrase “Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem” and how we believe this relates to the gospel.

There are those for whom Jerusalem is about Good Friday and Easter. They place the emphasis on the cross or the crucifixion. For them, Jesus was going to Jerusalem because there he was destined to be crucified. We do see elements of foreshadow that come out from time to time. Still, there are others who place an emphasis on Jerusalem and what it represents as a city. I would fit myself in that camp. Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem because Jerusalem had become the kind of city where people get crucified. Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem because of webs of unjust relations of power had set in, they had taken over, creating a normal state of functioning that depended on a violent, filthy kind of politics. Jerusalem, see, was meant to be the city that embodied the dream of God. Jerusalem was supposed to be a thin place, a place where heaven was just within reach. It was supposed to be the place to find God, to come into connection with the force that brought Creation into being. It was in Jerusalem where broken souls were supposed to find healing. Jerusalem was supposed to be the birthplace for the dream of God.

The Lucan Travel Narrative tells how Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem—traveling the countryside, preaching, teaching, and healing. In the words of the historian of early Christianity, John Dominic Crossan, Jesus was working as an “alternative boundary keeper.” He went to those who had been disgraced and discarded and restored them to healing and wholeness in the context of a community of trust, friendship, and solidarity. Jesus taught that the poor, rejected, displaced and seemingly powerless were the beloved children of God, empowered to bring about a whole new world. Jesus proclaimed to them the wildly radical notion that the dream of God—the Beloved Community—was breaking free into the world, into the here and now, and they were all invited to be a part of it.

So we have the story of this movement of folks—suffering, everyday people—journeying throughout first century Palestine, through the villages of Judea, following Jesus, who had set his face toward Jerusalem, the city that was the central focus of the saga of the dream of God. Jesus sends out 72 of his followers: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Lk 10:2). Jesus tells them that there are multitudes out there, broken and in need of healing, an uncountable number of folks waiting to hear the truth of the love of God, to participate in this in-breaking of the dream of God for the healing of the world.

He sent them out, into homes. Jesus said, “If they hear the stories of the broken finding healing and belonging in a community that accepts them as they are, and they listen, they have listened to me.”

I would love to spend this morning walking with you through the whole story. I’d love to tell you about how Jesus told an academic that there is no room for people to be left for dead in ditches in the dream of God. We would walk through the story of how Jesus invited a family to give up all of the things they were preoccupied with and to invest their lives into “the one thing that was needed,” participating in the unfolding of the dream of God.

Today in our reading, we get a glimpse into what it was like to be in a teaching moment with Jesus. A woman came and asked to be healed. Jesus healed her. And that turned into a debate. But see, you missed the first part of the story. You missed the context. Jesus was teaching about repentance. He had only just been having a conversation with them about the killing of rebellious Galileans—and there were Zealots in their midst. Did that happen because they Zealots were sinful people? No, he said, and the same thing would happen to them if they did not change. He talked about a Siloam that had fallen, and the 18 people who died when a tower at Siloam fell. That did not happen because they were sinful people. And the same destruction was coming upon them, unless they did something to change things. So, they were being called to care for their communities. To become fruit bearing communities by learning to care for each other, or expect to suffer the consequences. It was the same message he had been preaching about all along.

And the lady walks in and asks for healing. Some of them didn’t get it. They wanted to criticize him for it. This is an exact example of a moment where Jesus works as an alternative boundary keeper. They had placed a boundary around the Sabbath. It had become something of a tool of oppression. Not a day of festivity and joy. Not a day for celebrating the birthing of the dream of God. It had become something other than a time for mutual learning and growing and healing together. Sabbath,

Jesus then began to teach them, is the name given to the weekly celebration of the God's dream for the world's wholeness. What is the sabbath for?

It is for celebration. It is for community. It is for life. It is for healing.

The question I believe we are being asked this morning to consider is this: What would it look like for Tremont to be the cite of the birthplace of the dream of God? Or, asked differently—What does God's dream for the wholeness of Creation look like here in Tremont? What role does Zion UCC play in that?

## The Invitation for Tremont

This morning, I am coming to invite you to be part of a movement. The Living Water Association called me for the sole expressed purpose of helping our churches get really good at caring for our communities. We are made up of 150 congregations. God is calling all 150 of us to “journey together” to discover what the dream of God looks like for the northeastern Ohio. I'm inviting you to journey with us to imagine what the dream of God looks like for Tremont, for the whole city of Cleveland, for the entire Rust Belt. When we look out at the world around us, here in 2019, what do we dream for our community? What do we believe God cares about here?

Americans have a really hard time talking about poverty. We have these really inept tools, like the federal poverty line, to deal with it. The United Way created this metric to evaluate the amount of need in different communities across the country. It's called ALICE and it stands for Assets Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These are working people who struggle to pay for basic things like food, housing, clothing, childcare, the things that you need to get by on in everyday life. Cuyahoga county has a total of 534,355 households, 9,161 of those households live in this part of Cleveland, within the 44113 zip code tabulation area. (That includes Ohio City and the Warehouse District.) According to the United Way report, 47% of the households in our area are below the ALICE threshold. That is 251,146 in Cuyahoga County who struggle from day-to-day to decide whether to pay the rent, the heat bill, or the groceries, or their doctor bills, because they absolutely cannot miss a payment on their childcare, because no matter what tragedy comes, they cannot miss a day at work. Two-hundred fifty one thousand. That number means it likely includes some of you. The question I'm asking is about God's dream for our community, and whether the gospel has something to say about our situation.

I pray this morning that we hear Jesus' invitation. I pray we hear the invitation to rediscover the Sabbath as a day for celebrating, for dreaming, for working to embody the dream of God. The gospel is the mighty and dangerous story about the dream of God coming to pass among us. God is calling us to center our lives around this dream for the worlds wholeness. I am speaking on behalf of those of us who are desperate to see the dream of God become a reality in our communities, and we would like you to be a part of it.