

Proper 4B 2018 Sermon

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³ One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

David Lose says about today's Gospel, "I'm not sure there is a more universal story in Scripture."¹ Now, when I first read that statement, I said to myself, "What? Today's Gospel is about keeping the Sabbath, and I hardly think *that* is the most pressing matter on most people's minds today – excepting, perhaps, strict Jews or 7th Day Adventists." But the more I studied and pondered today's passage from Mark, the more I could see Dr. Lose's point. Because these two incidents in today's Gospel are really **not** about *keeping* the Sabbath; they are about the *meaning* of the Sabbath, and other commandments – and about how easy it is for you and me to take a gift meant to serve **God's** purposes and turn it around to serve our **own**. *That's* what makes this Gospel passage so universal.

Our Gospel passage comprises two events, both relating to the Sabbath. In the first scene, we see Jesus' disciples, on the Sabbath day, walking through fields of grain and plucking the heads of grain – presumably, to eat. Now, according to the Sabbath law which we heard in our Old Testament reading earlier,² God's people are to do no work on the Sabbath – and plucking grain was considered work. So the Pharisees, protectors of the letter of the Jewish Law, complain to Jesus that his disciples are breaking the Law.

But Jesus knows that his disciples are not violating the *meaning* of the Sabbath law – which is to promote life. For, from the beginning of Creation, God's intention was to provide food for humans when they are hungry, since food gives life. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that when David and his companions were hungry, they ate the holy bread of the Presence, which was against the Jewish law

for anyone but the priests to eat. But the need of David and his companions for food, Jesus implies, *trumped* the law. The symbolism is clear: God gave humans grain to eat, that they might have **life**; but the Pharisees want to keep this life-giving food from the disciples, because they are more concerned with the letter of the Law than with **life**.

In the second scene of our Gospel, Jesus is in the synagogue, God's house, again on the Sabbath. He sees a man with a "withered" hand. Now the Greek word here for "withered" literally means "dried up" – like the dry bones we read about in our Old Testament lesson on Pentecost. If you remember that marvelous passage from Ezekiel,³ God takes the prophet to a valley that is filled with bones that are "very dry," and God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" The dry bones, we are told, symbolize God's people Israel, and God says to them, "O my people... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." In that Old Testament story, God brings life to the dried, withered bones of his people; should not Jesus do the same for this man with a dried, withered hand, who has come to God's house on the Sabbath day? The very *purpose* of the Sabbath rest is to renew the life of all living beings – including slaves and animals, as we read in today's Old Testament passage.² But the Pharisees consider the act of healing to be work, which is forbidden on the Sabbath; and they are just *waiting* for Jesus to break the Law.

Jesus asks them this question: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to *save* life or to kill?" The answer is obvious; but the Pharisees remain silent. Jesus looks at them with anger, "grieved at their hardness of heart." He says to the man with the withered hand, "Stretch out your hand." He stretches it out, and **life** is restored to the withered, dried-up hand.

And here's the irony (and the hypocrisy): The Pharisees want **Jesus** to *wait* until the Sabbath is over before restoring **life** to the man's withered hand; yet *they* **cannot** wait until the Sabbath is over to plot Jesus' **death**. We are told, "The Pharisees went out and *immediately* conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him." Apparently, it is **not** OK to *heal* on the Sabbath, but it **is** OK to plot *murder*.

And here's the thing: that's what the Pharisees had in mind the minute Jesus walked into the synagogue that day. Mark tells us, "They watched [Jesus] to see whether he would cure [the man] on the sabbath, *so that they might accuse him.*" Professor Tom Long writes: "The Pharisees know full well that saving life and doing good are lawful on the sabbath. It's just that *Jesus' opponents are not in worship that day to fulfill God's will.* They are there to gather evidence [against Jesus], and as is so often the case, one gets from worship precisely what one seeks..."

"Jesus wasn't crucified for his views of the sabbath or of the synagogue and temple," Dr. Long continues, "and it wasn't because he stirred up political

revolution. He was killed because he did God's will, and **that** was *truly* revolutionary. Every deed [Jesus] performed was an expression of God's will, and that meant that the will of others was confronted. Everything he said was a pronouncement of God's reign, and that meant the toppling of lesser, though tightly held, kingdoms..."⁴

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees can be seen in terms of how each of them *uses* the Law. For Jesus, the Sabbath Law is in service of God's will, to nourish life; while the Pharisees use the Sabbath law in service of their *own* will – to preserve their privileged status, their sense of self-righteousness, and their power over others.

And the reality is, my friends, sadly, that there is a little of the Pharisee in each of us. For we, too, can use laws, traditions, Scripture passages, rituals, and moral codes to serve our **own** wills, rather than **God's**. We, too, can focus all our thoughts and energies on tripping up our opponent, rather than promoting the general welfare and doing God's will. We quickly forget Jesus' prayer, "Not *my* will, Father, but *yours*, be done."⁵ And we, too, can put an inordinate amount of our energy into protecting our *own* kingdoms and the kingdom of our tribe, rather than pulling down human-built walls in order that the kingdom of **God** might expand and flourish. We forget that when we pray, "**Thy** kingdom come," the corollary is, "**My** kingdom go." We love to sing, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God,"⁶ but we are not very good at putting it into practice. We seek instead our *own* kingdom, and that of our group or tribe.

And so it is that argumentative Christians hurl their favorite Scripture quotes or denominational traditions at each other as though they were grenades. But rarely do I hear quoted that passage in St. Paul's letter where he instructs us, "Let each of you look **not** to your own interests, but to the interests of others."⁷

Fr. John Shea notes that "In [Mark's] Gospel, Jesus is a fierce critic of the inherited traditions. He takes on purity-dietary laws (7:1-23), temple traditions (11:15-17), divorce traditions (10:1-12), etc. ...[H]is overall complaint is that [these traditions] reflect – and strengthen – a hardened heart. A hardened heart has walled itself off from God and neighbor. The walls it has built are the traditions, and their builders rigorously walk the parapets to make sure God and neighbor do not breach them.

"Jesus' criteria for evaluating the Sabbath traditions might be paraphrased this way: Do they serve life?... The heart of a faith tradition is its spiritual perception of the flow of life between God, self, and the world. This spiritual awareness transcends forms, [but] it is *expressed* and *communicated through* forms. These forms are always partial and historically conditioned. Therefore, they have to be continually evaluated and adjusted. Are they bringing people to the spiritual awareness at the **living** heart of the tradition? Or are they contributing to the hardening of the heart?"⁸

My friends, these are questions which, as Christians, we need to ask not only of our *faith* traditions, but of the traditions, attitudes, opinions, and philosophical viewpoints of our lives at **all** levels: personal, social, corporate, political, legal, governmental, international, or what have you. Are our traditions, laws, and mindsets life-giving? Spirit-nourishing? Or are they contributing to the hardening of the human heart?

If our answer is, “they are contributing to the hardening of the heart,” then is it time to consider changing them. For the Sabbath laws – and so many other laws and traditions *like* the Sabbath laws – were originally meant to give life and to draw people closer to God and one another. Yet we so often bend them to serve our *own* selfish purposes, rather than God’s.

The author of our final hymn today, Adelaide Pollard (who lived from 1862 to 1934), wanted more than anything to be a missionary to Africa. But at every turn, the path toward her dream was blocked. One night, at a prayer meeting, she overheard an elderly woman say, “It really doesn't matter what you do with us, Lord, just have your own way with our lives.” Adelaide realized that she had convinced herself that going to Africa as a missionary was God’s will, while it might, in actuality, have only been *her* will. She went home, and before going to bed that night, wrote all four stanzas of today’s hymn, which begins,

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.
Thou art the potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
while I am waiting, yielded and still.⁹

May that be *our* prayer, also.

AMEN

¹ David Lose, “The Heart of the Law,” ...*in the Meantime* blog
<http://www.davidlose.net/2018/06/pentecost-2-b-the-heart-of-the-law/>

² Deuteronomy 5:12-15

³ Ezekiel 37:1-14

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Century*, May 3, 2018 edition
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/june-3-ordinary-9b-mark-223-36>

⁵ Luke 22:42

⁶ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/seek-ye-first-lyrics-misc.html>

⁷ Philippians 2:4

⁸ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 78

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Have_Thine_Own_Way,_Lord