

Sunday June 2nd, 2024  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-3:6  
“How Shall We Mark the Sabbath?”

Every profession in this world has rules. Rules to make us successful and rules to keep us out of trouble. For example, I found a few rules that apply to being a pilot that Shawn Broughton or any pilot might find enlightening. 1. Every takeoff is optional. Every landing is mandatory.

2. Flying isn't dangerous. Crashing is what's dangerous. 3. The ONLY time you have too much fuel is when you're on fire. 4. The propeller is just a big fan in front of the plane used to keep the pilot cool. When it stops, you can watch the pilot start sweating.

5. A 'good' landing is one from which you can walk away. A 'great' landing is one after which they can use the plane again. 6. Always try to keep the number of landings you make equal to the number of take-offs you've made. 7. Helicopters can't fly; they're just so ugly the earth repels them. 8. It's always a good idea to keep the pointy end going forward as much as possible. 9. Remember, gravity is not just a good idea. It's the law. And it's not subject to repeal. 10. The four most useless things to a pilot are the altitude above you, runway behind you, gas back at the airport, and a tenth of a second ago.

Rules for pilots, teachers, ministers, everyone. Rules meant to protect us, help us, and yes occasionally to confuse us. Rules unspoken, and rules codified into law, and we are expected to know the rules because as we have been repeatedly told, “ignorance of the law is no excuse”. Today's Gospel lesson is about rules and possibly the breaking of rules, but it is much more than that. In fact, it is a very important passage, for understanding much of what happens to Jesus.

These two little incidents of breaking the rules about the Sabbath is really the line in the sand for the religious leaders of Jesus' day, particularly the Pharisees. The actions of Jesus and his disciples in this passage, cloud the Pharisees' perception of who Jesus is and what he is aiming to accomplish. It is a passage not about abolishing the law or denigrating Sabbath observance, but rather a conflict over what should take precedence in one's life.

So, let me see if I can unpack this passage for you a bit, as a way of preparing all of us for what lies ahead in the Gospel of Mark. The first conflict with the Pharisees occurs right after what appears to be such an innocent thing. We are told that on one sabbath Jesus was making his way through the grain fields. It seems implied that this is a casual walk, with the only real possible intended destination being the synagogue.

The walk would not have been a long walk, as arduous journeys were not permitted on the Sabbath. As the disciples are making their way among the grain stalks, they begin to pluck heads of grain and then roll them in their hands to eat a few of the displaced grains. I am not sure the disciples were all that hungry. To me their activity seems more like a pleasant enjoyment of what is around them. It is akin to when we might find a clump of wild raspberries and cannot help but stop, pick, and enjoy a few.

At first you may think the disciples were violating the law by taking someone else's grain. They were perhaps stealing. But the disciples were within the law by taking some grain heads. The law reads in Deuteronomy 23:24-25 as the following.

Sunday June 2nd, 2024  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“If you go into your neighbour’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in a container. If you go into your neighbour’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour’s standing grain.” I don’t know if any fruit growers in Norfolk would appreciate us wandering in their fields eating our fill of strawberries but according to Mosaic Law it was legal.

The Pharisees knew this part of the law, and the taking of the grain was not the issue. For them the great offence was the disciples rolling the grain heads in their hands. In other words, they were doing physical work to prepare something to eat. In the Talmud or Jewish interpretation of the law there are 39 categories of work identified as being prohibited on the Sabbath. This includes winnow or separating grain from chaff.

The reasoning here is that anything that is creative, specifically with grain, anything that makes the inedible edible, is work. To the Pharisees, the disciples violated the law by separating the grain heads from the stalk, which was the source of their creation. To the Pharisees the disciples should have prepared better for the sabbath, by having their food ready ahead of time. Many Jewish families continue to make extra food the day before the sabbath to avoid cooking.

Jesus disagrees with the Pharisees, not because he trivializes the Sabbath, or its rules, but because Jesus sees the Sabbath in a different light. Jesus turns to another passage of scripture about the life of David to aid in his interpretation. Jesus retells of a time, although not perfectly, when David living as a fugitive from Saul goes to the temple to find food. David takes the bread consecrated for the priests as laid out in Leviticus 24:5-9.

Jesus implies that the priest who Jesus misidentifies as Abiathar instead of Ahimelech did nothing wrong, in breaking the strict letter of the law to feed hungry people. The priest sustained the life of a weary traveler and contributed to David’s journey to eventually become king. Jesus’ point is that sometimes certain demands of the law are rightly set aside in pursuing greater values or meeting greater needs, especially in helping to preserve someone’s well-being.

What is surprising also is that Jesus’ opinion is not all that radical or new. In fact, he goes on to point out that the Sabbath has always been created to serve humankind instead of humankind serving some strict religious principles. Jesus is simply reiterating Deuteronomy 5:12-15, in which God says that the Sabbath was instituted to give people who once toiled in the slavery of Egypt at least some period of rest.

Joel Marcus (The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus) points out that there are Rabbinical traditions dating to around Jesus’ time that essentially say the same thing as Jesus. As an example, one source states, “Profane one Sabbath for a person’s sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths.” Jesus is saying that the proper function of the Sabbath was to promote life and to praise God as Israel’s liberator.

The Pharisees knew all this, they just didn’t like Jesus, the new guy on the block dispensing legal opinions, nor deferring to them for interpretations of the law, especially law about the sabbath. Mark is making sure we fully understand, as the Pharisees were learning, that Jesus was no ordinary teacher. He is also declaring himself Lord of the Sabbath.

Sunday June 2nd, 2024  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

And as if we needed more proof of this we move to the synagogue. The scene that unfolds here is about the conflict that develops over Jesus' authority, values, and the urgency of his claims. As Jesus enters the synagogue the Pharisees are lying in wait. You see, inside the synagogue was a man with a withered hand. Implied here is a man whose appendage was either deformed or damaged and was now useless for work or other tasks.

We are not told, but I do suspect that the man was a sort of plant by the Pharisees but perhaps he was a regular presence in the synagogue. Notice that the Pharisees did not doubt Jesus could heal the man. In their eyes Jesus was capable, but they wondered and secretly hoped he would heal the man on the Sabbath. Again, they conclude that healing was work, and a change in someone's state, on the ultimate day of rest.

Standing with his earlier position that the Sabbath was made for man, not the man for the Sabbath, Jesus sees through the trap and the Pharisee's premises. He turns to them and asks a question, a very good question. "Is it lawful to do good or do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or kill?" Then Jesus heals the man and does not disparage or break the law in any way. In Jesus' view, the law in general, was to save and preserve life. (Deut. 30:19-20)

In other words, what better day was there to demonstrate God's commitment to humanity's well-being, than the Sabbath. Saving life trumps the Sabbath, according to ancient rabbinical tradition. Now, of course the man is not dying, but the whole demonstration of the coming of the Kingdom of God was restoration and liberty. By having his hand healed the man would receive back his ability to earn a living and provide for his family.

It is not just about healing; it is also about promoting life to its fullest. The joy and life the Sabbath represents applies to every human heart and every human situation. I am sure that the man with the withered hand was overjoyed to be restored but what about the Pharisees. The passage ends with Mark telling us that immediately, the Pharisees left the synagogue and went to conspire with the Herodians on how to destroy Jesus.

I should point out that scholars are not quite sure exactly who these Herodians were, but the best answer seems to be they were political allies close to the throne of Herod. This is challenging though because Herod was known for embracing Hellenistic culture to which Pharisees were vehemently opposed. It was like Hatfield and McCoys teaming up to face down another group. But the "enemy of my enemy, is my friend". Anyway, Mark wants us to see that very early on in Jesus' ministry two significant groups of leaders opposed Jesus.

Not just oppose Jesus but seek to destroy him. It is an opposition that dogs Jesus all the way to the cross. Jesus' view of the Sabbath and the law as being created for the betterment of people, will form a major theme throughout Mark's Gospel. The lesson in this passage is vital for us to comprehend. It reveals to us how religious conviction, values, and principles: originally intended to benefit people and to bring life, can harden and be oppressive in careless hands.

Donald Juel writes about this passage, "For us—as for Mark—the cross ought to be a sober reminder how easily the most noble motives can be perverted.

Sunday June 2nd, 2024  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

It points out how quickly an institution can become an end itself, stifling legitimate concerns of those outside that seem to threaten stability. It illustrates how frequently insidious forces we scarcely notice can transform the best-educated, best intentioned among us into insensitive leaders, desperately out of touch with what is real.” (Shaping the Scriptural Imagination, pg. 175)

The insensitivity and hard heartedness that Jesus encounters in the synagogue moves Jesus into a state of grief. Thus, begins a theme of Jesus’ ministry exposing the corrosive and tyrannical atmosphere of religion that people have faced for centuries. And dare I suggest that this atmosphere of corrosiveness and tranny still exists today. For example, I ran across a very thought-provoking article by Napp Nazworth in the Christian Post Recorder from June 2012.

Nazworth suggests that Evangelicals have strayed from our true calling by becoming salvation centric and not gospel centric. The Gospel of salvation has over the last many decades produced in North America especially, what might be called a “salvation culture”. A culture that is marked by who’s in and who’s out. Proponents of this culture relish in being counted in the “in group”. A “Gospel culture” however, includes personal salvation, but includes so much more.

Quoting Scot McKnight, Nazworth writes, “The central question of the Bible is not ‘how I can be saved?’ This is a me question. The central question of the New Testament is, ‘who is Jesus’ This is the ‘God’ question. The me questions follows the Jesus question. The fundamental job of the evangelist is not to get people to feel guilty about sins, or to feel terrorized by an angry God. The central question of evangelism is, who do you think Jesus is?”

Nazworth goes on to stress that too many evangelical pastors are more concerned about decisions than about making disciples. This is why so few people who make decisions end up remaining committed to following Jesus. The decision becomes an end itself, not the beginning of a lifelong journey of faith. The Great Commission did not tell us to go and get people to make decisions. The Great Commission and in turn Jesus, calls us to make disciples.

I am not naïve enough to believe even for a moment that erasing the toxicity the current salvation centric culture of the modern church is possible. But I am hopeful that we can at least acknowledge that Jesus is all about making sure that if law, tradition, and faith practices are not bringing about life in abundance they should be jettisoned or reinterpreted to considering the Way the Truth and the Life. I share with you the following poem entitled “When I say”, by Carol Wimmer.

When I say...“I am a Christian”  
I’m not shouting “I am saved”  
I’m whispering “I get lost!”  
“That is why I chose this way.”

When I say...“I am a Christian”  
I don’t speak of this with pride.  
I’m confessing that I stumble  
and need someone to be my guide.

Sunday June 2nd, 2024  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

When I say... "I am a Christian"  
I'm not trying to be strong.  
I'm professing that I'm weak  
and pray for strength to carry on.

When I say... "I am a Christian"  
I'm not bragging of success.  
I'm admitting I have failed  
and cannot ever pay the debt.

When I say... "I am a Christian"  
I'm not claiming to be perfect,  
my flaws are too visible  
but God believes I'm worth it.

When I say... "I am a Christian"  
I still feel the sting of pain  
I have my share of heartaches  
which is why I seek His name.

When I say... "I am a Christian"  
I do not wish to judge.  
I have no authority.  
I only know I'm loved.

So, what do you mean when you say you are a Christian?