

Mark 2:23-3:6

^{2:23}One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He 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.” ²⁷Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

^{3:1}Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴Then 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. ⁵He 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. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Reaching for Life June 3, 2018

One of the consistent themes of Mark’s gospel is this ongoing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and religious leaders. The conflict begins in the very first chapter when Jesus heals a man of an unclean spirit, and soon everyone is seeking him to be healed and forgiven of their sins. And in these first two chapters Jesus heals a lot of people and forgives a lot of sins and he does so to make a point. He is challenging the priestly system and their control over the spiritual life of the people. He is drawing a line in the sand and telling them that the current system, which creates obstacles and burdens for those seeking healing and comfort, is not the way God works. He is challenging their very reason for existing and they don’t like it.

Now, we have to remember that the Jewish religious system only allows for God to forgive sins and that has to be done through the established procedures of the Temple. For anyone else to forgive sins would be blasphemy. And as we mentioned last week when we met Nicodemus, there are many rules and traditions associated with being a good Jew and the Pharisees are tasked with seeing that those rules and traditions are upheld. In contrast to the two commands of Christ to love God and love your neighbor, the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, 365 negative commands, and 248 positive laws...By the time Christ came, it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness. It was steeped in power and greed and this just ticks Jesus off big time!

And so, this issue of what is ok to do on the Sabbath flies in the face of those traditions and Jesus is speaking to them and to us about what is really important to God. And he asks some really tough questions this morning and I struggle to find my own answers and I hope you do too.

Now, I couldn’t help but laugh a little here, because this whole standoff between Jesus and the Pharisees made me think of, well, my cats. Yes, I know that is a strange twist. I don’t know if you have ever had a cat but let me tell you that some cats have this habit of pushing things off counters or dressers. Dishes, jewelry, glasses full of water, some cats just do that. I don’t know if it is to get your attention or just because they can. It certainly does get your attention. You can stand right there and watch them, and they won’t blink an eye. They will just slowly and deliberately push that glass right off the counter and then look at you with this look! Who me? It is in their nature I guess. And, in the same way, I think it is in Jesus’ nature to push us to the edge of our

beliefs and traditions and challenge us to see people first. To see the divinity of all people. He's going to knock your ideas about God right off the theological countertop. And when he does he looks you in the eye waiting for a response.

And in all these encounters we see that the one thing Jesus really cares about is healing and restoring people to wholeness and life. It isn't that he doesn't care about the rules, he just believes that love is stronger than tradition and God's love is greater than anything. He always responds to those who are seeking and those who are in need, and he does so without expecting them to meet any specific agenda or payment. He doesn't even expect them to believe in him or bow down and worship him. Out of his great love, he calls us to come forward, and receive this blessing from God. And he doesn't care what day it is or if you or anyone else thinks you shouldn't be here. That poor man in the story this morning technically should not have been there. He would have been considered 'unclean' because of his infirmity. But Jesus says, "Reach out your hand." Reach out and offer me your brokenness and I will give you peace. Not as the world gives, but peace as only God can give. Peace and rest; true rest for your soul. And for my money, that's worth breaking any tradition!

And what faith it must have taken for that poor man to reach out his arthritic, withered, hand. I can just imagine his hesitancy as he looked from Jesus to the Pharisees. He must have been thinking, "what are the consequences of doing this? Would they come after him or his family? How did he get caught up in this religious showdown?" And what was everyone else thinking? Were they silently urging him on? "Go ahead do it!" Or were they hoping for some kind of cosmic shootout?

And were the questions perhaps pointed at them as well? All these good Jewish folk, gathered for worship, and Jesus asks, "Is it ok to heal, to do good on the Sabbath or not? How do you answer the question? To save life or to kill?" And they were silent! All of them. You and me and the Pharisees.

When I read that sentence I was struck by my own silence in the face of those who are in need. At my own silence as I see the way the poorest, weakest, and most vulnerable in our society are treated. Silent when racial slurs or jokes are told in my presence. Silent when immigrant children are torn from their families and somehow go missing or unaccounted for. Silent when people go hungry or homeless when we have the means to care for them. Silent. Silent. Silent.

And it occurs to me that all these people are reaching out to be made whole. Just as the man today stretched out his withered hand, so these are stretching out their withered spirits in the same way. And I think it is a reminder and an invitation for us to reach out the same way. If you are weary in spirit, reach out. If you are excluded and alone, reach out. If you are afraid, reach out! If you are so hungry in your soul for God, then reach out! Reach out your withered spirit and be made whole, be restored to the One who loves you beyond measure. And then reach out to those in need around you!

And God help you if you are the one who sits in judgment, who offers shaming silence, who says, "no", who chooses not to offer life. Because it reads pretty clearly here that Jesus was angry about that. He was grieved at their hardness of heart. I don't wish that on anyone.

Today we celebrate Holy Communion. We will share the bread and cup that says, "Yes" to God's love for us. It is bread that symbolically feeds the body and soul. A continuing gift from Jesus. Now for some religious folks, only certain people are welcome at this table. There are some expressions of the faith that would require that you are baptized and made a personal confession of faith in Jesus or a particular denomination before you would be welcome at this table. Even our own Presbyterian traditions have held to that standard for many years. But thankfully, I think, we have come to our senses about that. And we acknowledge that Jesus invites

all who are hungry, all who are in need, all who are sinners, to come and be renewed and restored to wholeness. And the good news is that you can return again and again and again.

I'll leave you with this wonderful story that Rachel Held Evans shared about her good friend Sara Miles that always speaks to me. She tells it like this.

“When Sara Miles was forty-six, she wandered into an unfamiliar church, ate a piece of bread, and took a sip of wine. Until that moment she'd had no interest in religion. She was raised in a secular home and remained deeply skeptical of what she'd seen of the church, particularly its more fundamentalist iterations. She'd never been baptized, never read much of the bible, never prayed the Lord's Prayer.

But at St. Gregory's of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, someone invited Sara to the table. “And then something outrageous and terrifying happened,” she says, “Jesus happened to me.”

Sara felt dizzy, overwhelmed, charged with life, filled. Suddenly, she believed. “I couldn't reconcile the experience with anything I knew or had been told. But neither could I go away: For some inexplicable reason, I wanted that bread again. I wanted it the next day after my first communion, and the next week, and the next. It was a sensation as urgent as physical hunger, pulling me back to the table.”

So, with the bewildered support of her partner and daughter, Sara went back to St. Gregory's—the next Sunday, and the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that. Not only did she convert to Christianity, she devoted herself entirely to “a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.”

Rachel goes on to say, “I don't know exactly how Jesus is present in the bread and wine, but I believe Jesus is present, so it seems counterintuitive to tell people they have to wait and meet him someplace else before they meet him at the table. If people are hungry, let them come and eat. If they are thirsty, let them come and drink. It's not my table anyway. It's not my denominations table or my church's table. It's Christ's table. Christ sends out the invitations and if he has to run through the streets gathering up the riffraff to fill up his house, then that's exactly what he'll do. Who am I to try and block the door?”

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat; a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet. Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space; as we share in Christ the feast that frees us: all are welcome; all are welcome; all are welcome in this place. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Prayer of the Day (c) 2018 Thom M. Shuman

You alone are holy, Wondrous God, yet you choose to use us to bring about your dreams and hopes.

You could create a small group around you who are perfect, but you choose the fragile, the forgotten, the voiceless, the overwhelmed to be your household in this life. You could come with a long list of rules, Child of the Holy One, but you choose to focus on relationships. You see the refugee, not as a threat, but as a sister; you see the bullied, not as weak, but filled with courage; you see the suffering, not with pity, but those who can teach grace to all.

You could teach us words of judgment, Wise Heart of the Holy, but you write songs of grace and hope, so we can learn them from the broken; you write poems of laughter, so we can hear them in the laughter of children; you craft visions of wonder and joy, so we can see them as each day becomes sacred by your love.

You make every moment sacred, you create every day to be Sabbath, you shape every person in your love, God in Community, Holy in One, and so we pray as Jesus taught us saying, (*The Lord's Prayer*)