

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23-3:6

Whether we want to admit it or not, we human beings crave law and order. We feel more secure if we know what is expected of us...if there are rules to follow and consequences for failing to do so. The laws and conventions of society make it possible for us to live with one another in some orderly fashion that at least attempts to protect the rights and freedoms of each of us. Law is a good thing even though there are times when we might protest that a law is unjust or that a policy has unintended consequences or the traditions in society no longer reflect who we are. Periodically, we go through cultural revolutions where societal norms are upended and reversed. Some of us are old enough to have lived through the decade of the 1960's. That was such a time of cultural revolution, controversial military actions and unexpected and tragic violence in our public life together. The times in which we are now living are not that much different. We find ourselves in the midst of great cultural controversy worldwide as we human beings find ourselves increasingly polarized in our viewpoints and locked in a struggle to determine which shall be our prevailing cultural narrative.

Jesus is not unfamiliar with such times as our Gospel lesson from Mark points out this morning. For the entirety of the Easter season we were hearing messages about Jesus from the Gospel according to John...a gospel that emphasizes the divinity of the human Jesus. The Gospel of Mark propels us into a world of controversy and conflict that not only surrounds Jesus, but that Jesus seems to actively provoke. Given the resistance we human beings have toward change and our nimble way of avoiding anything close to insight about our own shortcomings and behavior, perhaps Jesus realized that flat out conflict was the most efficient way to jolt us into seeing what we need to see.

The controversy we hear about this morning is around the observance of the Sabbath and what that means. It is such a temptation to see this as a black and white issue...a clearly 'Jesus is right and the Pharisees are wrong' issue. It is so easy in the rearview mirror to have 20/20 vision, but walking into this situation cold, it's a little harder to tell...just as it is difficult and complex in our own times to see clearly which way we want to go. Our life together is polarized enough to provide 'sides.' Which side should we choose? It is so much fun and is so very easy to see the Pharisees as the Bad Guys as opposed to Jesus' Good Guy. We do that all the time and with some justification, but to do that in the conflict between them that we just heard is to lose some of the power of this message.

Think about it. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of their community. They weren't ALL bad. It was their calling...their sacred responsibility...to preserve the traditions of their religion and not only to teach the Ten Commandments, but to be sure that observance of those commandments of God was faithful by all. Theirs was a God-ordained trust that they took very seriously. They were answerable to God for both their action and their inaction. It was their sacred responsibility to speak out and take action when someone violated those commandments and encouraged others to do likewise. Let's not lose sight of the fact that by zeroing in on Jesus, they were doing their job. To the best of their knowledge, they were doing exactly as God had asked them to do...they were defending the faith as they understood it.

And guess what? We faithful, church-going, committed Christians are the Pharisees of our day! We aren't ALL bad. We are good people preserving the traditions of our religion and doing our best to observe the Ten Commandments in a way that is faithful to God. We have a sacred trust with Christ. We have taken baptismal vows...vows that we take seriously and that we periodically re-commit ourselves to in corporate worship. We are answerable to God for both our action and our inaction. But we don't have the advantage of 20/20 vision in the rearview mirror. We are in the midst of controversy and conflict and it's not so easy to determine which side God wants us to be on. There were good, law-abiding, faithful people among the Pharisees that eventually plotted to kill Jesus. And there were good, law-abiding faithful people among those who followed Jesus and abandoned him in his most desperate hours.

So what does Jesus want us to understand about this controversy with the Pharisees over the observance of the Sabbath? It is the fourth of the Ten Commandments...the first one to appear after the commandments about our relationship with God. Consider, for a moment, the purpose of the Sabbath. It is to honor God...to do what God had done on the 7th day after the creation...to set aside a day that allows us to get off the hamster wheel, to rejuvenate, to rest, to be made whole again by stepping out of the normal routines of daily life that require us to work for our daily bread. This is a day made for restoration...of our spirits and our bodies and our relationship with God. In an effort to be sure that people didn't remain under the bondage of work for that one day out of the week, the religious leaders of the day codified...in minute detail...what constituted work. There was so much detail that the laws around the observance of Sabbath ended up being more repressive than the work the Sabbath was supposed to alleviate.

Enter Jesus who provoked a conflict to jolt people's eyes open!! The Sabbath was a gift from God to the people who were enslaved first in Egypt and then by work itself. The Sabbath was

given to human beings not only to honor God but to provide relief to humans. God rested on the 7th day. We honor God by resting on the 7th day.

What Jesus' disciples did when they wandered through the grain fields was to pluck the heads off the wheat stalks as they walked by. It served as a snack for them...a God-given snack. The tradition of the day among those who cleared the fields and reaped the harvest was to leave stalks still standing around the edges of the field so that those who were poor and disabled and in need could get something to eat. The disciples weren't working. They were taking advantage of the generosity of others.

And in the synagogue, Jesus restored a man's withered hand returning him whole to his community. Not only his hand was restored, but his entire life was restored. He could now take care of himself and his family and he could contribute to the welfare of the community. If you read this passage carefully, you can see that Jesus did no 'work.' He never even touched this man. He said simply, "Stretch out your hand." And he did this in the middle of the synagogue the center of religious life in the community. This was God's house and restoration is God's gift.

Jesus didn't violate the Sabbath by what he did. He emphasized that the Sabbath was designed by God to be used for restoration...for rejuvenation...for being made whole once again...for being sustained by God. These were the reasons for the Sabbath in the first place.

But Jesus' display of deeper understanding of the purpose of the Sabbath...like so many other deeper understandings that he presented to us as he walked the earth...threatened to upset the statue quo. His actions called into question the rules and regulations that the religious leaders had established for their people. He jolted everyone out of their complacency and made them truly think about what they were doing and why.

Is Jesus doing the same for us this morning? Is this story about Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees making us stop and think about whether or not Jesus might actually be provoking a conflict with us and what we think we know about him and about God? Do our ways of doing things mean more to us than the spirit in which those ways were developed in the first place? Do we get lost in our laws and traditions at the expense of understanding God's gift to us? Have we lost sight of Jesus' love for all in our attempt to be sure that we pay the proper reverence and respect to God through the rituals and traditions we refuse to amend or even question?

The answers to these questions and many more like them come through prayer and conversations with other believers who are trying to discern God's will for us in any given

situation. The questions themselves come from a deep desire for spiritual rejuvenation, for the restoration of our very souls, and for a deeper spiritual connection with our Creator.

And to make all of that possible, God gave us the Sabbath. When we use it accordingly, we honor God and keep the Sabbath as God intended.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.