

Proper 4B
Mark 2:23 - 3:6
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Stuck in the Rules?

It's a new season. School is over, graduation ceremonies completed, and even traffic patterns are slowly beginning to reflect the vacation season. Here at Holy Spirit, we've begun our own summer routine, as we rev up for a marvelous summer VBS program and lean into our revised Sunday worship schedule. The summer season — with its summer pace — has officially begun!

Yet Mark's gospel pulls us back from getting too comfortable with a summer slow down by reminding us about the importance, the urgency of Christ's mission, and that we really need to stay tuned, to keep listening, opening ourselves to continuing to learn what it means to follow our Lord and Savior.

I'm not exaggerating about that sense of urgency, for in this gospel, everything happens quickly. If you find the word immediately in the New Testament, 70% of the time, it's here in this book. From the very beginning, Mark's gospel jumps right in and gets straight to business. In the first chapter, Jesus is baptized, he calls his disciples, he preaches the good news of God's kingdom, and immediately, the miracles of healing begin. There's no time wasted. People are rushing in from everywhere to see and hear Jesus.

Not surprisingly, with all that attention, Jesus is also meeting resistance from those in authority. He stirs things up as he pronounces forgiveness, as if he's God own self. He associates with the wrong kind of people, tax collectors and sinners. He's not acting as he should, not fasting as expected.

And now there's another issue and more controversy about Jesus — this time involving the Sabbath.

All first century Jews understood the concept of the Sabbath. The Sabbath day was an integral part Jewish identity, setting this faith community apart as people of God. And this Sabbath day of holy rest was intended not only for God's people, but for all of God's creation. Sabbath rest even included those who resided within the Jewish community: their staff, their servants, and foreign guests, even their animals. And every 7 years, by law, fields were left fallow, a kind of sabbath time for the earth's own renewal and rest.

But Sabbath wasn't just time off for a little "me-time." The Sabbath was purpose-filled, providing the time to recall the Creation story when God created all that is. The Sabbath was to help God's people remember their liberation from Egypt and recognize their perpetual covenant with God. Think of the Sabbath as a way of life, a ritual day observed by all God's people — not only the ultra-pious or religious, but everyone — both devout and ordinary.

But Jesus recognized that this blessed practice, over time, had been twisted, separated from God's purpose and instead had evolved —through human intervention — into a complex system of rules designating what could and could not be done: what was work and what wasn't, what travel could or couldn't occur, what you should or shouldn't do to keep the Sabbath holy.

Religious commitments and values that were first established to honor God and help God's people align with God's purpose had morphed into systems that were oppressive and legalistic. The rules themselves had become more important to some than God or God's people.

This isn't a new story. We see it happen today. Rules and guidelines, often created with good intentions, can evolve into something else, something that over time, doesn't even resemble where it all began. And as we get used to this adjusted way of doing things, it then may

becomes the tradition, the status quo, as it's always been that way — even though it really wasn't. And we can begin to follow the letter of the law, rather than the Spirit of the Law.

There's an old wisdom tale about a saint and her cat. This old saint and her followers would meditate together daily on God's word. The only problem was that the saint had a young cat, and this cat, being a cat, would walk around during this quiet time, meowing and purring and jumping on peoples' laps, bothering everyone during their meditative time. So the saint, being wise, would put the cat on a leash right before that time of meditation and tie that leash to a pole outside their sacred space, so the cat couldn't disturb anyone.

The people continued to gather together to meditate for years, and after the saint died, the practice continued, including the habit of tying the cat to the pole. But as years passed, the habit seemed to take on a life of its own. Nobody could meditate unless the cat was tied to the pole first, even when the cat grew too old to bother the people during their prayer time. Then one day the cat died and everyone panicked. How could they continue to meditate? How could they reach out to God? For now there was no cat to tie to a pole.

It's a silly story, but a cautionary tale about getting stuck in our practices, the rules, for the sake of the rules. Or take it one step farther, to live by the letter of the law, rather than the Spirit of the Law.

Even our most noble motives can become twisted when our hearts are hardened. All commitments and values, including religious ones, can turn oppressive if we're careless and stop paying attention, closing ourselves from the nudgings of the Spirit. None of us are immune. It's just so easy, even for the best-educated and best-intentioned among us, to get stuck in the rules and become insensitive and out of touch with what's really going on in the world.

Just think about a few of the current controversial topics of our day:

- Our borders: Yes, our country's borders do matter and must be protected. But why should children be separated from their parents?
- And guns: Yes, we have a constitutional right to bear arms. But what about safety from gun violence, especially for our children in their schools?
- Or justice: Yes, we do need law and order. But is justice being served if the majority of those incarcerated are the poor and those of color?

Complex issues, not easily resolved. Yet the world encourages us to see these and other concerns in black and white terms, dividing us into tribes and factions, encouraging us to dehumanize all who do not think, or look or act like us, while loudly declaring that civil discussion and compromise are signs of weakness.

So. Much. Noise. So how do we follow Jesus in our daily lives?

Jesus words remind us to not get lost in the rules, not to allow our hearts to be hardened. Remember "the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Hear and know God's truth: God created us and all of God's creation in love, for love. God's purpose is to save and preserve life, restoring it to wholeness and dignity. If our own words and actions are not centered in God's love, it may be time to think about whether we too are stuck in the rules, failing to live into God's Spirit of love.

We should take the time to dig deeper into those complex and controversial topics. We can explore that less familiar side of an issue, listening to stories of those with different

backgrounds. We can ask questions, encourage civil dialogue, find common ground. And we should ask our leaders to do the same.

But above all, we need to remember what matters most: our relationship with God and our neighbor. As Christ's own, we've been born again into new life, set apart from the world, and called to live into our Christian identity: spreading the Good News of God in Christ, seeking to serve Christ in all persons, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. Jesus shows us the way, breaking through our hearts of stone with the Spirit of compassion and transformational love.

What better time than right now, during this summer season with its gift of a slightly slower pace, for us to explore together with a sense of urgency and immediacy, the truth of how to live our lives in the world, according to God's Word. Amen.