

June 3, 2018 - Annunciation Episcopal Church - 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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***The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the
Herodians against him, how to destroy him.
Mark 3:6***

If you've ever read any of the sermons that I post online, on the Annunciation website, you've seen that at the top of my manuscript, I include a snippet - a line or two - of the scriptures of the day. It's a line that sums up or expresses my "theme" for that day's sermon, a sort of thesis sentence. Usually, it's the phrase or idea that's caught my attention, that has somehow spoken to me; often it's the thing I feel that God wants me to carry with me for a while, and so I put it front and center on my page, to remind myself that that's where my focus should be.

I do that, every time I preach. Except for today.

Oh, there's a line of scripture at the top of my page, to be sure. But today, the line that stood out for me was not what I think of as God's take-away message for me. Instead, the verse that stood out is something that somewhat horrifies me...the very last line of our gospel.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

That's pretty harsh: conspiracy, destruction. All because Jesus did.....what?

At issue - at least on the face of it - is that Jesus and his disciples seem not to be following the rules, the Law. They've gleaned from the grain fields on the Sabbath, and there - in the synagogue, right in front of the Pharisees, almost as if he's flaunting Jewish law, God's laws - Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, again, on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees are part of the structure of Jewish religious authority, charged with making sure that everyone minds their religious manners. It's their job, and they take it seriously. And, for a people who have been repeatedly battered by outside forces, taken captive by Egyptians and Babylonians, occupied by the Romans - for a people who have been through so much, having guardians overlooking and trying to keep pure the practices that make the Jews the Jews perhaps makes good sense.

Good people making sure that the Law is preserved, upheld: that's what it looks like the Pharisees are doing on the face of it. But in this case, the thing's not the thing. If it was only a matter of Jesus and the disciples forgetting themselves, or coloring outside the lines a little bit, surely an admonishment, a reminder, about the importance of keeping holy the sabbath day would suffice. A reminder about the intricacies of what it means to properly honor the sabbath. That's not what happened, though. Listen again to what the gospel says: The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

That kind of extreme and zealous response indicates that there's something deeper going on here. The encounter near the grain field, the encounter in the synagogue: these aren't the first times that Jesus and the Pharisees have wrangled. And their opposition to one another is not simply verbal sparring between learned people with different interpretations of the same scriptures. No, instead they each approach the world in fundamentally different ways, are playing two entirely different games, what game theorists call finite games and infinite games.

In a finite game, there are players and rules, winners and losers. Finite games have an end point, and are based on scarcity; when the whistle blows or the finish line tape is broken, only one person or team is on top. Not everyone can be the winner or be on the winning team. There's a sorting, a hierarchy. The Pharisees, in their pursuit of religious purity, are definitely in the finite game camp.

“In the infinite game, though, something completely different is going on. In the infinite game, the point is to keep playing, not to win. In the infinite game, the journey is all there is.” *[Seth Godin blog, May 2, 2014]* Think of a parent playing catch with a child. Think of a musician practicing - playing - their instrument. There is no endpoint, no sorting of winners vs. losers. Infinite games are meant to enhance or improve the quality of life of the participants, to build up the community. This is the game that Jesus is playing.

In their finite game, the Pharisees work to set up boundaries, to make clear the rules and then enforce them as to who's in and who's out, who's a winner, who's a loser. Their allegiance is to the rules, the Law, and not the

participants. And as they are the rule definers and interpreters, guess which side of the scoreboard they always land on?

Then into this long-standing and comfortable (for some) finite game scenario comes Jesus, whose focus is entirely on the players, the participants, and inviting new people in to play. Lowering barriers to entry, so everyone can join in. For Jesus, the Law is there not to keep people out of the game, or to sort them into winners and losers, but to help them find their way into being the person God created them to be; to find their way into a loving community; to help them engage with others who would welcome them. A game based on abundance - plenty for all - rather than scarcity.

Is it any wonder, then, that the Pharisees want to figure out a way to take Jesus out? They've been the beneficiaries of this finite game they've been overseeing, and now Jesus is changing everything. Who will they be? - how will they live? - if this Jesus guy manages to discredit or nullify the game to which they've given their life?

That's how game theorists might characterize the difference; one theologian sums it up this way:

The biblical witness is clear: God gives us the law to help us get the most out of life and, in particular, to help us get more out of life by helping others, by looking out for them, by taking care of them and, by extension, each other. In this way, the law creates a level of order that makes human flourishing more likely. Law offers a measure of protection, particularly important to those who are most vulnerable. Law establishes a modicum of stability that makes it easier for us to prosper. All of these things the law does. Which is why God's law is holy and we are taught to know, revere, and follow the law.

But as important as the law is, it is – and shall always be – a means to an end, a tool, a mechanism in service to a greater purpose. It is not an end in itself; following the law is not itself the purpose of the law, and the law is not capable of granting us identity but only helps us live into the identity of 'beloved child' given us by God.

And that's where these good religious folk [the Pharisees] – and many of us good religious folk today – get confused. We mistake the law for its end. We think following the law is the point and forget that the law was established to help others. We establish our

identity based on our ability to obey the law – or at least to obey it better than whatever comparison group we devise – rather than using the law to help those we would compare ourselves against. [David Lose, In the meantime, June 1, 2018]

“The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” Motivated by fear, victims of their own view of the world as a finite game, the Pharisees scrambled to make sure they would be on what they perceived to be the winning side. Too bad. It’s too bad they couldn’t confess their fear to Jesus, couldn’t give up their idea of God’s laws as tools of scarcity, couldn’t wrap their minds around a new game - one of plenty and abundance - where everyone is invited by an infinite God to take part and play. *Amen.*