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Mark 2:23-3:6

June 2, 2024

***Mark 2:23—3:6***

***23One 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.”***

***3Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They [the Pharisees] 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 the Pharisees, “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.***

Yesterday afternoon, we enjoyed the Spring Tea of 2024, here in the sanctuary. The food, the flowers, the baskets for the raffle prizes, the antique tea cups and saucers from Kathleen Mitchell’s antique business, George’s music, the organization, and the presentation by RotaCare Coast Side, the medical clinic in Half Moon Bay where Chris and other medical professionals donate their time, to whom our donations are going, were all so well done, and represented so much work! Everyone brought friends and neighbors and family. It really was lovely.

I had never experienced a Tea here at Bethany, so I didn’t really know what to expect. I had heard some things and knew that folks were pretty excited to be able to offer this event again, but I didn’t have a complete picture. I didn’t know if it would be all women; I didn’t know what to wear; I didn’t know what the tone would be – formal, playful, business-like. One person suggested that I just wear what I would wear to church. Well what *I* would wear if I were *attending* church might be jeans and a nice shirt; what I would wear if I were *leading* worship could be *nice* jeans and a nice shirt, and maybe, just maybe, a dress. When someone said that ladies used to wear a hat and white gloves, I got nervous. What do you mean “used to?” As in, maybe some still do? I don’t have any white gloves, and I have a few baseball hats.

Somehow conversations about what to wear and what to expect and what used to happen at these Teas ended up covering the topic of what is allowed in a Church. Church with a capital C. Depending on the architecture of a church – whether it has a room or rooms before you enter the sanctuary itself, or if you walk through the front doors into a giant long regal looking baroque cathedral makes a difference. Churches have been places that one enters silently and remains silent, prayerful, and reverent, anytime of the day or week. That has changed in some places over the years. Many churches now raise the expectation level to some kind of polite respect during the hour for worship, but the rest of the time there are no rules, spoken or unspoken. Most churches are somewhere in the middle.

I think of the way many churches removed carpeting from under the pews so that congregational singing would be stronger. Churches also began to prefer moveable seating, and therefore ended up also removing *all* carpeting. Great for singing, but difficult for regular speaking and hearing. I’m sure those of you who have been here for a while remember those transitions. The rules about behavior in churches is kind of a moving target. Welcoming children in worship involved re-thinking the idea of children being seen and not heard. When the worship space and the everything-else space is one and the same, like here at Bethany, these rules are harder to discern.

Are there certain behaviors that are generally more worshipful that we adhere to from 10-11 on Sundays when this is a worship space; and other behaviors whenever this same room is an everything-else space?

Most faith traditions have spoken and unspoken rules about behavior and formality that we reenforce by comforting traditions and rituals in our play and in our worship. At the same time daily life over the years invites new circumstances and challenges and opportunities that the Church needs to respond to. The Pharisees in today’s scripture reading were doing just that. Jesus was providing a new take on the importance of Sabbath, by inviting them to reflect on the original meaning of the commandment.

The gospel of Mark moves at a quicker pace than other gospels. Only 21 verses into the first chapter of Mark’s gospel account, Jesus is getting into trouble. In our reading for today, only in the middle of the second chapter, Jesus has already made a name for himself as a troublemaker five times.

1. He healed a man with an unclean spirit, on the Sabbath, in the synagogue.
2. He healed crowds of people at the house of Simon.
3. He cleansed a man with a skin disease.
4. He healed a person who was paralyzed.
5. He broke rules about fasting.

Time and time again Jesus’ behavior was a challenge to what was expected and acceptable.

Each time, Jesus offered an explanation, sometimes in the form of a question, that was meant to draw the listeners deeper. In today’s reading, the topic is the importance of Sabbath as part of religious teaching.

Our text opens with the Pharisees questioning why Jesus’ followers are plucking grain, something that is unlawful to do on the Sabbath. We are often taught that the Pharisees are the bad guys because they are so often opposite Jesus’ complaints, and called hypocrites. But being a Pharisee was not in itself a terrible thing. Pharisees were a “lay reform movement within 1st century Judaism.” Let me quote from a commentator here: Pharisees were “dedicated to superlative adherence to Torah in all walks of life.” “Pharisees were celebrated by their Jewish contemporaries for ‘practicing the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their discourse.’ They were regarded as upstanding, devout, Bible-believing pillars of the community.”1 Plucking grain on the Sabbath was not allowed, as a way of safe-guarding the Sabbath as a holy day, so the Pharisees ask a good question. “The Pharisees said to Jesus, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’”

Jesus reminded the Pharisees then, of a story from their own Jewish history about when King David broke the laws of the Temple also, by entering and eating food meant only for the priests, scripture that we can read in the Old Testament from 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. In other words, King David had already set a precedent.

“And Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He 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.”

As Jesus entered the synagogue and saw the man with a withered hand, the Pharisees watched carefully to see what Jesus would do. Would he break another Sabbath law?

The Pharisees were no different than any number of Christian denominations, other faith traditions, who find themselves in the midst of a changing landscape. Just like asking what I should wear to a church event that’s not worship, reflecting on the way things used to be in church vs. the way things are now, we are in the midst of a changing landscape too. The Pharisees took the meaning of Sabbath as expressed in the Torah very seriously. There are many non-biblical sources written in the 1st century that tell us how the Sabbath was meant to be kept holy. Sabbath is a divinely ordained rest in every aspect of life. The Sabbath is foreshadowed in the creation story, and commanded in the 10 commandments. The rest required of a true Sabbath is a costly command. “The people, their foreign residents, and even the animals must rest. The land must rest. The widow must be released from her dept. “This mandated idleness – 15 percent of life – was so costly that it had to be general and it had to be enforced with fierce penalties.”2 The sabbath was to be life-giving, even at the expense of cultural commerce and productivity.

When Jesus said “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” he was saying that those fierce penalties were man-made, and not the point of the divinely ordained and commanded Sabbath. The Sabbath has been “described as a sign of liberation. Taking a sabbath rest is proof that we are no longer enslaved and forced to work without rest.”3 “Idleness is sacred in the Bible because it identifies the world with a living God whose greatest gift is rest and who rescued the people from slavery in a land where no rest was allowed.”2

In American culture no one is allowed to rest. We are all supposed to be giving our all, at all times. We work to earn everything we get – our money, our homes, our food, our belongings, which leads to more respect from society, which leads us to raise our self-worth, which leads us to define ourselves by our value to others. We can’t call off work because we are sick because it means that we aren’t able to tough it out, take one for the team. We end up so filled with guilt that we don’t fully rest, and work twice as hard when we go back. But that is backwards. In America, we have to fight against the notion that resting is laziness; resting is only for those who are weak or ill; doing anything slowly is inefficient and therefore a waste of time. Even our vacations aren’t completely restful because we have to plan, pack, pay for the means of travel, see all the sights, do all the special things so we don’t waste our vacation.

I suggest we practice resting. Take a nap and don’t feel guilty. Put aside a chore and go for a walk in nature instead. Sit in your garden even while the laundry needs doing. Ruthies read a book called “Sabbath” a few months ago, and we all found some wonderful quotes to live by. One was about us needing to rest because if we didn’t rest voluntarily, we would be forced to rest by exhaustion or illness.

Sabbath is not just about bodily rest either. The word itself means “release” as when we are released from pressures, released from suffering, released from fear, etc. Sabbath has sometimes been described as those moments when your insides match your outsides. Sabbath becomes a state of mind, where one feels completely at peace.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees, with all of their rules, to look deeper into the meaning of sabbath for themselves. Rather than getting caught up in all of the requirements for keeping the sabbath holy, why can’t we back up a bit, to the original intent of the sabbath. My college flute teacher would say “Don’t let the tail wag the dog.” We can keep the sabbath holy by providing any of those releases to others; by offering the freedom of sabbath to others whom we meet. We can keep the sabbath holy by any means that we consider life-giving – sometimes that might look like doing nothing and receiving the grace of life-giving rest; and sometimes it can look like feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, helping the sick, protecting the vulnerable.

Jesus demonstrates that there is a freedom inherent in Sabbath that contributes to wholeness and a flourishing life, for all.3

How will we accept this gift of Sabbath today?

Let us pray…

1Black, C. Clifton, Working Preacher, Commentary on Mark 2:23-3:6

2Dueholm, Benjamin J., 11/26/2014 *Christian Century*, “The war against rest.” <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-11/war-against-rest?code=hCeANPKeGO4vSq63CakH&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=ba26db14d5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCFREE_2024-05-27&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-a11c3b8de1-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D>

3Sawyer, Nanette, *Christian Century*, June 2024, Lectionary