

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, henceforth and for evermore. Amen.

In this pair of startling scenes from today's gospel reading, barely into the second chapter of this account of Jesus' life, we see what might feel like a very familiar controversy: Jesus, the rabble-rouser, the provocateur, ruffling the feathers of the Pharisees in the temple. The Gospel according to Mark is the most spare of the gospel accounts – minimalist, even – and it starts quick, straight out of the gate. It is this lack of embellishment, stripped of detail, that has – in part – led Bible scholars to believe that Mark was the first Gospel written down. By the middle of the second chapter, where we pick up today, Jesus has already been prophesied by John the Baptist, baptized in the Jordan river, driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, called the first disciples, cast out an unclean spirit, and healed fevers, paralytics, and lepers. In today's episode of "You Can't Do That On the Sabbath, Can You?" Jesus puts those pesky Pharisees in their place, once again, in two quick scenes.

When we enter the scene today, Jesus and the disciples are out strolling, wandering through a field, "idly plucking off the tips of grain."¹ This was lawful, it should be noted, by the Law in Deuteronomy: allowing hungry travelers to grab a bit of grain from a field was a way of providing for their need to eat (in a time without roadside shawarma shacks.) But is the sabbath, and so the Pharisees are

¹ Farley, Wendy. Mark 2:23-3:6: Theological Perspective. In *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 2009, p. 96.

incensed. Jesus, as a rabbi, a teacher, is responsible for his students' conduct, and is thus called to account for their actions.

Likewise, in the second instance, Jesus enters the synagogue, coming upon a man with a withered hand. Not only does Jesus heal the man – still, on the sabbath – but does so in the center, right in front of everyone.

The theologian Don Saliers writes, “It would be too easy, of course, to say, ‘This shows that Jesus was a religious and political radical—attacking sabbath-keeping,’ or ‘Jesus has no respect for the Torah or for the religious leaders of his day.’ Much more is here than Jesus the religious and moral non-conformist.”² The startling conclusion, I think, is Jesus' response: that the sabbath was made for people, not the other way around.

What are we to make of these Pharisees, and their objection to these actions, their accusation that these constitute a violation of the sabbath? “Sabbath rest was, after all, a deeply significant value and practice for the Jews...Should we be so hard on the Pharisees for pointing this out? In fact, Jesus never denies or rejects the significance of the sabbath...it is about what constitutes ‘work’ on the sabbath, in view of humanity's life before God. It is about the very meaning of sabbath itself...”³ Whatever else the sabbath may come to mean for Jesus' followers, it always should point in the direction that Jesus' love signifies.

² Ibid., Don Saliers, pp. 92-93.

³ Ibid., pp. 92-93.

It seems to me that Jesus is calling the Pharisees to set aside their particular kind of rigid piety, their insistence upon the letter of the law, and consider instead the intent of sabbath in the first place. The sabbath rest goes back to the very creation of the world, and to God's original intent when creating humankind – it is directly related to the sacredness in creation that God saw and called "good." Jesus contradicts the Pharisees' objection by claiming the sabbath as part of that good creation – and its fundamental benefit to people. It seems to me that, rather than rebuking the idea of sabbath, Jesus is instead underscoring its importance.

Wendy Farley writes that "this gets at the heart of what it means to participate in the vision of reality that Jesus is offering to us. The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is a conflict that dwells in the heart of virtually every human being and operates in every church congregation...The Pharisees are portrayed as obsessed with religious authority, traditional observances, and righteousness...their love of scripture and tradition make them blind to the compassion and joy that" inspire Jesus' healing acts. "In this passage, Jesus tries to change the idea of the Sabbath from being an oppressive ogre, which denies food to the hungry and healing to the sick, to what it was originally: a reminder that we belong to God and not to our labor."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes this: "As best I can tell, most Christians follow eight commandments, not ten. The second commandment was dispatched at the Council of Nicea in 787, when the church decided graven images were OK. If it had pleased God to become incarnate in a person, the church reasoned, then it should not displease God for us to have images of that person. Iconoclasts have

continued to rise up over the years, but few Christians regard icons, stained glass windows or Jesus T-shirts as sinful.

“The fourth commandment has undergone a more gradual demise. When Jesus declared that the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath, many of his followers deduced that they were free from sabbath observance. Since the rabbis themselves had said as much ("Sabbath has been given to you; you have not been given to the sabbath"), it seems more likely that Jesus was sharpening his disciples' sense of sabbath as divine gift instead of divine burden.”⁴

As we set out on this second half of the church year – our opportunity to consider and respond to the great acts of salvation we remembered in the seasons of Advent and Lent, Christmastide and Epiphany, Holy Week and Easter, Ascension and Pentecost – it seems fitting that we begin with a reminder: that our faith in Jesus Christ, living out our love of God in practice, should be done flexibly, always with God’s intention for us and for creation in mind. And that means letting go of rigidity. And that setting aside time for God, and for our own rest and renewal, is part of God’s intention for us – not as an obligation that must be grudgingly fulfilled, but as a part of the rhythm of life which God intends for us. Perhaps, in these times, when busy-ness of life is sometimes a measure of its worth, this is a reminder we need desperately. Jesus calls you – and me – to an intentional rest, so that we may know peace in our frantic lives.

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Remember the Sabbath” on Christiancentury.org. Web: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-12/remember-sabbath>. Retrieved 6/2/2018.

Moberly
3 June 2018

St. Alban's, Annandale
Proper 4, Year B: The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

“It turns out that profound human needs are indeed touched in the meaning of sabbath – and now, of Sunday as the “Lord’s Day,” – such as the need to hold the whole of life before God, and the need for sheer delight and enjoyment. The gift of the Lord’s Day allows the contemplative side of our humanity to flourish.”