

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
June 3, 2018

Mark 2:23-3:6

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Wanting More

First a point of clarity. Jews have never permitted observing Torah (including rules about the Sabbath) to override decisions to save a life. In a story heard on National Public Radio, a Jewish man remembers being on a train to a Nazi death camp as a young child. His mother buys them food but all that is available is non-kosher meat. Her son asks her why she is crying. She tells him that she has kept kosher all her life but now she is going to die, and she is crying because her children are young and have not had a chance to live. This mother wasn't a great scholar, but she shared the wisdom of the historical Pharisees in knowing that Torah is made for human beings: Her children were starving, and it was her duty and right to feed them what she could. (Wendy Farley, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 3, p.92)

But today's stories, they are hardly life-threatening matters. Though Jesus himself appeals to a story where David's men were starving and ate bread that was consecrated in the temple, we aren't told here that Jesus' disciples were starving or that Jesus encountered needing their life saved. The disciples are wandering through a field, idly plucking off the tips of grain. And, as one commentator points out, the man's withered hand could have been healed at sundown. Jesus is not compelled to decide between life-saving actions and violation of a narrow and technical legalism. (Farley, p.96)

So why is Jesus so provocative?

If you heard our scripture introduction you know Jesus is already in some hot water. Jesus socializes - *dines* -- with tax collectors and sinners. When asked why his disciples don't fast (when John's do) he acts like fasting is no big deal, though it's been a traditional religious practice. Already there are ripples of controversy. Why then if people are getting so touchy so early in his ministry doesn't Jesus ease off a bit, preach a gentle sermon, suggest a family game night or go off on a spiritual retreat? Why does he permit his disciples break the Sabbath rules out in the field? And why, seeing feathers already ruffled, does he act to heighten the conflict by going into the synagogue and performing a healing there?

In pondering this, it came to me that Jesus was not the pope trying to run a church, he wasn't a pastor trying to hold a church together in tense political times, he was simply being true to his call as one sent by God trying to help others follow God's way. He was a man on a mission: to get the synagogue back to its foundational purpose: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

So Jesus is provocative in our stories today but he is not doing it just to get a rise. In the hearts of religious leaders Jesus has encountered a hardness of heart and lack of compassion that simply cannot go unchallenged. It isn't so much that Jesus *relished* controversy as he was always trying to flex in us what is rigid. And alas, where people are religious there is often rigidity.

You know, though it's been a bit cramped and challenging musically and more work for Brian to set up this space each week, worshipping here in the JRC has been transformative. Sunday after Sunday people have been sitting and talking with people they have never met before. When people voice prayers, they are not so far away. Our voices blend more for congregational singing. When I preach, I can see your faces, sense your responses...it feels different in here, and in some ways, different *good*. Maybe the stretching that has come with this time has been beneficial, liberating us from any notion we may have that God resides "over there", and opening us up to new ways of experiencing God.

The past few weeks here at the church, however, we've had a flurry of leadership e-mails going on involving when we were going to get back into the sanctuary. After meeting with the contractor early this week, it appeared that if all goes well it will be next Sunday, the 10th, which is Celebration Sunday when our worship will be lead by the Sunday School of our church. This also happens to be the weekend my family will go to southern Ontario for a graveside committal service for my father. When a few leaders heard that, that I would be away, they wondered if it was right to have our first Sunday back when the pastor wasn't going to be around. In fact, a few of them thought it *wasn't* right. They felt we should wait, and they said so.

I quickly wrote a note saying that while I will be sad to miss our first worship service back across the street, that it was fine and good to proceed – that there were good reasons related to music and to the kids why we should not delay. In other words, we should do what is best for the church.

I am not telling you about this to tell you how great a leader I am. I am telling it because it actually *was* something of a struggle for me to get to this place. If there would have been good reasons to have held off until the following Sunday, I'd have been happy to have lifted up those reasons...because I really would like to experience this return with you.

But I had to think a bit before I wrote that e-mail about how I wanted to use the power I do have -- the power of my voice and the power of my position -- because if I've learned anything over these years of ministry it's that we have to do that, think hard on such matters, because too much of what is disturbing in our culture today comes from people not thinking enough about how they use their power, their voice, their words. Look at this week and Roseanne Barr and Samantha Bee.

Truth is, I cherish my role as your spiritual leader. But—as today's scripture suggests -- the things we cherish can become problematic. They can become an idol. Our building can become an idol. Our music can become an idol. Our preaching can become an idol. My being a leader here in this church could become an idol. What is an idol? Anything that draws our energy, our attention away from the things that really truly matter to God. Oh, a beautiful building and beautiful music and beautiful preaching can bring glory to God -- and nurture us in our efforts to be Jesus disciples. But if we make any of those things the end game, the primary focus, "the thing" as people say today..."the thing above any other thing" we are engaging in idolatry, chasing after the wrong thing or letting something other than God have a hold over us.

When this sermon is over, we'll sing the old spiritual "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell Old Pharaoh, let my people Go" That's because the story of the Exodus was the formative story for Jesus and for every good Jew. We'll sing this song because Jesus was trying to lift up the real sense of Sabbath, which is not just about *rest* (God resting on the seventh day, Genesis, chapter one) but about *liberation* (Moses leading the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, as in the book of Exodus)

Jesus was not being provocative just to get a rise. He was trying to reclaim the Sabbath, so that rather than it being an oppressive tyrant that kept food from the hungry or healing from the sick it could get back to what it was originally: a reminder that we belong to God and not to our labor, or to the money generated by our labor, or the money spent from our labor in consuming products that we think will make us feel so much better. (Nibs Stroub *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol 3, p.97) Freedom. Liberation. Sabbath is subversive. In that it's meant to question the very basis of our culture. If God led the people out of slavery, why do we turn around and embrace things that enslave us?

Sabbath asks us to imagine a life that is not dominated by money, or work or consumption, but rather by our belonging to God.

Where culture says you need more, and you need to *be* more Sabbath says in God you not only have enough, you *are* enough. This is very different from the religious leaders shrinking Sabbath to a size that suited their purposes, or that made them the Sabbath enforcers. *Jesus confronted this because Jesus wanted more for the people than that.*

Recently I got to spend time with one of my seminary friends, a dear friend I met up with at the Festival of Preaching in Washington, DC. She is the one I've spoken of before, who got asked to leave her church in Oklahoma when she participated, co-officiated, in a same sex marriage ceremony. It was a painful experience and she is still healing from it. "I was naïve about power" she said to me, after we heard a sermon that was sort of about that. "I really didn't understand the ways people in the church use power to further their agenda, to set themselves up over and against others, or against change."

Upon my return to Plymouth, I heard of a church I once served as an interim. The co-pastors are only one year in, and the Session (council) has asked for their resignation. You have to wonder what is going on there, and how power is being used.

If I came away from the Preaching and Politics conference with any a question that must be brought to modern life, to the church, and to the text it is, who has the power and who is trying to exercise it and for what purpose?

Who has the power and who is trying to exercise it, and for what purpose. People think that is not a religious question, not a spiritual question but in Jesus we see it very much *is* a religious question. Because we are human, because we do have power, and because our loving God wants us to find better ways to be human together.

As we come to the table I hope together we are making the shift from Jesus as provocateur, as controversy maker to Jesus as the one who seeks in love to set us free. He came in love to set us free...which is why he was so challenging, so provocative!

I would ask you to notice our bulletin cover, how the disciples and Jesus are gathered in a circle. This meal we are called to today is not about who is leading, who is calling the shots, who has the power, who is defining what for whom. When Jesus calls us to this meal, it is not a top down kind of thing. It is a circle of love. A vision of the kingdom where power is not manipulated or lorded over others, but simply shared.

As we practice this, may it transform us and our world.

Amen.

