



January 19, 2020

Sermon Series: Following Jesus to Surprising Places

Jesus Reimagines the Sabbath
Pastor Vern Christopherson

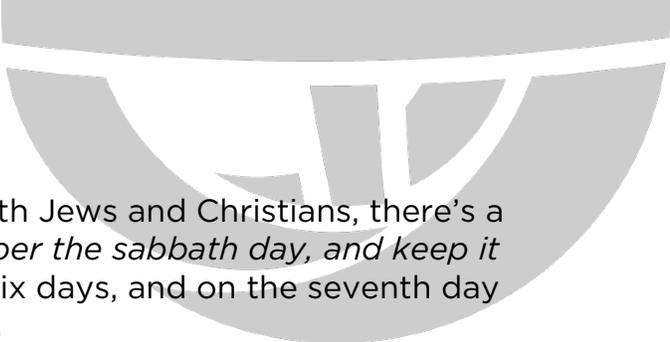
Mark 2:23-3:6 NRSV

²³One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; 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."

³ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They 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 them, "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.

How many of you remember the good old days – you know, when stores weren't open on Sunday? When a person couldn't buy beer on Sunday, even in a grocery store? When everyone got up and went to church, and then came home and had Sunday dinner together? Those were the good old days, right? Where have they gone?

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is in a tussle with the Pharisees over the good old days of first-century Judaism, and of the sabbath in particular. Just a reminder: their sabbath was on Saturday. Or to be more precise, it went from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. As Christians, our sabbath is on Sunday because



that's the day Jesus rose from the dead. For both Jews and Christians, there's a commandment behind our observance: *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy*. The thinking is: God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day God rested. If God's needs rest, then we do too.

Where has our day of rest gone? It seems to have gotten swallowed up in a flurry of to-do lists, an avalanche of texts and emails, a calendar that's filled to overflowing, and let's not forget football. Anybody here feel like they may be falling short in how we honor – or don't honor – the sabbath today? I do!

The sabbath is meant to be life-giving. We can't work seven days a week. We shouldn't try. Over the years, Israel was sometimes good at keeping the sabbath and sometimes not. They were often more committed during the tough times: during sixth century exile in Babylon when they were far away from home; and now, during the Gospel of Mark, when they're under the iron grip of Rome and have no certainty whatsoever about their future. Focusing on the sabbath is a mark of their identity as God's chosen people. It's a reminder of God's good care, and of their responsibility to that God.

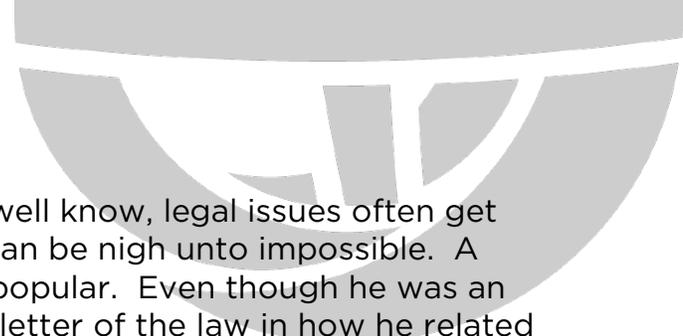
So, what does that responsibility look like when keeping the sabbath? People often wondered: How far could a person walk on the sabbath? How much work could be done? Were you allowed to care for animals? What if you had crops in the field and they needed to be harvested? What if you were hungry – could you fix yourself something to eat? The sages in Israel added one proscription on top of another. They ended up with 39 general categories of labor that was forbidden. The categories covered everything from sewing to cleaning the house to starting a fire. Helpful as those categories may have been, some wondered: How much is the right amount? And how much is too much?

Those questions could have been a part of the job description for the Pharisees. It's easy to portray the Pharisees as nattering naysayers – and maybe at times they were – but their intentions were generally good. In a changing world, when it's easy to lose track of who you are and where you're going, the Pharisees were trying to steer people in the right direction.

Some refer to their efforts as “putting a hedge around the Torah.” They spelled things out as clearly as possible so people would not violate the law. I can imagine them being a little like parents who've given their teenager a curfew. But instead of going to bed and occasionally glancing at the clock, those parents are sitting in the living room, with the lights on, counting down the minutes. And if you're that teenager, you better not be late!



Today's reading has two controversies between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees didn't start out to antagonize Jesus. They were on the same team,



trying to guide the people of God. But as you well know, legal issues often get complicated. Getting to the bottom of things can be nigh unto impossible. A complicating factor was that Jesus was highly popular. Even though he was an observant Jew, he didn't necessarily follow the letter of the law in how he related to the crowds, at least not to the degree that the Pharisees did.

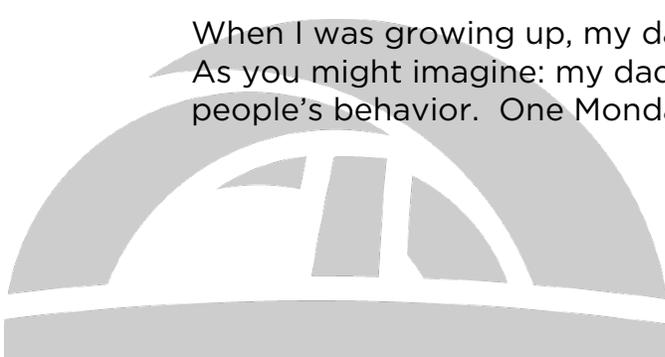
In the first controversy, Jesus and his disciples are on the move. It's the sabbath. They're hungry and there isn't a Golden Arches to be found anywhere. In ancient times, travelers were allowed to walk through fields and pick heads of grain. It wasn't considered stealing. It was a way for Israelites to show their neighborliness, and also a way to care for strangers and sojourners who were on longer trips.

So, does picking a few heads of grain constitute work? The Pharisees think so. Jesus and his disciples have violated the sabbath. They should have brought food along with them. The Pharisees confront Jesus: "Look, why are your disciples doing what is not lawful on the sabbath."

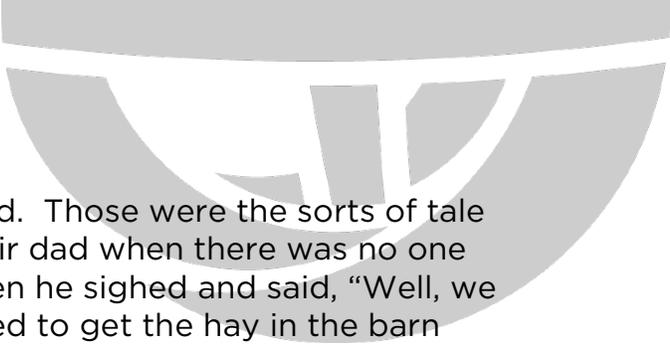
Jesus tries to settle the dispute. Like the sages of old, he cites precedent. He brings up a time when King David was on the move. David didn't go into a grain field, but he did enter the House of God. The priest gave him the Bread of Presence to eat. It was holy bread and was normally reserved for the priests. The story doesn't say it, but when Jesus mentions King David, I can picture the Pharisees gritting their teeth. *David? Just who does this guy think he is?*

Jesus makes a couple of pronouncements. The first is fairly tepid: "The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath." Nothing terribly radical here. Exceptions in sabbath conduct happen from time to time, even by nattering naysayers. The second pronouncement, though, has an edge to it. Jesus makes a startling claim: "So the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath." The "Son of man" title is tricky in Mark. It's appears only on the lips of Jesus, and only when talking about himself. We're not always sure what Jesus means by it but, in this case, what he's really saying to the Pharisees is this: "*I am Lord even of the sabbath. I am no ordinary teacher.*"

Do you see what's happening here? Like King David, Jesus approaches tradition, even sabbath tradition, with a special claim to authority. He offers a legal opinion that differs from the Pharisees. He contends that sometimes certain demands of the law rightly need to be set aside in favor of pursuing greater values or meeting greater needs.



When I was growing up, my dad used to talk to me about keeping the sabbath. As you might imagine: my dad, the preacher, always had an opinion about other people's behavior. One Monday he commented that So-and-So hadn't been in



church on Sunday; he was putting up hay instead. Those were the sorts of tale that preacher's kids occasionally heard from their dad when there was no one else to hear it. My dad seemed troubled, but then he sighed and said, "Well, we did have a big storm last night. Maybe he needed to get the hay in the barn before the storm." So, does that sound right to you? Do certain demands of the law sometimes need to be set aside in pursuit of a greater need or concern?

The second sabbath controversy follows soon after. Jesus makes a return visit to the synagogue. The Pharisees are there. Their hostility is mounting. At this point, the Pharisees don't seem to care about Jesus' authority and the urgency of his claims. Rather, they're keep an eye on whether he will heal the man with the withered hand...on the sabbath. They've already made up their minds: If Jesus does, he will be willfully disregarding the law of God. Again, they believe the law is good, giving order to life and providing conditions for encountering God's blessings. But unlike Jesus, they are far more inclined to follow the letter of the law, rather than its spirit.

Jesus can see the Pharisees glaring at him. He asks them: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Clearly, Jesus disagrees with the premise of their suspicions. By orchestrating the man's healing, he's not disparaging the law in any way. Rather, he's honoring the deeper purpose of the sabbath, and of the law in general, which is meant to save and preserve life. Indeed, what better day is there than the sabbath to promote God's commitment to humanity's well-being?

Now, Jesus could have waited till sundown - this was not a life or death situation. Then again, for the first time in a very long while, the man was probably able to think about going to work and supporting his family. Jesus does more than fix a problem. He restores the man to dignity and wholeness. In the process, he demonstrates the urgency of his own work. The reign of God has come near. Clearly the Pharisees don't approve. They immediately conspire with the Herodians on how to destroy this new and increasingly dangerous rabbi.

Jesus and the Pharisees are at a standoff. It's hard to get to the bottom of legal issues such as this. Look no further than our own Impeachment trial in the United States Senate. One of the claims brought by Democrats against President Trump is that he withheld defense spending to Ukraine in hopes of getting them to investigate a political rival, Joe Biden. Republicans, in turn, claim that the Ukrainians got their money, there's no direct evidence linking Trump to these charges, and even if there were, the actions do not rise to the level of high crimes and misdemeanors. After months of chargers and counter-chargers, the chance of getting this resolved decently and in order seems nigh unto impossible.





Oh, it's hard to get to the bottom of legal issues. In many ways, the rest of Mark's Gospel will be one controversy after another. A passage like we read today is meant to help us make sense of the controversies, and the events leading up to the end.

Keep in mind, Mark wrote his gospel some 40 years after the events took place. I have a feeling that 40 years from now, the actions in Ukraine will make a lot more sense than they do today. Like Mark, we'll have the benefit of hindsight.

Hopefully we'll be able to see then what we cannot see now. Don Juel puts it like this: "For us - as for Mark - the cross ought to be a sober reminder of how easily the most noble motives can be perverted. [The cross] points out how quickly an institution [like the sabbath] can become an end in itself, stifling legitimate concerns of those outside that may seem to threaten stability. [The cross] illustrates how frequently insidious forces we scarcely notice can transform the best-educated, best-intentioned among us, into insensitive leaders, desperately out of touch with what's real." Juel is talking about the Pharisees, but in my humble opinion, his words could apply to almost anyone in power, at any time.

Friends, we're not living in the good old days any more. Insensitivity and brokenness are alive and well in the events surrounding Ukraine, and in today's political climate. I wonder what Jesus would say and feel if he were among us. In that synagogue encounter, Jesus was moved to grief when he witnessed the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, stubbornly refusing to admit any wrongdoing, unwilling to celebrate the man's relief from suffering.

Still, in the midst of swirling conflict, Mark does have good news to announce. The inbreaking of the reign of God has come near. Jesus brings compassion and transformation. Jesus, like the God who instituted the sabbath, is committed to preserving life. His ministry will expose the corrosive tyrannies of fear, of imperial pretense, of religious hypocrisy, wherever they reside. And finally, through the cross, Jesus will deliver us from them.

Lord Jesus, may it be so. Amen.



