

Sermon, June 2, 2024

Mark 2:23 - 3:6

“But What About the Sabbath?”

As I mentioned last Sunday, all my sermons between now and the last Sunday in August will be based on readings from the Gospel of Mark. Just a little background- it is not known who Mark was. His Gospel is believed to have been written somewhere between the years 65 and 75 Ad., that is, 35 to 45 years after the death of Jesus. He probably never met Jesus, but there appears to be some evidence that he knew Peter. His Gospel, as well as the other three, should not be seen as biographies of Jesus, at least not in the modern sense of the term. Their primary purpose is not historical, but theological. Mark's Gospel has three basic purposes, 1) to indicate who Jesus is, 2) to explain why he should be seen as the Son of God, and 3) to show what it means to follow him. As Mark writes in the opening line of his Gospel, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.

The time in which his gospel was written has significance for today's reading, and others throughout. It is the time when the split between the Christian movement and the synagogue is starting to take place. It is also the time when the brutal persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Nero is very much a reality. So, Mark is emphasizing Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish leaders of his time, but he is also using his Gospel to encourage faith among the Christians of his time as they face the challenges and suffering surrounding them.

Today's reading has to do with a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. But, before we judge them too harshly, we see that they were antagonistic towards Jesus, but not as brutally as is often assumed. In a recent book by a Jewish scholar named, Israel Knohl, we find that when Jesus stood trial it was before a group of Jewish leaders known as the Sadducee's, who would have found Jesus' claim to be the “Son of the Blessed One” as blasphemous and worthy of the death penalty. The Pharisees, on the other hand, may have found Jesus' claim to be the Messiah irritating, but not worthy of execution. If the Pharisees had overseen the trial, Jesus would not have been crucified!

In today's reading there are several questions and issues to be raised. First, why were the Pharisees there, and where did they come from? The Sabbath law stated that Jews were not allowed to walk more than a half mile on the Sabbath, so were they also guilty of breaking the law? Secondly, were Jesus and the disciples guilty of breaking the law? The text specifically says they were plucking the heads of grain. Deuteronomy 23:25 says, “If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain”. There is no mention of the disciple's using a sickle. Thirdly,

can it really be said that Jesus was working when he healed the man with the withered hand? All he did was tell the man to stretch out his hand! The Pharisees were experts of the law. They had to know there was no violation here - so they were just being antagonistic.

There is also one other discrepancy to point out. Jesus says 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 is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions". Here's the problem. Almost none of the details of that story from 1 Samuel are true! David was not with his companions, he was alone. There is no mention of hunger, David did not enter the House of God, and the priest's name was not Abiathar, but Ahimelech. But the problem is not with Jesus, but with Mark. There are other instances where he gets details wrong. Mark was probably a Gentile and was not completely knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, even if the details are all wrong it does get to the crux of the issue, which has to do with priorities. The very next verse says, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath". Put succinctly, the purpose of the Sabbath is not meant to curtail our freedom but should be seen as a gift and blessing from God! Going back to Deuteronomy we find that the prohibition of work applies not only to the Jewish people, but to their servants/ slaves, and even to their animals, such as, oxen, asses, and cattle. The purpose is not restrictive - it's about rest. Work six days a week - rest on the seventh. God, himself, rested after six days of creation, and desires that we join him in that time of refreshment.

This does not mean just sit and do nothing. Do whatever recharges your internal battery. Watch a ballgame, go for a hike or a swim, get together with friends and family.

Again, it's about realizing that life is more than work, and that the body, mind, and spirit need time to separate from the rat race. But it is also important to keep in mind that the day is sacred. It is the Lord's Day, a holy day. Well, all days are holy, but the Sabbath is a time to stop and give recognition to that fact. It is a time to go to church, to worship and sing God's praise, and if you can't make it to church, at least say a prayer or two.

Also, as one commentator pointed out, "...to observe the Sabbath is not only for rest and worship, but also to do good, to save life, that is, to make life whole, both our own and our neighbors". Or, in the words of Abraham Heschel, "Sabbath is a holy time - even if it is not observed - and the depth of our experience depends on our behavior the preceding six days".

To repeat Jesus, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath". As Lord of the Sabbath the Son of Man reveals that the Sabbath should not be seen as a burden, but as a divine gift of God! Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of grace and mercy, on this Sabbath day we gather to offer you our thanksgiving that you have given us this gift - a time for rest and relaxation, a time to recognize your Holy Presence in our lives, a time to reflect upon that which is right, and to do good for ourselves, our neighbors, all of humanity, and the whole of your creation. We are grateful that your Son Jesus revealed to us the true meaning of the Sabbath and pray that you help us to keep it sacred in our hearts, and in our actions in this world. May your Holy Spirit bless us with inspiration, helping us to deepen our faith and our love. With all the problems facing us as a nation and as a world, fill our spirits with hope. Open our eyes and our ears to the kingdom at hand and within us, all to your glory...Amen.