

Lord of the Sabbath

-This week we come to chapter 6 in the Gospel of Luke. We're reading two stories where Jesus' vision of faithfulness creates conflict with the Pharisees' perspective on Sabbath-keeping. As you may know, the fourth commandment sets apart the seventh day of the week as a Sabbath unto the Lord. The Jews set aside sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday as a day of rest. As I read, consider: Why are the Pharisees so flustered and infuriated by Jesus in these two short stories? And why do Jesus and his disciples feel free both to gather grain and to heal a man on the Sabbath?

6 One Sabbath^[a] while Jesus^[b] was going through some grain fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. **2** But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful^[c] on the Sabbath?" **3** Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? **4** How he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" **5** Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

6 On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. **7** The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him. **8** But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand in the middle." He got up and stood there. **9** Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" **10** After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. **11** But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.

-The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.* Let's pray. Lord, open this Word to us, we pray, that we may hear you speak. Break through our fears and insecurities, Lord, that we might entrust ourselves to you and to what you are doing to bring life. Amen.

-OK. Who are in these stories? [First one? Jesus, Disciples, Pharisees. Second? Jesus, Jewish worshippers, Scribes/legal experts, Pharisees, Man with withered hand]

So in one story, we have Jesus and his disciples walking through grainfields on the Sabbath. Saturday. As I said, the seventh Day. Shabbot, the 'cease' day. A day of rest from work set aside to the Lord. When the Pharisees see Jesus' apprentices plucking grain and rubbing the chaff away to eat the kernels, they confront Jesus with the obvious question from their perspective: Why? Why break Sabbath law? And Jesus responds here with a story about David doing something controversial with his own men, then an oblique affirmation that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

In the second story, Jesus goes to the gathering place (synagogue) to teach on the Sabbath. There's a man there with a withered hand. And the Pharisees and legal experts are watchful to

see if Jesus will cure on the Sabbath, hopeful to taste the pleasure of righteous indignation. Just by who's there and the looks that the Pharisees are giving one another, everyone, including Jesus, is aware of the tension in the room. And so when Jesus invites the man to stand before them, looks the Pharisees in the eyes, asks them whether they think it's better to do good or harm on the Sabbath, then heals the man, well – it lathers them up to a delicious outrage.

-Now. In order for us to hear how the Spirit of God may be speaking a Word to us today, what more might we want to know about? [Who were Pharisees? What did they expect on the Sabbath? What's up with this story Jesus tells about David? What is Jesus' reference to the Son of Man about? What is at stake? For the Pharisees? For Jesus? For us?]

- Who are the Pharisees?
 - Not priests. Priests were aristocratic class in Jerusalem. Had their own traditions.
 - Pharisees were 1% of Jewish population. Think of a party of influential leaders in the synagogues where the Torah/Law – Old Testament - was read and interpreted
 - Pharisees were a pressure group aiming to purify Israel by stricter adherence to that Torah and to their own strict interpretation of those laws
 - Pharisees longed to be faithful. They feared how Jews were letting their faith get watered down by the prevailing Greco-Roman ideals
 - The name 'Pharisee' means "separated one." They were scrupulous about separating themselves from wrongdoing and living as God commands. That meant separation from 'sinners.'
 - We think of sinners as everyone. But in the world of first century Palestine to be a sinner had a more precise definition: We're not talking about people who occasionally transgressed the Law of Moses but those who stood fundamentally outside it.
 - So "sinners" were obvious; sinners were those who didn't observe the Sabbath Day (according to Pharisaical interpretations) or wash for ritual purification, etc.
 - Sabbath-breaking 'sinners' were considered categorically reprobate and *excluded* from the synagogue, making them outcasts from the community
 - The Pharisees were sincere in their desire for right-living. They were reformers. Experts. Perfecters. And they began to create a set of religious rules to interpret just what constituted work - which not only brought clarity about prohibitions from picking grain (as harvesting was obviously work), but had the added benefit of leaving them in control of God's law

-The Pharisees have been famously cast as stick figures. So let's try to identify by saying some more about what they feared. Under Roman rule and influence, Palestine was becoming increasingly *secularized*. The distinctives of the Jewish life were being eroded by prevailing pagan ways. The Pharisees feared godlessness. They feared cheapening the Sabbath. They feared the backsliding of their culture into moral degradation. They feared losing their identity as a people and nation. To their minds, the "sinners," who insulted their heritage were the ones to blame, even keeping the Messiah from coming. The well-trained in the Law of their God feared losing the culture war.

So can you see the *tension* in these stories, then, when a popular teacher strows through the fields and harvests on the cease day? When he chooses to do healing work (for which they had actually written no regulations yet) not only on the Sabbath but in the synagogue?

The Pharisees assume that faithful living before God requires them to put pressure on sinners to adhere scrupulously to God's law (and Sabbath observance in particular). Faithfulness required *stigmatizing* Sabbath-breakers (separating from them). I'm always reminded of a humorous tongue-in-cheek bit from Bill Cosby many years ago about disciplining children: '*The beatings will continue until morale improves.*') It made the Pharisees furious that the people they were pressuring didn't respond to their well-meaning judgment with warmth and gratitude. And isn't righteous fury delicious?

I had a professor once who told us seminary students that it's crucial to the impact of passages like this one that we come to see the world through the eyes of the morally upright, law-abiding, integrity-seeking, community-mentoring Pharisees. It's crucial, he said, that we understand Pharisical fears if we are to let Jesus' vision disrupt, even anger, and reshape our hearts.

So. Can you look through our own eyes and see a slackening of faith and moral commitment that makes you cringe? Are you fearful of a future for our children because 'those people' seem bent on undermining Christian faith or American values? Who are the 'sinners' thumbing their noses at your good sense of what's right? Can you understand the Pharisees in their fear of losing their identity as a people?

- Enter Jesus, who meets us in our fears.

How does Jesus respond to the fear of the Pharisees? How does he respond to our own?

He nourishes persons who are hungry. He heals persons who are outcast. He speaks an even word of truth to those who aim to threaten. He affirms just who is Lord of this Sabbath and who has control of this culture war.

- Jesus compares himself to David. Anointed as king, but still unknown to the people as king, David entered the tabernacle, and ate what was considered holy, set apart. The Bread of the Presence symbolized God's presence with God's people. And David the king shared that presence with his men even as Jesus shares the grain of God's giving with his own people.
- Like David, but greater, Jesus claims authority as the yet-unrevealed king of Israel. Even the mysterious figure of Daniel 7, where in a vision 'one like a Son of Man,' a human being stands equal to God.
- And on God's Sabbath, God will provide for those who hunger in body and spirit.
- In a culture war, everything becomes a proxy for battle. What's often forgotten is the person in front of you. What is often forgotten is the main thing.
- As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus will bear witness to its purpose *to feed and nourish*, and so reveal the way of *God*!!

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- Jesus looks into the eyes of the legal experts. In all their vigilance, they fail truly to see the man with the withered hand. *Remember* the man with the withered hand? Jesus does. If we are concerned to follow Jesus where he goes, we will find him lifting up persons vulnerable to being disregarded.
- ‘Is it better,’ he asks, ‘to do good or to do harm? To save life or to destroy it?’
- In a culture war, we lose perspective. Like this human encounter in a synagogue, everything becomes a proxy for conflict. What’s often forgotten is the person in front of you. What’s often forgotten is the main thing.
- So when everyone becomes focused on a flashpoint of controversy, Jesus remains grounded in compassion.
- As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus will bear witness to its purposes *to rescue, heal, and bring life*, and so reveal the way of *God*.

-The Pharisees were good people. They upheld morality. They cared for and taught their communities the Word of God. They longed to be faithful. And when things felt out of control, when they felt their core identity threatened, they struggled for security, they over-functioned, they put a lot of pressure on people, and, according to Jesus elsewhere in Scripture, they lost sight of the weightier matters of God’s word: faith, and justice and mercy (everything he put first in healing the man in the synagogue).

-Do any of you know of any culture wars going on right now anywhere that may be similar to what the Pharisees were experiencing? Any tugs-of-war that could be getting us into serious danger of missing the point? Where out of fear of loss, out of our desperate desire to make things right, we might be in jeopardy of becoming blind to the people in front of us? Forgetting that Jesus is Lord of this Sabbath and grainfield and synagogue. Forgetting that what matters most is what God is doing to nourish, rescue, heal, and give life.

-Years ago I met with a high school student who had been asked to speak to his youth group on this story of Jesus and the man with the withered hand. Brian was wearing a baseball cap so tightly rolled down over his forehead that you could barely see his eyes. We read the story together and talked about it. The division of labor we agreed to was that I would tell the gospel story and he would say something about what it meant to him. So we went to work on our presentation, each of us looking down at our Bibles, re-reading the passage. I was making notes when I heard Brian sniff, then begin to cry. Then sob. I looked over and his baseball cap was hiding his face completely. But the tears were dripping and his shoulders were shaking.

I of course was concerned for him. And when I asked him what was up, he told me about a kid at school who he and his friends were belittling for sport. To them it was all a joke. They would tell him he could go to lunch with them, just so they could make him ride in the trunk and make fun of him. And this was a kid, Brian said, who was so desperate to have somebody value him that

he endured their obvious derision and insults. And who was he? Who was Brian, if not a kid so insecure to belong that he himself had banded together with a group united by their cruelty? And wasn't self-preservation a cause as righteous as the Pharisees'?

But reading this gospel story, seeing how Jesus stood up for a person who suffered from paralysis, considering how Jesus saved life rather than destroyed it, watching how Jesus risked compassion even when the powerful were there to cultivate their own outrage, to spurn his mercy as weakness— it undid Brian.

If the restoration of the Sabbath was about loving the person in front of you, then God was about loving the person in front of you. Which meant high school was about loving the person in front of you. Jesus was the Lord of not only the Sabbath, but of lunchtime. Of how we stand up for people, especially those vulnerable to being bullied. Of how we save life instead of destroying it.

When Brian encountered Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, I was in the room to watch Jesus get hold of his heart for doing good and saving life even as the Pharisees in the story were licking their lips with an angry taste of missing the point.

What would you say if you were to offer a short response to what this passage means to you?

What do you hear God saying to you?