

A Divine Day
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June 3, 2018

Scriptures:

23 One 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.'
(Mark 2:23-28 NRSV)

¹Again 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. (Mark 3:1-6, NRSV)

Sermon:

I would like to suggest two possible settings for Mark's Gospel. It is sometime after 70 C.E. The author was either an urban Jew living in and writing to house churches in Rome, or a Jewish Jesus-believer writing somewhere in Syro-Palestine. Wherever he writes, the author keeps his message of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the coming religious-political Kingdom of God, the heart of Jesus' message, close to his chest. I think he wants to keep faith with God's revelation in Jesus but in the aftermath of the 66-70 rebellion he wants to show that Jesus believers are no threat to the powers that be. If the kingdom is to come, it will not be predicated upon the efforts of the Jews or the Jewish Jesus-believers, but at the hand of Almighty God, which no one will be able to withstand and the "who's" will be irrelevant.

Let me just add that the Romans would have called all people of the Israelite religion with their loyalty to the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, "Jews", even though many of these Israelites living in the Diaspora had never lived in Judea or had ever been to Judea. Furthermore, there were people from Judea, "Jews", who were not of the Israelite religion.

At this time, especially in Rome and other major metropolitan cities of the Ancient Near East, Jews would have been highly suspect, and Jewish Jesus-believers were seen as potential lightning rods for intra-Jewish community conflicts, which could bring the wrath of the Roman officials down on the Jewish communities like it did sometime after 41 C.E. when the Emperor Claudius in reaction to civil unrest among the Jews in Rome over the preaching of one "Chrestus" expelled the more vocal and fervent Jews on either side of the conflict. In addition, Claudius severely restricted or denied all Jewish meetings or gatherings for some time. The Jews were expelled several times from Rome going back as far as 139 B.C.E. for their enthusiastic Judaizing or proselytizing.

Mark's audience, wherever, would have lived in self-segregated and self-governing communities, what we would call ethnic neighborhoods, not ghettos. In such neighborhoods and enclaves, the Jews, although highly acculturated to their social surroundings, would have kept their distinctiveness, more or less, to the chagrin of the non-Jewish communities.

This being said, let's pick up our text this morning with Jesus in Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, a fishing community. It is in Capernaum and its environs that Jesus found and called his disciples.

To properly grasp what is going on in our text, let me remind us that any time a man in the ANE or even parts of the Modern Near East asks a question of another non-family man, particularly in public, it was an honor challenge, or a public challenge of one's worth and social status. The question sets into play a set of ripostes and challenges and pares. Think of the questions put to Jesus in our text this morning as a social-honor challenge game with serious social implications and sometimes lethal repercussions as we see in the closing verses of our text today.

Both encounters in our text deal with the sanctity of the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath holy, set aside as special time, is one of the Ten Commandments. No one ever disputed honoring this day, the question was how to keep from profaning it, making it common or ordinary; that is, dishonoring it and subsequently dishonoring God. I would add that at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments there would have been no mandates to gather for worship, go to the synagogue, or any other religious gathering on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was simply and profoundly a day of rest.

I think there is something else I need to point out; religion in the ancient world had nothing to do with professing one's personal faith or beliefs. Religion was not an internal, contemplative psychological phenomenon as we know it; but rather, it was about people's actions in relationship to the gods. For the Israelites, these actions initially centered on sacrifices in the Temple and how one treated one's fellow Israelites and complying with the purity and dietary statutes contained in the Hebrew Scripture's Holiness Codes.

Confessional or creedal religions as you and I understand such things and their theological, philosophical dimensions weren't relevant at the time of our texts. If a person wanted to pursue speculative theological matters, they studied philosophy because religion was about actions not intellectual speculations. This, however, would all change as Judaism had to respond to certain Hellenistic, philosophical challenges along with the rise of Christianity and later Islam.

Some people had previously challenged Jesus on the matter of his disciples not fasting and Jesus defeated their challenge. Next, we see Jesus' disciples grabbing handfuls of grain as they walk along and eating them. They were doing the "actions" of harvesting, not lawful on the Sabbath. Jesus' response to the challenge was to remind these pious men that David, although under extreme conditions, violated the sanctity of the Bread of Presence in the Temple to satisfy his and his companions' hunger while on the run from King Saul. Thus, Jesus points out that although his disciples are not in the same extreme situation as David and his companions, the underlying humanitarian principle of the Law always favors human needs over ritualism relative to the degree of need. This was nothing new to the Judaism of Jesus' day, which always made allowances for humanitarian needs and concerns on the Sabbath. It was just that these fellows challenged Jesus with ulterior motives and needed to be shown up for their pettiness and dishonorable intents.

Next, Jesus moves on into a synagogue and he seems to go out of his way to make his Sabbath point further by initiating a healing on the Sabbath. Notice Jesus is now the challenger. He asks these Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' Knowing full well that the answers to these questions were detailed in the Law and traditions caused these men to remain silent - they lost the challenge because they could not site an authoritative riposte to Jesus' challenge. Jesus is angry and saddened by these men's lack of understanding the spirit of God's laws. Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, which most likely would have been

seen as punishment for someone's sin, either the man's or a family member's. The man, now healed, would not only have had full use of his withered hand but he could take his place among others with honor and dignity. What we are seeing is two healings, a physical and an honor healing.

Jesus does not cancel out Sabbath laws or observances but rather in his authority as a prophet, Son of Man, clarifies that the Sabbath was for the benefit of humankind first and foremost, whether as a time of physical, mental, and spiritual rest or eating and healing. Humans then are also lords of the Sabbath; that is, with proper understandings of God's intent and criteria of rest on the Sabbath we humans, whether as individuals or as a group, determine what is holy and permissible for this day.

The Apostle Paul in addressing similar dietary and holy day issues will put it this way:

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God. (Romans 14:5-6, NRSV)

Many modern folks seem to fall into the category of judging all days alike - no special or holy days, no days set aside to rest, reflect, or really enjoy our relationships.

What is interesting to me in our text today is not that Jesus bested the duplicitous Pharisees, setting into motion a deadly alliance with their arch antagonist, members of the Herodian royal establishment, but that the Pharisees, Herodians, and Jesus all have such an acute sense of holy time upon which to take exception to with one another. For the Pharisees it was a holy time of inaction based upon self or group wellbeing before God. For Jesus, it was a holy time, underwritten by the impetus of God's concerns for humanity's wellbeing not humankind's concern for God.

I know of people, whether out of perceived necessity or career advancement, work seven days a week, including national or religious holidays. I know of companies that subtly or not so subtly imply that this is a corporate virtue. I know of people who set Sunday, the Christian holy day, aside to catch up on laundry, yard work, family administrative matters, etc. Sundays as family days are spent watching sports events on TV, practicing or attending sports events, going to the lake, etc. I often hear people say that they were glad to see Monday arrive or return from vacation to go to work so they could get some rest. True, some designate Sunday as church day, unless they get a better offer.

Sadly, some people have absolutely no sense of sacred time, sacred space, or the mental, physical, and spiritual benefits of having a sacred day, a day set aside for unstructured time, rest, reflection, and spiritual concerns. Even retired people today keep calendars and appointment books full of doctor visits, social events and outings along with attending grandkid events and volunteering, etc.

Folks, I think our Creator understood our mortal limitations and either through revelation or the collective wisdom of adverse consequences gave us a recipe for our physical, mental, and spiritual health and rejuvenation. It is called the Sabbath, keep it holy, and set aside from the ordinary. But, like so many other things, we don't listen, and we pay the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual prices.

Remember the Sunday Blue Laws based in Christian Sabbath traditions and what businesses could be open or what commercial activities could be conducted on Sundays? Well, given our twenty-four-seven-365 consumer demands and people's constitutional right to be free from all implications of religion, those Laws have gone away. And, how is that working out? Well, I think the mental, physical, and moral health statistics concerning occupational and life-situational stresses, depression,

and the use of mood-altering drugs associated with our hyper-life styles tell us it is killing us by the thousands each year.

My friends we need to spend time with our families and friends engaged in pleasant socializing and mutually gratifying exchanges. We are, after all, sociable creatures. And, oh by the way, working with people or engaging in competitive and highly energetic activities is not resting or socializing. Socializing is crucial to our survival because it helps to reduce stress, it is affirming, it builds supporting networks to draw upon in time of distress and serious illnesses, it even has positive influences on our immune systems and blood pressures.

In our deluded, multi-tasking world of texting or talking on cell phones while driving, eating while driving, eating while watching TV, or keeping up with social media contacts while watching TV bypasses the brains critical need to focus on just one thing. Mental rest means we become so engrossed in something simple and clear that all the other complicated stuff falls away. Focusing on simple thoughts and things affects our nervous systems, lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature.

Hopefully, we don't have to make much of a case for the benefits of physical rest and its effects on body, mind, and spirit. Getting eight hours of sleep on a regular basis is literally the miracle prescription for health and longevity. Several studies have revealed that even taking short naps three times a week in the afternoon cuts the risk of heart attacks and improves work performance significantly

Spiritual rest is equally important, especially to certain portions of our brains associated with attention, focus, analysis, memory, and yes, our blood pressures. U.S. researchers tell us that people who regularly attend religious services, have regular times of prayer and meditation, live longer and have far more rewarding social and family relationships with all of their inherent benefits.

So, regardless of your confessional or creedal theology or Christology, Sabbath rest, being sociable with friends and family, singing, praising, and praying in a safe and welcoming setting, and gathering around a table of tasty food and fellowship followed by a nice afternoon nap is a divine day and definitely in keeping with God's idea of the holy if I've ever heard of one.

Corporate America, career climbers, and modern option-overloaded people, here is one of the Isaiah prophet's recipe for what ails you and your success:

13-14 "If you watch your step on the Sabbath
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,
God's holy day as a celebration,
If you honor it by refusing 'business as usual,'
making money, running here and there—
Then you'll be free to enjoy God!
Oh, I'll make you ride high and soar above it all.
I'll make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor Jacob."
Yes! God says so!

Isaiah 58:13-14 The Message (MSG)

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