

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 2, 2024 – The Second Sunday after Pentecost
1 Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 2:23-3:6
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Jesus had an interesting and complex relationship to the religious Law of the Judaism of his time. In many ways he honored and observed the Law. In fact, he told his disciples that he had come to fulfill – not abolish – the Law. At the same time, he often broke the Law, as we just heard in today's reading from Mark's Gospel. When he broke the letter of the Law, he did so in order to uphold the higher and greater spirit of the Law.

Many of us were taught that in Judaism the letter of the Law is observed, while in Christianity the spirit of the Law is observed. This is not correct, as we can see in today's Gospel. The spirit of the Law is present in the writings of the Hebrew Bible; for example, in the behavior of David which Jesus refers to. It is also very much present in the writings of the Hebrew prophets, with their insistence that God calls for mercy above all and that God condemns people with hearts of stone, not flesh. A few moments thought about Christianity past and present provides more examples than we would care to remember of Christians who use a literal interpretation of the Bible or strict adherence to Christian tradition and doctrine in order to condemn and exclude, even physically harm people, both fellow Christians and others.

Back to our lesson for today with some background. Jesus began his ministry by calling the first four disciples – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They all traveled to Capernaum, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. On the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue there, where he taught “as one having authority.” While he was in the synagogue he exorcised “a man with an unclean spirit.” This is the first healing done by Jesus which Mark reports. Healing on the Sabbath was a violation of the fourth of the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” which meant refraining from work on the Sabbath. After they all left the synagogue they went to Simon Peter's home, where his mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus healed her. In the evening crowds of sick people came to be healed by Jesus. It is unclear if this is before or after sundown. If before, it is still the Sabbath. Remember this is all on the Sabbath, when it is unlawful to work.

Jesus and his disciples travel for a few days and then return to Capernaum. Crowds of the sick were again brought to Jesus. Mark records the account of a paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his friends, the only way they could get him near Jesus. This time Jesus infuriates the scribes who were there by telling the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven – something the scribes regard as blasphemy because only God can forgive sins. Jesus tells them that he has the authority to do this.

The way Mark reports Jesus' ministry so far, it looks like he is purposely infuriating the scribes and Pharisees. Let's recall who these people were. Scribes were people who could write, draw up legal documents, and interpret documents. In the New Testament they are described as functioning as lawyers, and they are often shown arguing with Jesus about legal matters. The Pharisees were members of a movement within Judaism. They were extremely scrupulous in observing religious Law and were experts in the interpretation of the Law.

Now we come to the account we heard this morning, of Jesus and his disciples working on the Sabbath, plucking heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees challenge Jesus, and Jesus counters with an example from Jewish sacred history, when King David himself broke the Law because he and his companions were hungry. We can imagine that the Pharisees were not pleased by this rejoinder! Jesus then entered the synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees were watching to see if Jesus would again break the Law by healing the man. They were watching, silently gathering evidence. Jesus challenged them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" As the Pharisees well knew, in rabbinic law Sabbath restrictions could be set aside if a life was in danger, the life of an animal or a human being. Jesus had "won" the second argument. He restored the man's hand to wholeness. Jesus was angry with the Pharisees, "grieved at their hardness of heart." They had hearts of stone, not hearts of flesh – hearts of flesh that would have been moved by compassion for a man with a disability which would have made it difficult to work and to live in a society in which most men were manual laborers. They lacked compassion for human need and human frailty. They lacked the lovingkindness and mercy of God.

We need to take these lessons seriously in the church and in our lives as followers of Jesus. We have heard the message. It is up to us to take God's Word into our hearts and let it shape our lives, so that love and mercy and kindness and compassion govern our words and actions. I mustn't end without referring to the last chilling verse of this morning's Gospel, when the Pharisees go out to conspire to destroy Jesus. Jesus did nothing but good in his ministry – teaching, healing, feeding people – yet others plotted against him, to destroy him.

As the closing hymn today, we will sing "I, the Lord of sea and sky," a hymn that makes a clear reference to our Old Testament reading from the book of First Samuel and the Lord's call to the boy Samuel in the Temple. I enjoy singing this hymn – as I hope you do – except for one line which I can hardly bear to sing, if at all: in God's voice, "I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone." I cannot believe that God breaks hearts, even hearts of stone. From a young age, my heart has been broken more than once by more than one person, and I have wrestled with God's part in that. I may not – do not – understand why God allowed others to break my heart out of their malice and evil. But my conclusion is, without doubt, that God did not break my heart, nor did God want my heart to be broken.

God gives human beings free will. Just as God did not intervene to stop the Pharisees who "went out and immediately conspired ... against [Jesus,] how to destroy him," so God does not usually intervene to stop the consequences of human beings' choices not to love, even when those consequences deeply harm innocent people. We don't know why. We only know that Jesus experienced all this, and so we are confident that Jesus is with the broken-hearted.

God does not break human hearts, nor does God stop human hearts from being broken. God does not force human beings to change their hearts from stone to flesh. But God does stand ready to help us when we choose to have hearts of flesh, hearts for love. We have the freedom to choose, and every day we make choices that either harden or soften our hearts. From the ancient Hebrew prophets to Jesus, the message from God is clear: Love, do good, have mercy. The Gospel challenges us to choose sides, to "do good or to do harm" on the Sabbath and on all the days God gives us. May we choose well. In Jesus' name. Amen.