

## Pronouncement about the Sabbath

<sup>23</sup>One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" <sup>25</sup>And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup>He 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." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

## The Man with a Withered Hand

**3** Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. <sup>2</sup>They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. <sup>3</sup>And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." <sup>4</sup>Then 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. <sup>5</sup>He 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. <sup>6</sup>The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

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**“Things that Make Jesus Want to Drink Gin from the Cat Dish”**

**Mark 2:23-3:6**

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When you start with a sermon title like today’s, I dare say it requires some explanation. The line is not original to me. It’s an oft quoted passage from Anne Lamott’s book, “Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith.” The chapter that leads up to that line begins with the author talking about trying to be a more forgiving person having previously not been “one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness.” Starting out with the big forgiveness projects – relatives, old boyfriends, and past Presidents seemed too much, so she decided to start out with an Enemy Lite, a fellow Mom from her son’s first grade class who seemed to have perfection down pat. Being more the Anne Lamott-type school parent myself, I can resonate with the kind of glares you can get if you forget the little things, like school ending early on Wednesdays. Her example of how that type of relationship can go awry was excruciatingly honest.

She recounts that the day of the class field trip when Miss Perfect Mom said to Lamott, quite sweetly, “I just want you to know Annie, that if you have any other questions about how the classroom works, I’d really love to be there for you.”

That was it. Understandably, that level of help that doesn’t feel like help set off all the alarms in Lamott’s head. After smiling back, she notes, “I thought such awful thoughts that I cannot even say them out loud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.”

That, she says, was the event that brought her to her knees. It was in that moment that she cried out for God's help.

That wonderful line came to mind as I read this excerpt from Mark's gospel because it is one of the very rare mentions of Jesus' anger. What makes Jesus angry? Is this the kind of anger that would send him to the gin bottle and make him forget that he was pouring his troubles into the cat dish? Why is Jesus starting to fume in this particular passage of scripture? What do we have to learn from it?

The passage begins with Jesus and his friends walking through a grain field, and as they do, the disciples start picking grain. But for the Pharisees, the Mr. Perfects who notice, Jesus and his crew are missing the mark because it's the Sabbath, and unlawful for them to do this kind of work on this day. Like the first-grade parent in Lamott's story, they think that Jesus might need some help, a sweet little reminder that this isn't allowed. At this point, what I imagine is a deep glare from Jesus' "You must be joking" face. Perhaps he thought they were being a bit extreme in their interpretation of the law, or dense for telling him something he already knew. So he throws their own story back against them in a clever burn, saying "David himself ate the bread designated for ONLY the priests when he was hungry." Isn't hunger ultimately more important than Sabbath-keeping?

But Jesus isn't mad just yet. It might be where we would get mad. This is what it has in common with Lamott's story. We could read that Jesus heard the Pharisees telling his friends that they weren't being "good enough," and that's when he started to get riled up. We don't like that feeling of comparison very much, do we? Feeling like we don't measure up is bad enough, but it's even worse when it seems to be directed at a friend or at someone we love. You can say all you want about me – but don't attack my family, or my friends, or my students, or my church.

Don't make me have bad thoughts about what kind of hypocritical, self-righteous, jerks you are being, you lousy Pharisees!

We tend to think that Jesus gets most angry at the stubborn rule-following of the Pharisees, but for Mark, the story doesn't end there. Jesus enters the synagogue. Or as we might say, he goes to church, and he comes across someone with a non-working hand, "withered" the text tells us. And those comparison-oriented Pharisees start eyeing him up. Will he, or won't he cure this man on the Sabbath and break yet another level of rules. They are predictable in that way. Seeing them watching him, Jesus then asks them to respond. "Do you think it's OK to heal on the Sabbath? Is it lawful to heal or kill on this day?"

Silence. Crickets chirping. Eyes averted and looking at the ground. The Pharisees say absolutely nada in response to Jesus' question. Twice he's come at them with questions of human dignity. Should hungry people be able to get food on the Sabbath? And should someone who is hurting be able to find relief and healing on the Sabbath? Zilch. Zero. They say nothing.

Now here's where it says, "He looked around at them with anger." Anger, at their silence, then sadness, at the hardness of their hearts. So, he acted where they would not – and healed the man.

Oh God. What if Jesus really is angered most by our silence when human dignity is on the line? What if he is livid when we put the tradition of the church up over actually helping people? He may be perturbed by hypocrisy. Frustrated by self-righteousness. His foils in these gospel narratives are always the Pharisees who respond to him with greater and greater hatred themselves. They don't like how he breaks the rules. They especially don't like it that he has followers who are excited by his breaking the rules. They will get so angry, so infuriated, that

they will plot to kill him. And Jesus knew this and challenged them on the laws that seemed to be holding them back from love – every time.

I think what he wants most for the Pharisees, or for anyone who wants to take their relationship with God just as seriously, is for them to have softened hearts, open minds, and a sense of the dignity of all people. If it makes Jesus angry and hurt when we fail to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the suffering, and work for justice, we are likely all, ALL sometimes caught by those times where we said nothing, did nothing. And we may be doomed – like the Pharisees - to keep comparing ourselves against the wrong matrix and falling far short of following the one we say matters most to follow.

We can come up with a lot of excuses for our silence. It will be too hard. The problems are too complicated. Who am I to make a difference? It could be expensive, time-consuming, and I'm just too dang tired. Silence. Jesus is looking in our eyes and asking us what we would do. The man with the withered hand is waiting – and our silence can be deafening.

Look, there are plenty of Christians today who will tell you a lot of things they think make Jesus angry, and this usually isn't on the top of the list. They will tell you that Jesus gets mad at our sin and is wounded by our transgressions. This “may” be true that our sin and our shortcomings are not the best aspects of our lives. But I don't think Jesus wants us to be torn up by the misunderstandings and mistakes that run deep for just about anyone who tries to have a life lived with other people in it. Our own guilt and shame at those points in our lives may be punishment enough for this world. Mostly, in scripture, I see Jesus getting into trouble for being TOO compassionate toward sinners. He eats with them. He has wine with them. He listens to their problems and heals their wounds. He teaches them about God's grace and love. Even for

those who would have received capital punishment at the hands of the religious leaders, he spoke kindly and offered a chance at a life newly lived.

The times in the gospels when Jesus gets truly, righteously angry are when he sees human life devalued, especially at the hands of the religious institution that also taught him about compassion in the first place. Jesus only ever argues with the Pharisees as an equal. He's not allowing them to be better or higher up than him. He's not speaking down to them as though their understanding of religion isn't important. He's expecting to hold his brethren accountable to their own truths. But David ate the bread. But the Sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around. His other famous angry scene of turning the tables of the money-changers? The same thing. When you hit up the poor – to pay for – I don't know – a private jet for the pastor, something isn't right about that. I am in awe of even the “few” clergy who feel like that's the only way to travel.

Circling back to the beginning, I know that I am, like Anne Lamott, quicker to judge than I'd like to be. It's easy for me to get riled up at the Mr. and Miss Perfects of the world who seem to have it all together and are perfectly content to point out the rules we live under and make it obvious which ones I've forgotten. I cringe at that. But like in Lamott's story, it's important for me to recognize that the one who might be a touch obsessed with comparing myself to the “goodness” of other Christians might just be me. After months of going back and forth between prayer and resentment, she realized that the woman doing the obsessive comparing was not necessarily the skinny Mom in biker shorts, but herself.

We sometimes want Jesus to have all the same enemies that we do. That's not just my problem. I think it's a rather common one. I like hating on the Pharisees and their self-righteousness, just like there are those rule-following Christians who I'm sure enjoy the

opportunity to point out the flaws in my ways of thinking and acting either to my face or behind my back. Whatever. But Jesus isn't like that. His anger didn't flare quite so much at the finger-wagging. He seemed to be willing to draw that kind of attention to himself. His inner rage, his deep grief was felt in knowing that they could fall silent when they likely knew the answers that would be a benefit to others and were either afraid or simply unwilling to take that step.

What makes Jesus angry? I think we can figure it out for today's world as well. When the hungry come to us, when the wounded seek refuge in our house of worship, when it is me, ME standing in front of Jesus with the opportunity to make the difference in someone else's life, I have to ask myself if my response is to do something about it, or to look silently at my feet. That's what makes the parable of the sheep and the goats so telling about Jesus, and so frightening for us, we have to pause and wonder, "When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or vulnerable, or in prison? And then ask ourselves, how did we actually respond?"

Our culture just seems to get it backwards a lot of the time, we think Jesus gets angry at the very cases in which he was most compassionate, and we think that will be judged most on how religiously pure to the faith we prove ourselves to be. For me, there is some comfort in noticing that the anger Jesus is recorded to have in scripture makes more sense with the values I think he came to teach – the love of God, and our neighbors, and ourselves. Nevertheless, it may be the more difficult path to follow in the long run. My silence may come at times I'm not even thinking about it or very aware of my own lack of seeing or knowing. But even in those times, when we are seeking to please Jesus, I think it actually does please Jesus, and we will never suffer for a lack of opportunities to do what the living Christ is calling us to do to heal the world and help one another.

So be aware, as much as you can, of those times when our silence speaks louder than our words, and then, come into that space with all the love you can for the Christ you wish to follow.

Amen.