

Sermon

2 Pentecost/Proper 4B June 2, 2024

Mark 2:23 - 3:6

We have officially entered Ordinary Time, that long, green season between Pentecost and Advent. There are three basic things to know about this season. First, it's called Ordinary Time because each Sunday is reflective of a numerical, or ordinal, sequence that you will see on the bulletin and hymn board. Second, unlike the liturgical seasons of Advent through Easter which focus on the events of Jesus' life, Ordinary Time focuses on Jesus' daily life. And third, the color for this season is green, symbolizing growth; and hopefully you will grow as disciples during this time.

This year we spend most of our time in the Gospel of Mark, with some of John thrown in since Mark is so short. The Gospel of Mark, you'll notice, doesn't waste any time. The story dives right in with, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," and almost everything happens "immediately." In this gospel, John appears, Jesus is baptized, tempted, and begins gathering disciples. He teaches, heals, and casts out demons. He gets in trouble for forgiving sins, eating with tax collectors and sinners, and healing on the Sabbath - so much so that the religious leaders conspire to destroy him. And that's in just the first 2-1/3 chapters.

This is where we are today, with Jesus being challenged about his behavior and the law. In today's gospel passage Jesus gets in trouble because his disciples labored on the Sabbath (they picked grain) and because he healed a man's hand. As the Pharisees saw it, Jesus was disrupting the finely tuned religious system by ignoring the laws. If he continued on this path of ignoring the laws of God and teaching his followers to do the same, the whole system might come down. And if the system came down, what would that mean for how the Jewish people related to God?

The danger Christians face in reading Scripture is to automatically demonize the Pharisees for their opposition and hatred of Jesus to the point of wanting him dead. We know and believe that Jesus is the good guy. Because we have heard these stories for so long, the Pharisees have become a caricature of evil akin to Snidely Whiplash, where we say, "Of course they're wrong, it's so obvious."

But is it? Let's look for a minute at the basic life of Christ.

Jesus came to help repair the divide between humans and God. He also came to repair the divide between humans and each other. We see this when Jesus talks with and has compassion for women, the sick, the outcast, the poor, foreigners, and sinners. We see it when Jesus tells the apostles they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world. We see it when Jesus tells them to go and make disciples of all nations. We see it at Pentecost with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. We see it when Paul says that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female. This universality of Christ, this all means all, scared those in power and they fought to maintain their own status and positions of power.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Ruling classes and those in power continue to fight to maintain those positions and continue to work to keep others in their place.

In our own country alone, we have passed laws that: prevented non-Christians from holding public office; relegated Native Americans to reservations; barred women from voting; and prevented certain people from getting married. We fought a war over the right to own people as slaves and property. We have created HOA's specifically designed to keep Jews and people of color out of certain neighborhoods. And there are many, many more examples of people using their positions and power to create and uphold laws designed to keep people ostracized, outcast, and in their place.

For those who oppose such laws and behaviors, they often run up against the same problem Jesus faced – that those in power will conspire to destroy them.

The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became incarnate in the form of Jesus. This was to help repair the divide between both God and humans, and humans with each other. He did this by living a life in unity with the will of God which we try to emulate. He did this by following the law when appropriate, but also by putting the needs and welfare of human beings above the law when necessary. He treated women fairly, and as fellow human beings, not as property. He placed more value on the healing and well-being of people than a law dictating when it was permissible to care for a person. He saw foreigners as fellow children of God.

As Christians and Episcopalians we are called to live as Jesus lived. Our Catechism teaches that all people are worthy of respect and honor because all people are created in the image of God. Our ministry is to bear witness to Christ and work for the reconciliation that Christ first exemplified. Our mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

In our Baptismal Vows, which we renew at least four times a year, we promise to (among other things) resist evil, love our neighbors, strive for justice, and respect the dignity of every human being.

These are not, or should not be, simply words on a page of a book that we blindly recite. These are the ideals and practices to which we should be living our lives every day. Neither are these words that someone just made up because they sounded good and might make us feel better on a Sunday. These are words and actions taken from the life of Jesus, and it started here when Jesus healed a man's hand on the Sabbath because it was the right thing to do.

Following Jesus is not easy. It requires us to put away our prejudices. It asks us to challenge laws designed to afflict certain groups of people. It expects us to place the will of God over and above the will of humans. If we do that, there will be people who conspire against us.

And if you're ever in doubt about any of this, ask yourself this simple question: Is this law doing good, or is it doing harm?

We are in Ordinary Time where we are focused on the life of Jesus; but as you can see, there is nothing ordinary about that life or about following in his footsteps.

Amen.