

The Trouble Starts...and Grows

A Sermon on Mark 2:1-3:6

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The threat of the cross didn't just pop up in the last week of Jesus' life. We can already glimpse its shadow in the very first chapter of Mark. Read too fast and it's easy to miss. Chapter 1, verse 22 says that people were astounded at Jesus' teaching in the synagogue, because he taught them as one having authority, and *not* as the scribes, the experts in biblical law, that is. Cue the ominous music. Sooner or later, there's going to be conflict between Jesus and these experts.

Turns out to be sooner. It breaks out early in chapter 2, in the middle of the story we read with such joy last week. Last week we marveled at the caring people who were so determined to bring their paralyzed friend into the presence of Jesus for healing in body and soul. In this faithful action, they showed themselves to be friends of Jesus, too, which is what we want to be: Faithful, persistent friends, participating in Jesus' healing, saving work.

Not everybody there that day was a friend, however. Some of the scribes did not rejoice when Jesus set the paralyzed man free from sin, and also free from the idea that his disability was a punishment from God. These scripture experts were deeply offended. How dare this man

Jesus do something only God has the authority to do! How dare this man Jesus put himself on the level with the holy God! In the critics' eyes it was blasphemy, an insulting offense against God.

I'm guessing it showed on their faces. But even if they managed to keep their outrage hidden, Jesus was well aware of it. To show them that he indeed had authority to forgive sin, Jesus then showed them that he had also authority to heal.

Things went downhill from there. Soon Jesus was freely associating with people deemed unclean in his critics' eyes: tax collectors and sinners, and he was even sharing meals with them. That was taboo for faithful people! Jesus went even further: he called one of them, a tax collector named Levi, to follow and be a close associate. The critics were aghast. Surely the Bible clearly warned against contaminating yourself with such people.

Then people noticed that Jesus and his disciples were not adhering to the critics' cherished tradition of showing devotion to God through fasting. The critics grew even more outraged when they saw the disciples plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath day. By scripture definition, this was clearly work. You shall do no work on the Sabbath day. Jesus' followers were desecrating the holy day and disrespecting God big-time.

The religious experts were now thoroughly disgusted. This Jesus was throwing forgiveness around and welcoming people far, far too easily and unconditionally. And by taking the God's holy day so lightly, Jesus was playing around with sin himself.

And so, on another sabbath day, a group of these critical scribes was ready and waiting to pounce. The congregation gathered in the synagogue again, and among them was another man with a disability. He couldn't use his hand. The critics eyed the man. Then they eyed Jesus. What would Jesus do? If Jesus healed the man's hand, then they would accuse him of working and disrespecting the sabbath.

Jesus eyed them right back. "What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil?" he asked. "Helping people or leaving them helpless?" (Peterson, *The Message*.) Total silence. Not a one of them spoke.

Jesus' eyes flashed with anger at them as he invited the man to stretch out his now healed hand. Jesus grieved at their hardness of heart.

It wasn't because Jesus was throwing out the sacred law and making light of his critics' cherished traditions and practices. He himself grew up with the same tradition and practices. He knew the

sacred law from the inside. No. It was because underneath the letter of the law was the foundation of God's love for humanity, God's aim to bless and heal and save humanity, something Jesus came to make clear. The law, indeed all of scripture, must be interpreted and lived out in ways that are consistent with God's love and deepest purpose. In all these cases in Mark 2 and 3, and indeed in all his ministry, Jesus saw human beings in need first instead of a dilemma where he had to follow the law perfectly or else. He saw a paralyzed man who was also burdened in soul and needed to be set free in soul, too. Jesus expressed the heart of God for this man: loving forgiveness.

Same thing with all the tax collectors and sinners who came to him. Jesus saw human beings in need. "Sick people need the doctor," he declared to his critics. "I've come to help people who need help."

And when it came to the sabbath, addressing human hunger and the need for healing took precedence over being able to dot every "i" and cross every "t" of the sabbath observance laws perfectly.

Jesus grieved at his critics' hardness of heart preventing them from seeing deeper into the heart of God, preventing them from considering what he was revealing about God. They saw no need to engage with Jesus, pray with him, learn anything new, or modify their views in any way. The belief that they were right and Jesus was dead wrong was

powerful. They felt strong and righteous. And so these critics immediately sought out people in the political world, people in the Herod world, who might help them achieve their objective of destroying Jesus once and for all. These good, faithful, religious people became very mean people.

Sure enough, hard heartedness on the part of a few people who claimed to know the scriptures best nailed Jesus to the cross. In Mark 14 there's that word "blasphemy" again. "It's blasphemy," the high priest declared at the so-called trial of Jesus. "Jesus is a blasphemer, and he deserves to die!" Then once again they turned to the political powers and officials to help meet their objective.

Here in today's reading Jesus is already the man of sorrows, already grieving, and it's only Mark, chapter 3!

When hard-heartedness comes into the picture, very good, faithful, moral people can easily become very mean people. We can see it in the very hurtful and hateful ways that people of different political views, even Christians, have spoken to and about each other, especially in recent years. We can see it when people become obsessed with something they see as a righteous cause, even if it's not grounded in reality, and suddenly they are ready to do all manner of things. They're

ready to use any means necessary to fight God's battles for him. They love pouncing on what they see as the missteps of others.

Hard-heartedness sometimes shows up where we wouldn't expect it: in otherwise kindhearted people. Some years ago the PCUSA convened a group of twenty people of varying viewpoints from across the denomination, and their purpose was to work together to guide our Presbyterian family of faith in talking about controversial issues and finding ways to work together despite deep differences in understandings of scripture, political issues, and more. The group came together before God to pray, worship, and study together. It was a remarkable experience for the participants who found unity in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. They wrote a report to the church calling the whole church to prayer, reflection, repentance, and above all to humility.

A friend of mine, Frances Gench who teaches New Testament, served on that task force. Frances has a real gift for making scripture come alive, and her work has been a big help to me. She deeply loves Jesus. How sad it was to me to hear from her that members of the task force received hate mail from people out in the church. They got letters that said ugly things like, "I hope you die before you kill the church!" How that must have grieved Jesus, who still prays for the unity of his church just as he did so long ago in John 17.

How easily people who claim to be Jesus' friends and who love the scriptures can fall into hard-heartedness. It still grieves him when, quick to judge and condemn, they divide themselves into "us" versus "them," with "them" being the clear problems, the clear villains who are displeasing God. When the need to be right, when the need to be in control, when the need to be on top, when a "my way or the highway" mindset drives their actions. How it still grieves him to see his people refusing to listen to each other, refusing to consider other viewpoints, enjoying battle, enjoying getting worked up in righteous indignation, just looking for the opportunity to shoot a zinger into a vulnerable spot and shut somebody up.

Even as we grieve this kind of hard-heartedness with Jesus, we need to open our own hearts to his examination, lest any hard-heartedness in us put us among his opponents instead of his friends. Create in us a clean heart, O God, as Psalm 51 says, and put a new and right spirit within us. Or as the prophet Ezekiel puts it, take out our hearts of stone and put in new hearts of living flesh, sensitive, animated with the spirit.

Lord Jesus, we really do want to be your friends. Open our hearts and help us. Save us from ever adding to your sorrows. AMEN.