

Mark 2:23- 3:6

To do good or to do harm?

The so-called Hippocratic Oath was written sometime before the 3rd century BC. It seems simply enough: do no harm. The oath clearly influenced John Wesley, that Anglican priest of the 18th century, who started a revival movement with the church. The People Called Methodists, John Wesley said, are identified by their consent to follow three simple rules: do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God.

It seems easy enough. Do no harm to others, nor to the world in which we live. Do good. Do good to others, to our neighbor, especially those who are near. And do those things, those ordinances, that keep you in love and right relationship with God. Attend church, read your Bible, pray. And, of course, keep God's commandments.

We like those large monuments of the 10 commandments, either on the walls of court rooms, or on the lawns of our courthouse buildings. Most of us claim a deep loyalty to the commandments of God.

Funny thing though, many surveys over the last few years reveal that only six of the ten are still important to many Christians. Most Christians believe that four of the commandments are no longer "important principles to live by" according to a poll. Would you like to guess which four commandments many Christians are willing to jettison?

The four which have fallen by the wayside are the requirement not to worship graven images, to use the Lord's name in vain, to worship no other God, and to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Less than one in three Christians believe in preserving the Sabbath as a day of rest. Only 38 per cent are opposed to using the Lord's name in vain. And only 43 per cent condemn the worshipping of idols.

These four, at least, we have agreed to contextualize for our 21st century lives.

Our scripture this morning begins with Jesus' disciples literally making "a way" (hodos, Mark 2:23) through fields. They are not stealing grain as they journey (see also Deuteronomy 23:24-25). What concerns the Pharisees instead is the fact that they are traveling and gleaning on the sabbath. All we need to know as we turn to the passage is that people were not supposed to walk very far on the sabbath and they were not to do any work. They should have stayed put and prepared their snacks on the previous day. To the Pharisees, this behavior appears to deliberately neglect the mandate to observe the sabbath and keep it holy.

Jesus disagrees, not because he regards the sabbath commandments as trivial but because he sees a larger picture, one that regards the sabbath in a different light. He turns to another piece of scripture—which is a story about David-- to interpret scripture (the purpose of the sabbath). He roughly, but not precisely, summarizes 1 Samuel 21:1-6, a story about David taking consecrated bread that was supposed to be reserved for priests (see Leviticus 24:5-9).

David insisted on the bread because he was on a campaign, seeking allies and fleeing Saul, who had clearly declared his intentions to kill him. Jesus implies that the priest did nothing wrong in breaking the strict letter of the law concerning the bread. By remedying David's hunger, the priest sustained the life of a weary traveler and contributed to David's quest to live into his calling as the king anointed to replace Saul.

Jesus therefore offers a legal opinion, one he derives from scripture itself. He contends that sometimes certain demands of the law are rightly set aside in favor of pursuing greater values or meeting greater needs, especially when those greater needs do no harm and do good by promoting a person's well-being and facilitating the arrival of divine blessings.

We have to note here that Jesus was not offering a wholly new argument. Christians are likely to draw false lines of the way things were "before Christ" in contrast to the way it was after Christ. But that is not the case. Jesus did not abandon the law. In fact, when he notes that the purpose of the sabbath has always been to serve humankind (as opposed to making humankind serve some stern religious principle), he is essentially restating Deuteronomy 5:12-15, in which God institutes the sabbath so a people who once toiled in slavery can forever enjoy at least a modicum of rest. The proper function of the sabbath is to promote life and extol God as a liberator. Everyone knew that.

The Pharisees understood the sabbath. Perhaps what they did not appreciate Jesus, this Johnny-come-lately, who was dispensing legal insights. Where Jesus definitely would have caught their attention was in his assumption that somehow, he and his calling were comparable to David and David's calling. Also, declaring himself the "lord" or "master" of the sabbath itself could be tantamount to claiming that the law's ultimate purpose is to serve Jesus. The scandal resides here: he presents himself as no ordinary teacher.

Then, the scene in the synagogue intensifies the conflict over Jesus' authority, his values, and the urgency of his claims. For the Pharisees who lie in wait, watching, the issue is not whether Jesus has the power to heal the man's hand, it is whether doing so on the sabbath demonstrates a willful disregard for the law of God -- a law that was believed to give good order to life and to provide conditions for encountering God's blessings and holiness.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees—"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?"— indicates that he disagrees with the premise of their suspicions. By orchestrating the man's healing, he does not disparage or break the law in any way (for nothing Jesus does here can be considered "work" that the sabbath prohibits). Rather, Mark says Jesus honors the purpose of the sabbath commandment. It is as if Jesus is saying that the chief objective of the law, in general, is to save and preserve life. Indeed, therefore, what better day is there than the sabbath, a day meant to promote God's commitment to humanity's well-being, for the restoration of a man's malformed hand?

So let me summarize, before I tell you a story, a parable.

First, take note that we are only 79 verses into the Gospel of Mark and already two groups of folks are conspiring against Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians. Historically, we can't identify the alliance of these folks, but we note that it is the beginning of the end.

Second, and this is important. In this pair of scenes, Jesus does not assail Judaism. Neither should you. You cannot take this, or any, opportunity to talk about before and after, as if the Jews then and now are somehow inferior or ignorant or, worse, willfully disobedient. Jesus does not reject the law. He does not render the sabbath obsolete. He does not even call the Pharisees blind guides or a pack of dotards. We should not do that either.

But we absolutely should take note of the way in which disagreement about living within the law quickly escalates into hostility, a hostility that will eventually lead some -- but certainly not all -- of the most powerful religious authorities to seek Jesus' debasement and death. Even as the passage emphasizes a commitment to life and vitality abiding at the heart of God's reign, it also illustrates how religious commitments and values -- any religious commitments and values -- can ossify and turn oppressive in the hands of careless stewards. None are immune. Does this sound familiar to you in light of our current religious and political debates?

So then, let me end with a parable of my own.

A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, probably going a little too fast. But who can blame him in his Jaguar S-type sedan, with its 3-liter, 6 cylinder, 240 horsepower engine, 5 speed transmission, and all the bells and whistles. He was trying to pay attention, though, and he slowed down when he thought he saw something. What he saw was the brick, just before it slammed into his side door! He slammed on the brakes then reversed back to the spot from where the brick had been thrown.

The executive jumped from his car and grabbed the first kid he saw: a kid with a buzz cut, wearing tattered cargo pants and a black t-shirt. The executive started yelling, "What was that all about? What are you doing? Do you see what you have done to my car? This is going to cost a fortune to fix!" The more he yelled, the madder he got. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked the kid.

"Take it easy, man," the kid pleaded. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." There were tears running down his cheeks and dripping from his chin. He pointed around the parked cars. "It's my brother. He's fallen and I can't pick him up." Leaning against the curb was the boy's paralyzed brother, his wheelchair tipped over, some dried blood on his face. "He's too heavy for me to pick up," the smaller boy continued to cry. "Please help me."

His heart still pounding, a big lump in his throat, the executive helped the boy set the wheelchair upright and lift his brother into it. He helped the two boys around the corner toward their home. Then he took that long, slow, painful walk back to his car.

Each and every day, God whispers in your ear and speaks to your heart. Sometimes, when you don't have time to listen, God has to throw a brick at you. It's your choice, each and every day: listen to the whisper, or wait for the brick.

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