

Mark 2:23-3:6^v

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

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." 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. 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. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

^v About the Gospel: Mark 2:23-3:6

Today's reading about plucking grain on the sabbath (Mt. 12:1-8; Lk. 6:1-5) continues the set of controversy stories begun in 2:1. Whereas gleaning in a neighbor's field was permitted in general (Dt. 23:24), the harvesting of grain on the sabbath was prohibited (Ex. 34:21), which seems to be the basis for the Pharisees' question.

Characteristically, Jesus replies with a counter-question also based on scripture. He refers to a story about David (1 Sam. 21:1-6), which illustrates the breaking of a practice in an emergency situation--for David, pursuit by enemies; for Jesus, the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Humankind takes precedence in the order of creation over the sabbath (Gen. 1:26, 2:2). The sabbath was made for the benefit of humankind (Ex. 23:12; Dt. 5:14). Verse 28 makes it clear that “the Son of man” has authority over the sabbath. Jesus’ use of the term “Son of man” forces his hearers to decide for themselves what he means--whether it is simply ‘a typical human being’ (as in Ezekiel), or ‘the One to come’ prophesied in Dan. 7:13 (which was later taken to refer to the Messiah), or something else.

The concluding story of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the sabbath forms a dramatic capstone for this teaching, placing human thriving at the center of the Law, and ensuring that Jesus is now on a collision course with the Pharisees and other authorities.

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

In reading the scriptures for this week, we feel the impact of both law and Spirit. The gospel relates to the fourth commandment: observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy. It is significant that Jesus was more often accused of breaking sabbath than of any other offense.

It is difficult for us to conceive of the reverence with which Judaism holds the sabbath. Like the Passover, the sabbath celebrates and commemorates an act of God. Sabbath is both a memorial of the creation of the world when God rested on the seventh day and a remembrance of God’s deliverance of the people from bondage in Egypt. The essence of the sabbath is the recognition of the omnipotence of God; it is a day on which to meditate, study, pray and give thanks to God for all God’s mighty acts.

In order to keep the sabbath a holy day of rest, what constituted “work” had to be defined. This led to a multitude of explicitly forbidden activities, which inevitably tinged this religious observance with legalism.

Inflexible rules are alien to the Spirit of Christ and may neither reflect the glory of God nor enrich human response to God. God gave us the commandments to govern our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters in the world. The law, by itself, strikes us as harsh and demanding. But note what the psalmist says to God’s motivation (Spirit) in giving the law--it is because God passionately loves us and desires to save us.

Our God does not wish to restrict and narrow our lives or press us into gloomy, burdensome rules for their own sake. As we are delivered from following our own counsels, we find God’s proscriptions to be the very channels through which God pours out great blessings upon us.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ disciples are walking with him through a cornfield where they plucked the heads of grain. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ complaint was that human need comes before rigid observances of the law. To satisfy human need was God’s purpose in giving the law; fulfilling the law as God intended required God’s people to be merciful and compassionate.

What looked like audacious sabbath-breaking to the Pharisees was really Jesus’ sign to them that he was Lord of the sabbath, graciously feeding all who walk with him, personifying the revelation that God had already

given. God's people had unintentionally darkened that revelation, but in the face of Jesus Christ, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" shines again.