

A forbidden meal on the Sabbath. An unsanctioned healing in the synagogue. Mark's Gospel this morning brings us the culmination of a series of controversies centered around Jesus and Jewish law. In previous events, Jesus has healed a paralytic and forgiven his sins, causing the religious leaders to accuse him of blasphemy. He's broken bread with tax collectors and other "sinners." His disciples failed to fast as they should. Now, they pluck heads of grain to eat, again violating Sabbath rules. And in the temple, Jesus calls forth a man with a withered hand, who is restored to health.

As Mark tells it, Jesus's ministry in Galilee barely gets a chance to kick off before he embarks on a collision course with the religious authorities.¹

Today, his conflict with the Jewish leaders seems to come to a head. The Pharisees do not like Jesus' response to their questioning of the disciples eating on the sabbath, and now, they watch him, waiting to see what he'll do about the man with the deformed hand, a man most likely considered an outsider—his physical defect making him an outcast. And Jesus calls him forward in front of all, saying, "Stretch out your hand."

The Pharisees know of Jesus's history of choosing healing and mercy over strict compliance with the law, and they look for a chance to accuse him.

Throughout Scriptural interpretation, the Pharisees often get a bad rap. In today's passage, they have angered Jesus with their "hard-heartedness." They are often considered hypocrites and elitists. And some were likely just that.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3

But we should also consider that the Jewish authorities had good reason to cling to their laws.

One of the bleakest periods in Israel's history was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solom by the Babylonians, who enslaved skilled Israelite laborers and put unskilled citizens to death. The Israelites spent 75 years in exile and slavery before being freed by Cyrus and sent back to their homeland, where eventually, the Temple was rebuilt.

Israelite scholars believed the exile and destruction of the Temple was God punishing them for not following the laws of the Torah. And they believed that to prevent such devastation from ever happening again, the Jewish people needed to practice strict adherence to all of God's commandments.

So, when the Pharisees witness the disciples strolling along plucking grains of head on the Sabbath, we can understand why they might see this as an act that could jeopardize Israel's good standing with God.

I have to say, it is a rare Gospel reading that has me relating to the Pharisees. But this scripture has me somewhat empathetic to their dismay.

As someone who spent 20 years in military service and has held a government security clearance for over three decades, I am generally a rule-follower. I believe laws and regulations play an important role in societal order, in the pursuit of justice, and in the fostering of peace.

Most people in a democratic society appreciate laws and rules for the safety and security they provide citizens. So when we hear accounts of Jesus's

behavior such as we heard this morning, it would be tempting to reduce it all to a character sketch of Jesus as radical, Jesus as rebel, Jesus as rule-breaker.

But in reality, the whole of Scripture provides evidence that Jesus had great respect for the law. In Matthew 5, he explicitly says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

Jesus's first followers called him Rabbi—a teacher of Jewish law. His students might well have heard him speak the very words we heard in Deuteronomy this morning: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

And yet, standing in the middle of the synagogue, he chooses to very publicly call an afflicted man before everyone, saying, "Stretch out your hand." And he challenges the Pharisees, asking: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

His conflict with the religious authorities might make him seem subversive. But a closer look reveals that Jesus took issue not with the laws of his ancestors, but rather, with those who distorted it to suit their own agendas.

If Jesus walked the Earth today, I believe he might similarly challenge us in our relationship with modern day conventions and cultural norms. He might invite us into a new way of seeing where we may straying from the intent behind God's commandments: the places where our rules become mechanisms for oppression,

where ritual makes worship rote, where laws become vehicles to exploit those on the margins and elevate the elite, where convention becomes comfort that leaves no room for compassion.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of how I had a “born again” experience and became a Christian at the age of 24, after having been raised in an atheist family. I will never forget the Sunday morning I accepted Christ as my Savior: I felt like I’d emerged from a cocoon, fresh with wings that would send me soaring to see the face of God.

The non-denominational Christian church where I had that experience invited me to join their new-member welcome class the next weekend. And, still alight with the newness of my salvation, I went to learn about the faith community I thought I would become part of.

Pastor Dan explained about the church’s offerings and services before moving on to expectations of its members. And as I listened to him speak of grace and sin, though I didn’t have the word for it back then, I heard in his presentation a troubling fundamentalist view of certain things: the role of women, the issue of sex outside of marriage, the “choice” of homosexuality.

I wondered if I might be misunderstanding in some way. But when I pressed Pastor Dan about what happens to those who break these rules, after some hesitation, he said that continued sin could lead to excommunication from the church.

There is a saying that there’s no hurt like church hurt, and in many ways, I believe that to be true. I left the class that day heartbroken—and never

returned. But I'm so grateful that God guided me to move beyond that pain to find a new faith community.

Ultimately, I found my way to the Episcopal Church. And while no church is perfect, I do feel that here we at least attempt to make space for both rules and freedom, for both ritual and spiritual nourishment, for both tradition and vision.

For tradition and rite and ritual certainly have their place, and many of us experience worship deeply through these. But consider, too, that Church as we know it may very well not look like this in 5, 10, 15 years. And as we work to build God's kingdom, our dependence on convention and structure may not serve us in the same ways. To draw people into the One Body, we need to think about how we make Church happen.

Church happens as we stretch out our withered hand, accept the healing grace Jesus offers, and turn and offer that to others. Church happens when we come face to face with another who's suffering and, though it's dismaying, we choose to walk alongside, to be present with them in their pain. Church happens when we see people on the margins pushed aside, held down, and kept out by those in power, and we step up to fulfill our baptismal promises to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Jesus is challenging into a deeper understanding and interpretation of God's commandments. He is challenging us to see the spirit behind the rules and structure, to choose to be Church far beyond the walls of the sanctuary, even—and especially—in dark and dirty and chaotic spaces, despite—and within—our fear and uncertainty.

We can honor and use convention and tradition well, while being open to the ways we may be called to move beyond that which does not serve as Jesus calls us to serve.

In his book “Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus,” our presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, “Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God’s dream.”

He added, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.”

If only we would measure the integrity of all our laws and regulations and rituals against that bar: “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.”

In a few months, this country will hold another presidential election. No matter where you sit on the political spectrum, these will be particularly hard and painful times. We may very well witness discord and division like never before. We will be challenged to consider where we might be clinging to convention for the sake of comfort, citing rules we know perpetuate injustice, and allowing tradition to lull us into complacency. We will be challenged to show compassion to ourselves, to each other, and to all those around us. I thank God that as disciples of Christ, we are blessed with a guiding compass for how to treat our neighbors, the one rule that takes precedent over all else: the way of love.

As the start of summer offers a slower rhythm and pace, I hope we can consider this season an opportunity to reflect on where in our lives Jesus may be inviting us into new ways of seeing and deeper levels of understanding.

“If it's not about love, it's not about God.”