

Mark 2:23-24, 27, 3:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

One sabbath he 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?" Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for 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.

During the mid-1800's, more than a million people died
due to the potato famine that spread all across Ireland,
which is why so many migrated to this country at that time.
There had been a succession of cold and damp cloudy summers,
which then led to a blight that destroyed the potato crop.

All that led to terrible hunger, especially poor families & children.
In response to the terrible suffering during the "potato famine",
many churches set up soup kitchens to feed the starving masses.

However, because the churches were afraid of breaking the Sabbath,
and of being accused of doing anything like work on the Sabbath,
many of these churches closed their soup kitchens on Sundays.
So the practice of their religion meant that poor starving people
had to go hungry without food on Sunday for the sake of the Sabbath,

which makes me wonder if they had ever read our text, vs. 23-24,

One sabbath he 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?"
... maybe because they are hungry?

In our Gospel reading, hungry disciples are plucking grain to eat,
which the Pharisees say is not lawful, to harvest on the Sabbath,
which as Jesus points out, means they are missing the point, vs. 27,

The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.

Sabbath rest is a gift from God to bless humankind,
and not that humankind were created for the Sabbath.

Back when I used to travel to NYC frequently for business,
at the newsstand I'd pick up an Orthodox Jewish newspaper,
and I especially liked a "Dear Abby" type column,
in which readers would write in with their questions
practical concerns about Jewish Law & Sabbath observance,
that various rabbis would answer and offer explanation.

I remember one particular question that had to do with alarm clocks,
was it permissible to shut off an alarm clock during the Sabbath?

If it was an **electric, plug-in or battery style alarm clock**,
the work was being done by the electricity still flowing into it,
and to shut it off involved stopping that flow or labor,
and therefore, considered work and not permissible,
so it must be left running, as is.

However, if it was a **wind-up style, a mechanical alarm clock**,
the work had been done in the winding up and setting the time,
which was done before the Sabbath began,
so it would be permissible to shut it off.

The appropriate observance of the Sabbath was a significant concern.

Originally Sabbath wasn't about following rules or a list of don'ts,
but intended as a **sign of God's grace, abundance and blessings**,
a declaration against endless work and production,
that we can enjoy rest and our relationship with God.

When God gave the former slaves the 10 Commandments at Sinai,
the purpose wasn't to impose a hardship or harsh demands,
but were **given entirely for their own good and benefit**,
rules so they could live together well as a community.

Obviously, stealing or lying or murdering your neighbor
would not enhance their life together as a community.

God gave the Law as a guide to **enable life together in peace & unity**,
so to receive the abundant good and blessings God intended for them.

The problem was that over time, **they had missed that point**,
and Judaism became all about detailed laws and rituals
rather than a real relationship with God and neighbors.

For many of the Pharisees, with their strict sense of legalism,
an appropriate observance of the Sabbath according to the rules
became their most significant concern and cause for judgement.
For Jesus, the essential issue was about loving God & our neighbors.

It was a major source of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees,
and in the Gospel of Mark there is a series of 5 conflict stories
that all center around our worship meditation today, **Mark 2:21-22**,
"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it,
the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine
will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

The gracious and loving God that Jesus knew and proclaimed
was at odds and in conflict with the legalism of the Pharisees,
the new wine of grace would burst old wineskins of ritual & tradition.

The Gospel message was incompatible with the Pharisees' legalism,
so Sabbath observance became a way they sought to get rid of him.

The second conflict story, is on the Sabbath and a bit of a set-up.
There's a guy in the synagogue with a withered-deformed hand, vs. 2,
They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

They are looking for grounds to publicly discredit and attack Jesus
in an **effort to confirm what they've already chosen to believe**,
and so they hoped to use the injured man as bait.

They see the man, not as a suffering person in need of help,

but as an object, or as means they can use against Jesus.
Their plan was to catch Jesus healing him on the Sabbath.

They already know enough about Jesus to be plotting against him,
and they expect that he will notice, **and have compassion for him.**
They are also pretty sure that Jesus **can and will heal** the man.

As I reflect on all that, it seems obvious to me,
that if a person is able to miraculously heal an injured person,
you'd think that might cause them to rethink their opposition,
or at least consider that maybe he had been sent by God.

As a matter of practice, if someone is able to perform miracles,
I hope I that I'd be willing to listen and reconsider my opinion,
but all that seemed to go right past them.

Aware of what they were trying to pull, Jesus poses a question, vs. 4
"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

That question about the Sabbath cuts to the very heart of the matter.

Strict adherence to tradition can become evil, a toxic religion,
if it replaces kindness, care and compassion for our neighbors.

The essential issue for Jesus, was loving God and neighbor.
For the religious authorities, the more important issue
was outward strict adherence to their law and traditions,
which lead to their lack of compassion
for the man suffering with a withered hand,
and when Jesus called the authorities on it, they were silent.

It is possible to get so hung up on our own rules and traditions,
our customs, our sense of proper and our ways of doing things,
that we fail to love, show mercy and care for our neighbors,
**and so soup kitchen doors are closed despite
the starving masses, because it is a Sunday.**

We keep the Sabbath Holy, not with stringent restrictions,
but by doing good, expressing love toward God and neighbor,
for we are all called and blessed to proclaim God's love.

When the Pharisees rejected that Jesus was angry and disappointed
by their loveless religious legalism and obstinate resistance, vs. 5,
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.

Their plotting and hypocrisy were now exposed,
so they came together to plot how to destroy him, vs. 6,
The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

That does not mean that to live by rules & traditions is always wrong,
but rather they can have their place and can serve a good purpose.

The challenge is knowing when and how to press for our perspective,
and under what circumstances to take a rigid stand and be insistent,
and when is it the time to back off from our ways & ideas
in favor of showing Christian forbearance & compassion.

As Church and believers, how do we rightly live as Christians?

and what does God want from us in any particular situation?

We will probably always struggle with those questions,
but from the text I make three observations this morning.

- 1- the religious authorities went in with a **critical spirit**,
and starting out with a critical spirit,
even in the name of maintaining righteous behavior,
can be a sign of **toxic destructive religion**.
 - 2- the religious authorities were intent on **setting a trap**,
watching, hoping and waiting for a chance to pounce,
seeking opportunity to expose or humiliate someone,
can also be a sign of **toxic manipulative religion**.
 - 3- the religious authorities had a **stony hardness of heart**,
so much so that they missed recognizing & appreciating
the miracle and cure Jesus had done right in their midst.
A stony hard heart that doesn't recognize God's grace,
that fails to see and appreciate God at work in our world,
can be another sign of **toxic defective religion...**
- ... such as the religious authorities so bitter and incensed
that Jesus had healed someone in need on the Sabbath,
that they plotted to use the Sabbath **to plan how to destroy** him.

So who was it that really abused God's gift of Sabbath?

In contrast, as we come to the Lord's Table of gracious mercy today,
consider what Paul explained to the Christians in Corinth, vs. 13:1-3,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, **but do not have love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love, I am nothing**. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, **but do not have love, I gain nothing**.