

"CAUGHT IN THE ACT OF MERCY"

Mark 2:23-3:6

2ND Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2018

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23-24 One Sabbath day he was walking through a field of ripe grain. As his disciples made a path, they pulled off heads of grain. The Pharisees told on them to Jesus: "Look, your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules!"

25-28 Jesus said, "Really? Haven't you ever read what David did when he was hungry, along with those who were with him? How he entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, with the Chief Priest Abiathar right there watching—holy bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat—and handed it out to his companions?" Then Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren't made to serve the Sabbath. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath. He's in charge!"

Doing Good on the Sabbath

3¹⁻³ Then he went back in the meeting place where he found a man with a crippled hand. The Pharisees had their eyes on Jesus to see if he would heal him, hoping to catch him in a Sabbath infraction. He said to the man with the crippled hand, "Stand here where we can see you."

4 Then he spoke to the people: "What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?" No one said a word.

5-6 He looked them in the eye, one after another, angry now, furious at their hard-nosed religion. He said to the man, "Hold out your hand." He held it out—it was as good as new! The Pharisees got out as fast as they could, sputtering about how they would join forces with Herod's followers and ruin him.

The Sabbath. Is it holy or is it convenient? Is it a day we reserve for God, or is it a day off from work, a day for sports and

laundry, for meeting with friends, for sleeping in? When I was a child growing up in Denver, Sundays looked very different than they do now.

We went to church. We always went to church. If I slept over at a girlfriend's house, I was to be home by 8:00 am sharp so that I could be ready to go to church. We could not go to a movie, for movies were not showing on Sundays. My parents couldn't shop for our school clothes, furniture, electronics, or for their new car. We still can't buy a car on Sunday here, but now, we can patronize liquor stores on the way home from church. If you happen to be in some districts of New Jersey on Sunday, you won't be able to do much shopping at all.

In Illinois, horses can't race on the Sabbath. In Iowa, you can't buy a car on Sunday, but you can buy a mobile home. And in Virginia and Pennsylvania, hunting is not allowed on the Sabbath, except it's always okay to hunt for foxes, crows, or coyotes without restriction.

The Sunday "blue laws" vary from state to state, originally put into place to enforce Sabbath rest and church attendance. They find their grounding in passages such as the ones above that Gus just read to you. Hear the controversy as expressed, perhaps, by a lesser Pharisee threatened by Jesus and his message:

There he goes again. That Jesus, that nobody from Nazareth, the self-proclaimed Messiah, comes sashaying in here to our Temple, upsetting everything we stand for and know. He has no pedigree; no one in his lineage claims the Pharisee credential. He has no money—no

servants, no horses, no jewelry, and no concubines. He does not travel with a valise; the clothes you see are the clothes he owns. Who is he to criticize me? Who is he to lecture us on the meaning of the scriptures? We are the experts in the law; he is a blowhard, a rabble-rouser who knows nothing.

He claims to know and travel with God's Holy Spirit. He claims to know the heart and the intentions of God. Blasphemer he is! We know the laws of Moses by memory. We can recite them! We study them and teach them to the people, the good and faithful Jewish people who rely on us to teach them our right ways and practice.

He walks around instead with the dirtiest of people, holding their hands, kissing their faces! Sheesh! Selah. We Pharisees are separate from the common people—above them, in fact. Our very title is translated pharisaios in Greek, and perisha in Hebrew. Either way, it means the same thing. "Pharisee" means "separated one."

And separate we are. It is our mission to keep our religion pure, unsullied by the unclean masses, the sinners, and the itinerant preachers such as this Jesus Of Nowhere, Messiah of Nothing. We must work tirelessly to preserve our national integrity in strict conformity with Mosaic law. If we don't, the filthy, lesser Samaritans might find favor with the Romans and supplant us as the heads and guardians of the Jewish faith. If we don't keep our people in line with the Scriptures and the laws of Moses, they might become fouled by

the pagan Roman pigs that keep us all in chains as subservient, persecuted Children of God.

We don't need trouble, and we sure don't need the Jesus-Kind-of-Trouble he brings. He brings it with his talk of love. For him, everyone is deserving of God's love. Not just Jews, but Samaritans, Romans, people who are disabled, poor, and afflicted. The unclean and the unworthy. We reject them and we save God the effort of denial.

Jesus brings trouble upon his head when he calls out for justice for those who have no voice in our world. He befriends the widows and the prostitutes, the blind beggars and the lepers. He calls the children over to him, whether they have been consecrated or not, no matter who are their parents or what is their religion. Sheesh! Selah.

Jesus brings trouble when he faces off against our benevolent, ordained corrections. When we point out to him that he is breaking the Sabbath laws by healing the afflicted on our Holy Day, he responds with argument and questions. Just the other day on the Sabbath, right in our faces, Jesus let his parade of fools break off grain heads in the field and eat them. This gathering of grain is strictly forbidden by the Mosaic law, God's law. But he just scoffed at the Pharisee trying to correct his sin, throwing David in our faces as justification for his transgressions. I wanted to arrest him right there and then!

And if that was not enough, he then defied our Sabbath proscriptions directly when he used his magic to cure a man with a

withered hand. He looked us right in the eye, had the man hold out his hand, and restored the hand to good health. He lit into the Pharisees who were rightly challenging him, claiming to know the will of God more than they. Sheesh! Selah.

"Do we serve the Sabbath or does it serve us?" he asked in that haughty way of his. "Are the laws the be all and end all or are the laws there to help us connect in a grateful and meaningful way with our Father in Heaven?", he asked. Does it not honor God to do the healing work of God in the world, to show compassion and to serve justice before serving the church?"

He was trying to trick us. Well, if the truth be told, perhaps we were trying to trick him. We needed a reason to condemn him before Herod, our King. Little transgressions would not do the trick, but we were keeping a record on him, and we were having none of his compassion and justice nonsense. We are the Pharisees, after all, and we are the keepers of God's laws. Not him. Not them. Not the idiots who follow him, who sing hosannas wherever he walks, who bring prostitutes and divorced women around him, who consort with known criminals, tax collectors, and persons not of our holy faith. Sheesh! Selah.

The truth is, the lesson is, that God does not care about love. God cares about law and the sooner this Jesus learns that lesson, the better. For he is barking up the wrong tree. He is playing chicken

with the wrong viper. He is challenging the wrong bull. We will silence him. We will poison his tongue. We will gore him clean through and leave him bleeding and dying on the side of the road. Where will his God of love and compassion be then? God will be in the synagogue blessing us, the true guardians of the faith!

I wonder why he tests us so? Doesn't he know that we can crush him? Doesn't he know that Caiaphas has already been to talk to King Herod about him? Doesn't he know that Herod has already plotted the trial and condemnation of Jesus before Pilate? Pilate is one mean old governor—he is no one to mess with. He hangs people for the slightest of infractions against the Roman law. He crucifies us Jews by the dozens just to demonstrate his power over us. He gives no quarter to troublemakers, and we keep trying to tell that to Jesus.

But he is driven! He is driven to proclaim his gospel good news and the people- the poor demented powerless little people- they soak it up. He talks about justice for them, and they forget they are living under the Roman guard. He promises them heaven, and they follow him around begging him to tell them more!

He says blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kin-dom of Heaven. They believe him.

He says blessed are the ones who grieve, for they will be comforted. They weep as he kisses them!

He says blessed are the poor, and he promises them some pie-in-the-sky reward for them.

I don't see how this helps these people one bit. They are accursed. They are unclean. They are not welcome in the temple. They are not welcome to stand where we are standing. We are God's people-not them! We know God's will and we know God's ways and these people are outta here! They are a waste of humanity. Why should we feed them? Why should we clothe them? Why shouldn't we send their children off to be slaves? Sheesh! Selah.

Still, this man, this Jesus, he presses on. He is driven! He is fearless! He scolds us directly—how foolish is that? One day he was preaching to the crowd and we, the Pharisees, were standing and listening to him. He said,

The religion Scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit and polish veneer.

Instead of giving you God's law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to have the place

of honor at banquets, basking in the most prominent positions in the synagogues, preening in the radiance of public flattery, being greeted with respect in the public marketplaces, and being called 'rabbi.'

And then he turned on us, cursing us, saying,

I've had it with you! You're hopeless, you religion scholars, you Pharisees! Hypocrites! Your lives are roadblocks to God's kingdom. You refuse to enter, and won't let anyone else in either.

You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You go halfway around the world to make a convert, but once you get him you make him into a replica of yourself, double-damned.

Jesus went on and on this way, and we were getting more and more steamed. Sheesh! Selah. He finished by condemning us. He told us we'd be sorry one day for what we had done to him, as if he knew we were coming after him. He lamented:

Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Murderer of prophets! Killer of the ones who brought you God's news! How often I've ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn't let me. And now you're so desolate, nothing but a ghost town. What is there left to say? Only this: I'm out of here soon. The next time you see me you'll say, 'Oh, God has blessed him! He's come, bringing God's rule!'

Well, we won't stand for much more of this. We don't have to. We are God's chosen priests, trained in the law of Moses,

memorized in the Scriptures, and anointed as God's own soldiers of faith. Our fathers and our father's fathers, our uncles and our brothers all were proud to be Pharisees. We have pedigree, whereas he has none.

His day in the sun may be now, but our day is coming. And he will be gone, forgotten. Whether it be one year from now, or a hundred years from now, or two thousand years from now, nobody will care what Jesus said, nobody will claim him as Messiah. Nobody will speak his name in the same breath with God. Yet we Pharisees will continue to own a proud place at the right hand of God, for we are the chosen ones, we are the righteous ones, and we are the ones God will reward.

God will reward us for silencing this clown, for purifying our religion and for putting law instead of emotion, rules ahead of compassion, and polity ahead of justice. Amen. Alleluia, Amen, Selah.

Interesting, isn't it, how some people just seem to think they are following God's will? Hehe. I guess the joke will be on Jesus; he was caught in the act of mercy, and the joke will be on him. Because it sure isn't on me, is it?

Selah.