



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 25, 2018

"Missing the Point" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Mark 2:23-3:6

23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as His disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

24 The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

25 He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"

26 In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

27 Then He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

3:1 Another time He went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

2 Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched Him closely to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath.

3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand "Stand up in front of everyone."

4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man,

"Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

We are now entering the last week of Lent. How has your Lent been?

As a kid, I grew up in the Eastern Orthodox Church and in that church tradition we would always fast from meat every Friday throughout the year. But during Lent it was even stricter, we fasted every Wednesday and Friday. And then during the week before Easter (Holy Week), we fasted from meat all week. I think on Good Friday we abstained from dairy products too, so no milk, eggs, cheese pizzas, etc.

By the time we got to Easter, we were eating cardboard.

But here's the thing, I think we missed the whole point of fasting and Lent. Because all the way through Lent we continued to demean and trash each other as a family by cussing, swearing and screaming at each other. All the fasting in the world never seemed to slow that stuff down.

Though we strictly carried out the right rituals of our faith, they

were powerless to bring real change, mostly because we were never really open to change.

Bottom line, Lent for us was an exercise of completely missing the point. And because we missed the point we ended Lent as the same kind of people as we started it - only skinnier.

Today we continue in our sermon series Hope Restored by looking at two related stories that brought out this deep problem of believers in God totally missing the point and being impervious to change. Because of their lack of openness, stubbornness and cultural myopia they left damaged souls in their wake and missed God completely.

In our story this morning, as in most of the Gospel stories, Jesus crystallizes what the Kingdom of God is really all about. Keep in mind the overarching motif of Mark is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, inaugurating a new age, inaugurating His kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

In other words, He is bringing to bear on the world in real, tangible, and sometimes disruptive ways the purposes, plans, values, and character of God's kingdom.

Remember also Jesus' constant challenge to people was to rethink, realign, and rebuild everything on the basis of Jesus. And this included the way the Sabbath was to be lived out, as well as who was in charge of it.

Our western indifference toward Sabbath observance might put some of us modern readers at a disadvantage in understanding the importance of Sabbath in Judaism and why these Pharisees are all crazy about Jesus' treatment of it.

Admittedly some of these Sabbath laws make you scratch your head in our modern world. For example, not only did one not work or pick grain on the Sabbath but there were other things one could not do. For instance, on the Sabbath, you couldn't sew more than one stitch or else you are now working; one couldn't pick up the same walnut twice; you couldn't spit onto the soft soil lest the spittle plow the ground, which is illegal on the Sabbath.

And even today at a hospital in New York City a "Sabbath elevator" runs all day and stops at every floor automatically because pushing the button on the Sabbath would be work.

Okay, so to us this seems kind of weird for some of the modern folks, but in the ancient world, the Sabbath was one of two religious practices, which helped define the Jewish people, which gave them their distinct identity and set them apart from the nations. The other religious practice was circumcision.

In case you may not know, the word Sabbath means to rest or to cease. It was observed from sunset Friday until sunset Saturday when Jews ceased from work.

On the Sabbath, there was time for the instruction in God's word and time for deep spiritual reflection. And by its practices at dinner and prayer, the Sabbath also brought remembrance of how the Jewish people were saved from slavery and given the Torah - that is, the laws of God - which included that they, and only they, of all the people's of the earth, were given the command to rest from work one day a week.

In the ancient world, Gentile people were familiar with certain holidays, but they did not have a regular day of rest. And so the Jewish Sabbath made the Jewish people distinct as a culture and nation.

Bottom line, everything about the Sabbath was not only religious, but it was a mark of distinction, of cultural identity and of Jewish solidarity.

So to break the Sabbath laws was not on par with driving 10 miles over the speed limit, rather it is was something like one of us blatantly violating a constitutional law. To violate the Sabbath was to violate one's core identity as a Jew.

In some ways, we can understand the passion to protect certain symbols and practices that underscore national identity. For example, the flag is part of our identity as Americans and if we see it burned something inside starts to churn viscerally, doesn't it?

You could say, 'what's the big deal, the flag is just a piece of cloth?' Just like you could say, what's the big deal, the Sabbath is just a day? But just as the flag is not mere cloth, the Sabbath was not mere day. It has

profound, deeply cultural, nationalistic, and spiritual significance - significance, which people felt viscerally not just intellectually, just as we would about the flag.

And after all Exodus 31:14 does say: *"Therefore you are to observe the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people."* So you have to see that in these two stories the stakes are quite high.

So given all this background information let's reexamine some things in our text.

As we read in 2:23 Jesus and His disciples were going through the grain fields picking heads of grain to munch on. Picking grain and rubbing it in one's hands (to get rid of the chaff) was considered to be threshing, which was farm work and forbidden on the Sabbath.

Now to be fair, in those days debating the standards of the Sabbath was very common. Jesus at first, does what lots of rabbis and Pharisees would do to back their case, they would cite a biblical incident that served as precedence.

Here Jesus refers to a story in the Old Testament where David, before he was king of Israel, was on the run from another king who wanted to kill him. In his hunger and need David asked a Jewish Priest to give him special consecrated bread reserved *by law* only for priests. The priest, putting human need over the laws about holy bread, gave David what he needed.

Bottom line, Jesus is making the simple point that meeting human need could at times supersede the requirements of law. And this is why Jesus says in verse 27, *“the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath.”* In other words, Jesus is making the point that the Sabbath was instituted in order to bless humanity, to meet the needs of people, and to enhance their well-being. It was not created to make people sweat in fear about how many times they’re picking up walnuts! And this point about blessing people and enhancing well-being and meeting the needs of others is exactly the point the Pharisees were missing, and it had in its wake dehumanizing outcomes.

Then on top of this, Jesus adds, *“The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath.”* This is huge because He is saying that He is the equivalent of God.

The Pharisees must have been stunned out of their minds! I say this because as we see in the next story, they are out for blood.

A quick thing I want to point out here before we move into the next section. Again notice how Jesus emphasizes need and hunger in His overriding of the law.

You see throughout the gospels Jesus brings a God-sized love and God-sized concern to the issue of Law and this can legitimately and often mess with our clear-cut ways to deal with folks who break laws.

For example, one of the Ten Commandments says you must not commit adultery. Other laws talk about stoning adulterers. And then here comes Jesus, some centuries later, to muddy the

waters of our clear dogmas and policies about adultery by teaching and demonstrating a love and a grace for adulterers (remember how He did not condemn the woman caught in the very act of adultery?). He also teaches and demonstrates a love for traitors, tax collectors, prostitutes, and even a love for enemies.

So here’s a question, what should we do when our commitment to our cultural standards of justice seems to be at odds with Jesus’ directives to love our neighbors and even to love our enemies?

His God-sized love toward sinners and humans in need can really mess with the seemingly clear contours of our Economic Policies, our Foreign Policies, our Immigration Policies, or a whole host of Justice Policies.

For example, think of the complex issues today like Immigration. I’ll be honest, if it wasn’t for Jesus my views as an American would be pretty crystal clear. But my identity is not simply American it’s American Christian.

And that central noun (Christian) affects everything of how and what gets expressed through that adjective (American). Are we American Christians or Christian Americans? Does it make a difference in how we see ourselves?

That noun “Christian” brings the issue of human well-being into my American cultural thinking, and at times it leaves me very challenged to know what is the right thing to do about human need and law-breaking.

And Jesus seems to be doing exactly that with the Pharisees, bringing human need & well-being into their Jewish cultural thinking. As a result, He was messing things up and they got ticked.

3:1-2 sets up the upcoming conflict over a man with a withered hand. In verse 2 it says they ‘watched Jesus closely’ to see if He would cure this man so they could accuse Him (and condemn Him to death) for breaking a Sabbath law. So these guys are really keyed into the man with the withered hand.

The phrase “watched Him closely” (in the original language of the New Testament) not only means to observe carefully but even to watch maliciously. Picture something like an animal as they lie in wait to pounce on their prey. This is the kind of ambiance of what is going on here.

So verses 1 and 2 create a sinister tone to the whole event. There is malevolence going on here towards Jesus and Jesus is going to take that malevolence head on.

Now, this is where it gets interesting for me. According to Jewish law, you could make efforts to heal someone on the Sabbath only if it was a life or death situation, but to heal something that could wait to the next day was a violation.

So what is going on here? Jesus is intentionally going out of his way to deliberately violate a known Sabbath boundary right in the face of the Pharisees, and He is not going to be “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” while doing it.

We can see His determination to do this because what is the first thing Jesus does after getting to the synagogue? He tells the man with the shriveled hand, the very man the Pharisees are keyed in to, to stand up in the middle of everyone.

Not only that, but consider this, Jesus could go about healing this guy later on after the Pharisees had left thus avoiding the nasty conflict. Nonetheless, He proceeds to heal the man anyway.

So here you have this poor man (who might be afraid because he knows the Sabbath limits on healing) standing there while Jesus throws down His gauntlet.

First, notice that at that point Jesus asks them (the Pharisees) a question.

So picture Jesus asking the crippled man to stand up and then turning His head looks right into the faces of the Pharisees. As He does He asks this theologically charged, unapologetically provocative question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?"

Again He puts the question of law in the context of human need and this seemingly simple question immediately traps the Pharisees in a box.

How could they say that the Sabbath was for anything but good? And how could they admit their regulations would cause evil in light of human need?

Here's the dilemma: If they agree with Jesus (and say it is lawful to do good, thus heal) they lose because now they are giving Jesus legal permission to heal on

the Sabbath. And they certainly can't say it's okay to do evil on the Sabbath. Doing Evil is intimidated here as ignoring human need and just letting this man stay deformed.

So Jesus puts them in a lose-lose situation. The Pharisees could not reply without condemning themselves. So as verse 4 says, they say nothing.

The tension at this point in the room is so thick you can cut it with a knife. The ongoing heat between Jesus and the Pharisees now reaches an irreversible tipping point.

Then in the face of their silence, we see something here in verse 5 that we do not see often in Jesus, which is Jesus becoming very angry. Anger could be translated as furious.

How do you picture His face as He is furious and as He looks right at the Pharisees sitting there? Does He look like Mr. Rogers with a beard or more like Robert De Niro? I think He is more De Niro here at this moment.

Notice He is looking at them and perhaps without turning His face from them, says to the man stretch out your hand. And then perhaps still looking at the Pharisees He heals the man. I bet there were gasps all around the room. You talk about an intense 'drop the mic' moment!

By healing this man on the Sabbath and by saying He is Lord of the Sabbath Jesus is unequivocally declaring that he is the authority over every other claim to God's will, God's ways, and God's laws. He designed them and He modeled how they were to be lived out. This kind

assertion of divine authority led to a very remarkable outcome

In verse 6 we see that the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Why is the last line so noteworthy? Because the Herodians were the opposite of Pharisees, The Herodians were very Pro-Roman and they wanted to preserve the highly immoral and politically corrupt Herodian kings in Israel. So the staunchly anti-Roman, anti-Herod, uber moralist Pharisees teaming up with Herodians is very odd. But hate can bring together strange bedfellows can't they? Like the U.S. holding hands with Iran in the early 1990s to fight Iraq.

So what can we practically take away for all this intense stuff?

Notice in verse 5 Jesus is deeply grieved at the stubbornness of the Pharisees. That tells us He wasn't angry just to nail them. He's not gleeful here in His anger as we can be when we are right. He's grieved because His deepest desire was for them to change. Change not just their morality but also their identity. Their identity was not to be found in being Super Jewish Rule Keepers, but in being a follower of the Rule Maker and the Life Giver.

And that kind of change would not merely have been a change in morality, but a change in their entire cultural identity.

I think we can relate to this in a way. The instinct to preserve whom we have always been culturally about various issues is powerful and hard to change.

When we feel like our identity or culture is being threatened or becoming something we think is much worse we want to start blaming people, don't we? We want to get stricter laws in place be it about marriage, guns, immigration, or whatever.

I'm not saying these things don't have their place or they are inherently bad things, but they are inherently second things. I say second things because the first thing is to pause and ask if we are somehow making things worse in our culture.

You see blame is a deep seeded pharisaic temptation in all of us. It is that impulse to say, 'that guy or those people right there are ruining our culture and our traditions. Those people are ruining our people and our faith.'

For the Pharisees, the Romans were ruining Israel. Tax collectors were ruining Israel. People who moved walnuts twice on the Sabbath or healed on the Sabbath were ruining Israel. You get the idea. But here is something the Pharisees would have never asked: "How am I ruining Israel?"

Have you ever heard that blame game on podcasts, news channels, talk radio, or church pulpits? When I speak with folks or listen to talk shows I often hear this, "_____ is ruining America."

You can fill in the blank with your favorite whipping boy; liberals, conservatives, the left, the right, the LGBTQ community, the Muslims, Gun Owners, Immigrants, White Male Privilege, etc. are ruining America. The list goes on.

But let me ask you this, have you ever put your own name or

your group in the blank? If not, why not? Why is it never, "*I am ruining America.*" Or why is it never "*We too, are ruining America?*" Why is it other people are always ruining America, but never me, not us. Why?

Is it because we really think we are never contributing to the breakdown of our society or our culture or our family; the breakdown of our marriage, friendships, or workplace?

It's like when I am dealing with couples with marriage struggles that want to inflate the effect of the spouses' actions on the marriage while minimizing their own.

More than a few times when I ask each spouse to tell me how he or she themselves contribute to the breakdown of their relationship, I am sometimes met with blank stares or outright chagrin.

Or sometimes when I ask them point blank, "What would *you* like to change *in you* to better help your marriage?" More than a few times I've been told, "I don't know, I can't think of anything." Admitting I need to change is no small feat. But that is exactly how the best life, the best marriages, the best friendships, the best workplaces and the best churches begin.

Most of us like to think we are open to change, but scientific data would prove otherwise.

The odds of making a change in your life are only one in nine even if you are facing a life-threatening illness. This statistic is drawn from a longitudinal study of patients

who were diagnosed with early-stage heart disease.

They were given clear information about where they are headed. They were also given concrete steps they could take to prevent an early demise.

The steps were hard but doable. And yet only one in nine of them changed their lifestyle.

It reminds me of a quote by the great poet W.H. Auden, "We would rather be ruined than change. We would rather die in our dread than...let our illusions die." Are there some illusions that need to die in you today?

Why do we resist change? Why do you resist change? Why do I resist change?

Here's reality, we all contain a degree of moral insufficiency and that insufficiency has a broad effect. For example, have you ever thought of how our lack of generosity affects life beyond ourselves? Or our seething anger our passive aggressive sarcasm impacts others? Or our refusal to admit we struggle with drinking or prescription drugs or pornography or gaming affects others? Or how our indifference to God's call on our life to disciple others affects our culture and society?

The point is the Pharisees are not some extreme anomaly of a human being. They are us.

And this is no small thing because the Pharisee's commitment to rigid rules, blame, and cultural myopia would have left crippled people crippled on a Sabbath. It would have left hungry people hungry on a Sabbath.

It would have left tax collectors and prostitutes and the diseased as outcasts. It would have left you and me out of the reach of God's love and mercy.

And that is why Phariseeism is not just wrong it's destructive to the human condition and it must stop.

Brothers and sisters, the world cannot afford Christians who are like Pharisees. The world cannot afford Christians who miss the point, who miss the point about the proper place of Cultural Ideals, who miss the point of Godly justice and peace, who miss the point of Human Need and Well-being, who miss the point of God's kingdom come, His will done on earth, through us, as it is in heaven.

Folks, there is no higher divine plan to change a world than us – His church. I don't say that arrogantly, but with a very sober urgency. Jesus is calling all people to repent – to rethink, realign, and rebuild everything on the basis of Him, to believe in Him, and join Him in this re-creation of all things.

And the Christian, by definition, starts that re-creation with themselves. A better world, a better culture, a better society starts with me.

You see folks, the ultimate triumph over evil is not simply in making sure the ideas and plans of the Left or the Right win the day. The ultimate triumph over evil is Christ formed in us. Do you believe that today?

The pharisaic way of adding a billion laws to make the world whole and good may help us to a point, but the most powerful force of Restoring Hope is when we

Christians live out, intangible and concrete ways, His passions, His purposes, His values, His character in a sin-stained world.

The sin of the world is powerful, I hate it, but as Jesus told His followers, "Take heart for I have overcome the world." Do you believe that today?

As we finish up can we ask our selves where and how does God need me to change? Not the world out there, but for me right here. What is going on in my life that still needs the Cross? In other words, what in my life still needs the forgiveness of God? And what needs to be given new life and a fresh start through His resurrection?

Let me just make this clear. No matter how far afield you may have strayed, your sin, your mistakes, and your moral insufficiency are not the last words. Rather His unbreakable love and value and mercy for you are the last words.

Folks, we can join the hopeless chorus of the Pharisees and continue to blame the world for the way it is. Or we can look at our lives with a strenuous honesty this week and ask the Lord what still needs to die in me, and what needs to be given birth within me through Jesus Christ?

What is God saying to you today?

May this Easter you find your own Hope Restored, not because the world got better for you, but because you know and live for Jesus Christ.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com