

The Kingdom versus The Religious

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15 Mark 2:23—3:6

Life is so complex that we know that we have to set priorities if we're going to get anything done. We set our own priorities, except when other people in the household set them out for us. Still, we have figured out ways of ensuring that our priorities remain the true priority while giving enough credence and attention to the priorities of others for us to stay out the dog house.

Our priorities define what's important for us. Not everyone shares the same priorities; that's why they're *our* priorities. We may have developed a sense for what needs to go first by experience, or we may be facing a complex task and know enough to break down the tasks into priorities that will yield the desired result, kind of like assembly instructions.

But our priorities change over time and experience. What we thought of as priorities when we were younger have likely changed remarkably in our older age. That's no surprise. We aren't the same people that we once were. Our relationships have changed. Our work lives have changed. When we had kids, they were often our priorities. When they went on their own, we developed a new set of priorities.

In matters of faith and spirituality, we may have developed our own priorities, but we are also given certain priorities by those claiming authority. When God sets a priority before you, it's best to take that seriously. God doesn't like priorities that compete with God's own ideas. So, when we declare something as sacred, it might be contrary to what God means by sacred.

As God was establishing a covenant with the Hebrews after the Exodus from Egypt, God memorably provided the people of God with a top ten list of God's sacred priorities which we commonly call the Ten Commandments.

This morning's scripture from Deuteronomy focuses on one particular commandment, the fourth, that states: *Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy [or sacred], as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work - not you or anyone or anything else shall do any work either.*

While varied strenuous efforts have been made to associate this idea of a sacred day of rest with some other people, culture, or tradition, no other people really have such a sacred observance. It is unique.

This notion of a sacred day each week, of resting on the seventh day is also reflected in the first Creation Story. Therefore, the text of the Ten Commandments in **Exodus** cites this reason for there being a Sabbath. It says: *For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy [or sacred].*

Returning to the text in **Deuteronomy**, it has a very different view of **why** there is a Sabbath. Our text says: *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.* That's **very** different. It isn't due to the Creation; here it's due to the legacy of being enslaved. Observing the Sabbath by not performing any work, not you or anyone or anything, it is a sacred celebration of God's liberation, of God's salvation. It says in effect that you shall remember when your people were enslaved and **never** stopped working, and to observe the Sabbath is an act of remembrance of blessing, of thanksgiving, for liberation from slavery.

In a rather liberal reach, the prohibition on work extends specifically to "the alien within your gates." Any idea that you could contract out labor to foreigners on the Sabbath while you're resting and observing God's law gets squashed by that clause.

This is distinctive for God's people. Christians like to think that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath, but that wasn't the case for centuries. The notion of a prohibition of work on Sunday was never Christian. Rather, Christians continued to acknowledge the Sabbath on Saturdays – the last day of the week – into the 3rd century, while consecrating the first day of the week – Sundays – as the Lord's Day. The notion of a Sabbath, of a time or season made sacred for rest and reflection, does become the understanding of how we observe the Lord's Day. (And on the second Sunday, have a feast called Pot Luck!)

When we come to the passage from Mark's gospel, we find Jesus and his disciples seem to be violating the Sabbath. Whaaat? How dare they? Doesn't Jesus respect the worthy tradition of his ancestors? Doesn't he want to honor God with his Sabbath observance? Is he disregarding a key practice of Jewish identity? What does he think he's doing?

Throughout Mark 2, you can see a string of confrontations as Jesus seems to break with every convention and tradition. However, when it comes to Sabbath observance, it seems Jesus is crossing a big line. This isn't just tradition and practice, but now it goes to his identity as one of God's law-abiding, law-observing people.

It starts with his disciples (not Jesus?) plucking heads of grain. This is exactly the kind of "work" that has been prohibited by the interpreters of the Torah-Law. One could argue that the interpreters have made the sacred Sabbath observance into a legalistic pain in the tush. Jesus probably would have agreed.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' accusatory challenge is rather over-the-top. Jesus refers to the story of David and his soldiers desperate for food when the only food available was the consecrated bread set aside by the priests. Clearly this has nothing to do with 'work on the Sabbath,' and is far different from what his disciples were doing. However it makes the point that **Jesus** wants to make and ignores the concern of the Pharisees. Jesus continues: *The Sabbath was made for man* or for human benefit and

blessing, *not man for the Sabbath* or that the Sabbath has meaning and value unto itself without consideration of the human situation. In this sense, the story about David and his men eating sacred bread connects to Jesus' intention. He is showing that **what is sacred benefits humanity**; what is sacred is not meant to be used as a tool to coerce or deprive or punish humanity.

Then Jesus heads for a synagogue and apparently the group of Pharisees follows right behind him, just looking for another instance of his law-breaking. Jesus gives them just what they're looking for, but Jesus continues to ignore their concerns and make his own case.

Jesus is about to heal a man with a withered hand, but he poses a question first, a question about interpreting the Torah-Law for the experts in Torah-Law, the Pharisees. The question is this: *Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?* Of course, it seems at first glance like Jesus is mixing apples and oranges; the Sabbath is about neither good nor evil, neither life nor death. The Sabbath is a sacred day of rest, of not working, carefully proscribed in the interpretations of the Torah-Law. A question of good/evil and life/death doesn't even apply to the Sabbath, right? The Pharisees are silent, and probably seething because Jesus has taken away their concern about his actions, flipped the tables and focused an awkward challenge for them about what is truly sacred, about what sacred really means.

Jesus has again asked about what is **sacred**. Yes, he might elaborate, the Sabbath **is** sacred, but so is doing good and giving life. We see that Jesus would challenge even standard interpretations of something as traditional as the exclusion of labor on the Sabbath. Why does he do that?

Jesus equates sacred with blessing and with life-giving. The interpreters of the Torah-Law, the religionists, see sacred as something that is observed, that is respected, that is obligatory, and the neglect or absence of such observance or obligation deserves condemnation and punishment. Jesus spends much of his ministry challenging the religionists in one form or another.

It is a major theme in Jesus' ministry: religion disconnected from God's love for humanity lies somewhere between useless and meaningless, and corrupt and oppressive. Jesus echoes the prophets who also denounced meaningless religion and scrupulous legalism because it was deaf and blind to the pain and suffering of people, to the injustice and corruption swirling in their midst. Jesus knew first hand that religious pretensions and practices which ignored God's people, that had not prioritized love, blessing, healing, justice, peace, and new life were contemptible to God. That was the clear message from the prophets who came centuries before Jesus, and Jesus reiterates their position in his ministry.

It remains the case that religion divorced from or disinterested in the needs of God's people is contemptible to God. The sad thing is that the church for centuries has remained divorced from or disinterested in the needs of God's people. The priority of the church is and most always has been the church itself. It may take a tiny fraction of its

resources to devote to the needs of God's people, but largely, the church has become (more and more lately) the opposite of what Jesus sought. It has become religious observation and performance that makes its participants feel good about themselves, but does next to nothing to address the dire needs of God's people. And in most places, any pastor saying that would be canned in a flash.

My point is that Jesus wouldn't run up against the Pharisees in today's world, but he would have a really hard time making his case to most Christians.

Jesus reveals to all what the Kingdom looks like, and it doesn't look like religion in his day or in ours. Let me say once again what Jesus would tell you is sacred, a description of what is found in the Kingdom of God. What is sacred is love, blessing, healing, justice, peace, and new life. May we always pursue what is sacred and let the rest be called tradition, but recognize that it is not of ultimate importance.