

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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If I had to pick a favorite genre of Bible stories “Jesus gets tired of people’s nonsense and responds with scripture and snark” would be right at the top of the list. And perhaps that is because it’s one of my go to techniques when I’m tired of people’s nonsense. And perhaps that’s one of my go to techniques because Jesus modeled it for me. Who can say really?

Anyhow, with that in mind, obviously today’s reading is a real exciting one for me. But—and this is often the case with Mark—we don’t really get a whole lot of explanation about why we’re getting snarky Jesus today. And we’re not going to begrudge Mark for that, he was writing only a few decades after Jesus’ death to people familiar with the geopolitical and cultural context during Jesus’ time. And Mark firmly believed the Second Coming would happen during his lifetime. So he had to get the Good News out *fast* and didn’t feel he had the time to stop and give details and explanations like say Matthew did, especially because he thought his audience would already have that information. He just...obviously didn’t see the next two thousand years coming.

Which leaves us in the position where we have to unpack this passage a little bit so we can better understand the factors at play here. And it’s important we do understand them, because according to Mark, this passage today, practically at the very beginning of his gospel, this is where the beginning of the plot on Jesus’ life started. So before we spend the rest

of the year looking at how that story unfolds, it's kind of important we understand this tension that set those events into order, yeah?

And to do that, first we need to make sure we understand at least a little bit about the sabbath. Because that commandment has gotten pretty watered down, by Christians especially over the centuries. A lot of people think that just popping into church for an hour one day a week is all that command asks of you. A relatively easy peasy thing to check off the day's list of tasks in between all your other errands. And if that's the only reason you've gathered here today...I'm sorry to be the one to break this to you but that's really not what is being called for. And it *certainly* wasn't the way first century Judeans would have understood the command. That reading we did from Deuteronomy showed us what was asked for and the why. Six days you shall labor, but the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work. But not just you, you don't get to be the only one resting while everyone around you toils, God says everyone should have that rest. And the Israelites were told they should do this and remember the time they were slaves in Egypt and they could have no time to rest. Now that they might be in a position where they have households that answer to them, they should not be like the Egyptians were to them and should instead extend that day of sabbath rest to everyone, even their animals. No loopholing your way out of that period of rest.

And this was a *bizarre* practice at that time. An entire day of just resting every week? Absolutely absurd! The Romans especially didn't get it, but understood if they took sabbath rest away from the Judeans they'd have riots so like...they humored them and said sure you can keep that weird tradition I guess, it's not really harming anything and kind of not worth the

hassle of confiscating. And so the Sabbath kind of became this symbol of Judean identity. This day is a gift from our God, we observe this day of rest to honor our God and do as he commanded us. We are different from our conquerors in this way. They would never show such mercy to themselves or each other. This is one of the few things we have left that sets us apart as a people. This is our tradition we can cling to even under occupation. It is precious.

So it makes sense, that people would then want to commit to this Sabbath resting as fully and completely as possible. It's a gift from God to be honored and what could be more honorable than refraining from not just "actual" work but absolutely anything that could even kind of be considered to be "work"? So you didn't do chores or prepare food or go on long journeys or really anything else that day, you got all those things finished the day before. If an emergency happened on the sabbath you would still tend to that. There are surviving records from that time of other rabbis and scholars insisting that it was just and right to "profane one sabbath for a person's sake so that he may keep many sabbaths." But short of that emergency level situation people were resting that day.

And so the fact that Jesus and his friends were even traveling that day would have raised some eyebrows, the pearl clutchers perhaps start casually inquiring exactly how far they were traveling because...well anything more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile exceeds a sabbath journey and....you're in a grain field? Those are kind of big aren't they? How far away is that from where you started? What synagogue were you on your way to exactly? But then again there were some Pharisees nearby and people who followed

that tradition very rigidly adhered to this no laboring on the sabbath rule so perhaps it was just a quick little stroll.

And some of the disciples start feeling snackish and pluck some heads of grain and start munching on them as they walk along. And to be clear, they are *allowed* to take that grain. The rows along the edges of a field were reserved for gleaning, anyone who was in need could take from the crop in the outermost rows of a field, as well as anything that was dropped during the harvest. This was a holy decree made by God himself. There is absolutely no theft happening here, they were using communal property in a way that it was intended. Except...they were doing it on a Sabbath and well harvesting grain is labor.

And so from the perspective of the Pharisees, the disciples are really deliberately breaking this thing that is both a holy mandate and sense of cultural identity. And I mean yeah you can go “seems like they’re kinda making a big deal out of a couple of heads of grain” but they can just as easily go “you’re profaning the day over something so trivial! And Jesus isn’t even scolding them! What gives!?! God gave us a rule and your followers aren’t listening and you don’t even seem to care!

And Jesus is...pretty snarky about it. Mark’s Jesus is often pretty snarky about things. Did you not read what David did when he was hungry and needed food? (They are deeply religious people Jesus absolutely they heard what David did). Because before he was crowned king Saul had announced he planned to kill David, and David and his men fled. They had no time to prepare supplies so they were hungry. But when they stopped at the house of God the only food they had was the bread of the presence, something that, but God’s decree laid out in the law, only the priests were

allowed to eat. And the high priest seeing these weary and hungry travelers *broke the law* and gave them this bread to sustain them. And his actions were viewed as good, since he was doing all this to assist God's anointed one, King David. My disciples plucking some heads of grain on the sabbath falls into the same category Jesus says.

And to be clear, the part of the argument where he's saying King David breaking the law in order to sustain himself for his mission was an acceptable action, that's not a scandalous thing. Even the most conservative of folks would have generally agreed with that. But the part where Jesus *implies that he and his disciple's mission is on the same level as David's* that's where eyebrows start shooting up and people go excuse me. Peter is not even mentioned in this story but I can still feel him trying to figure out a way to casually nudge Jesus in the ribs and hiss cut it out. And then Jesus asserts that the sabbath was made for humanity's benefit, it's a gift from God! Humans weren't made for the sabbath's benefit! And again that's something his contemporaries would say too so the disciples probably take a nice big exhale alright Jesus has simmered down we're ok.

And then Jesus continues that the son of humanity is lord even of the sabbath and *that* is the sentence that caused Peter's blood pressure to suddenly spike and all the accusers gasp in shock. Because Jesus is kind of suggesting here that like...the entire Law laid out in scripture that these faithful people hold to so dearly, that he himself is that law's master and the entirety of the law, including the sabbath, exists to serve Jesus. Which I mean...if I stopped this sermon and instead strolled over to the back altar and started scarfing down that communion bread right until one of you called out asking what I think I'm doing and I replied with remember that

time Jesus plucked those heads of grain on a sabbath when he was hungry? Besides I am lord, even of this bread. I feel like that would generate some feelings in this room. And Pastor Jason would probably go that's enough supply preaching from her.

But Jesus is making a point, that people going hungry because the alternative would mean bending good order and tradition in order to tend to their needs is unacceptable. And that's great news when you are the hungry person, I'm not denying that but church are we the disciples in this story? Or are we this group of pharisees? And sometimes the word Pharisee gets thrown around as an insult by Christians and that is absolutely not the sense I mean it in. This group of pharisees were fiercely faithful people who spent a lot of time and effort studying scripture and doing their best to live into what they saw God asking them to do, even when it was hard. I can understand how much it would *hurt* for them, after having made all sorts of personal sacrifices trying to live up to what they saw as God's expectations, trying their best to do what was asked, and then to have this stranger toss that back in their faces in a flippant way? Ow. And yeah, I can understand why that would upset them. And sure maybe it's easy to look at them in this story and go "that was dumb of you, you're focused on the wrong things, on like traditions and your own comfort zone over and above caring for people." But what about when you're the one in the position of having your comfort levels challenged? Dear church I remember when I first came to you as your vicar and I didn't stand during worship because my body wouldn't let me and...that caused some tension didn't it? And standing or sitting in worship is not any where near the same level of importance as upholding the sabbath, so multiply that several fold

over. It's *hard* when your practices are the ones being challenged. And Jesus isn't even being nice to them while he's doing it! He's dismissive and sarcastic and pretty condescending. And who is this guy anyway!? What gives him the right to talk to us like this! I would be annoyed with him too!

And Mark skips us ahead to his destination at the synagogue and...deescalating the tension created earlier is clearly not one of Jesus' priorities. He starts taunting everyone with what is clearly a trick question and then gets annoyed when no one takes the bait. Because if they agree it's lawful to do good on the sabbath, which it is, then they've given Jesus the green light to heal the guy on the sabbath which...it's not like his hand is a life or death situation so like...is this an "emergency" situation that could justify doing work on the sabbath? But Jesus asks about doing harm and killing on the sabbath too and that's because he's looking at the problem on a larger scale. Because that man not having limited mobility in his hand affects his entire life. It would greatly limit the kinds of work he could do, especially if it was his dominant hand. Most of the people in that region do some kind of physical labor for their work. Pulling in fishing nets, harvesting grain, masonry work, tending livestock, all of those tasks become extremely difficult and dangerous with only one hand. Because of this his ability to find people willing to hire him would be limited, his ability to make money and support himself let alone any kind of dependents. Food? Shelter? That all starts to be put into jeopardy rather quickly. And yeah the hand itself isn't actively killing him, but the cascading affect of trying to navigate in a society that assumes you have two fully functional hands when you don't. Jesus implies that *that* is killing him.

So what do you say people who have gathered in this house of god to worship? It's the sabbath! Should we continue to kill him slowly, do you think? Is that what the law requires of us? We have the option to change it, to do good instead. Should we do that? But they're silent, probably because Jesus is acting erratically and they aren't really sure what to do in this situation! And then Jesus does something even more obnoxious. He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and the man does. And Jesus *doesn't touch him*, doesn't say any magic words, just suddenly his hand is healed. These deeply faithful people that are gathered here can't even argue that he did work just now! Work? What work he just stretched out his hand and it's healed now. Did you see me do anything to it? So obviously I didn't break any rules.

And Mark says this is why people started to plot to destroy Jesus. Not because he was challenging the emperor, not greed or a sense of jealousy, not because he was starting an uprising. But because he questioned their faith's status quo, because he insisted they look at the bigger picture behind the Law. Because he challenged them to confront the way their interpretation of scripture was impacting the day to day lives of the people around them. And so dear church, as people of faith, we need to guard our hearts that we don't fall into the same trap. When Jesus strolls in the building and starts challenging the way things have always been, do we too try to get rid of him or do we listen to what he has to say?

And yeah, I know, that's a really easy question for me to ask in the abstract and a much more difficult one to live into in reality. There's *reasons* that people got so upset with his teachings that they tortured the man until he died. What is being asked for here is not easy but, people of God I firmly

believe it is within this community's ability to do, even though it's hard. And take heart, because Jesus will be along for the ride with you, offering snarky commentary, and encouragement the whole time. Amen.