

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 2:23-3:6
“Relationships, Not Regulations”
Year B – Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 3, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the outset of his early ministry, Jesus was still a conundrum to the religious leaders. They were trying to figure him out. On this day, while Jesus and his disciples were traveling, he went through a field of grain. And the disciples were hungry. So they took advantage of a long-standing cultural practice that allowed for people walking through a grain field to eat a small portion as they went (Deut. 23:25).

The Pharisees were offended by this. Not because the disciples took grain. No, rather because all this took place on the Sabbath. The Jewish holy day. The day instituted by God so that His people could rest from their work, worship, and reflect on the gracious God who had created and redeemed them.

Now, in order to protect the holiness of this day, the Pharisees and scribes had built up a fence of rules around the Sabbath. And not only for the Sabbath, but for all the Law. They didn't want to be tempted to break any part of it. So they made additional requirements that acted like a fence to protect the Law. And according to their regulations, gathering grain was one of the forbidden practices on the Sabbath. Because it was considered work.

You can see why the Pharisees would be taken back when they saw the followers of Jesus, this new, up and coming teacher, violating what they thought was a sacred practice. If he allowed his disciples to flaunt such an important part of the religious law, how could they take anything that he says seriously?

But Jesus responds by having them consider what is truly most important: was it all the regulations of the Law? Or was it the relationships that stand behind the need for the regulations in the first place?

To challenge their thinking, Jesus asked them to recall the time in the book of 1 Samuel when David was being chased by King Saul, as Saul was trying to kill David. David and his men were so depleted and hungry, that when they came to the house of the Lord, they asked for some bread. However, the only bread there was the bread of the Presence, which was an offering to God. It was not lawful for anyone but a priest to eat it.

Yet, the bread was given to David, even though it shouldn't have been. And the reason why was because David had need for it. Jesus was showing them the Law only goes so far in being beneficial. And yes, there are times, when the relationship that we have with God or the relationships we have with others might even lead us beyond the letter of the Law.

“The Sabbath was made for man,” Jesus says, “not man for the Sabbath” (2:27). The Sabbath was meant to be the day that was set aside for God's people to marvel in the wonderful relationship they had with their Lord. The Sabbath wasn't given by God just as an opportunity to add more rules to the list. Why did the disciples pick grain? Because they had a need: they were hungry. And by doing so, they did the best thing they could have done, remain with and followed Jesus, the “Lord of the Sabbath” (2:28).

But the Pharisees had lost sight of their relationship with God, and their relationships with others. Far gone was any notion that the Sabbath was meant as a time of delight in their

Lord, and a time for a generous spirit towards those around them. What mattered most of all to the Pharisees was that the regulations were kept perfectly.

It would be like a husband or a wife who attempts to be the perfect spouse, so they come up a long list of everything they know they have to do to fulfill their vocation. All the appointments, all the chores, all the acts of service that goes along with being married. And they do them well, even going above and beyond in many ways.

But then, somewhere along the way, the person gets so consumed with following their list of rules, and what's more, even taking great pride in following them, that they forget they were married. They end up having no relationship with their spouse, the person they were supposedly doing all this for in the first place. They've traded their relationship for regulations.

This was the Pharisees. And Jesus was pointing out that by focusing so intently on the regulations of the Sabbath, they had lost sight of what the Sabbath even meant. What it was for. They too, had traded their relationship with God and with others for regulations. And they were about to find out the terrible consequences this would have.

Immediately after their initial exchange, the Pharisees followed Jesus into a synagogue. And there was a man with a withered hand, a hand that was permanently disabled. And Jesus calls him over, and asks the group gathered, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" Now, the fence that the Pharisees had built around the Law, around the Sabbath, forbade any kind of practice of medicine, which seems to include healing.

But still, if answered honestly, the response to Jesus' question was obviously, "It *is* lawful on the Sabbath, or any day, to do good, and to save a life if necessary." And the Pharisees and everybody else knew it. Their silence only *confirmed* that they knew it.

But they were too stubborn to agree with Jesus, too stubborn to let go of their precious regulations. So stubborn, in fact, that they cared nothing for this man who was in need. They would have rather preserved their own sense of righteousness than to show love for their neighbor, or love for their God. For them, regulations trumped relationships.

And it was then that Jesus became angry, one of the few times we're informed he felt so strongly. His heart was grieved that these so-called followers of God could be so calloused and hard-hearted. And to demonstrate to them the fallacy of their ways, Jesus went ahead and healed the man.

But instead of marveling at what they had seen, the Pharisees departed immediately. And in the ultimate act of tragic irony, they were about to do the exact opposite of what they knew the Sabbath was for. They couldn't bear to do good or see a life saved, as Jesus said. Instead, they plotted to do harm and to kill. Still on the Sabbath, they conspired with their hated enemies, the Herodians, in order to *destroy* Jesus.

What the Pharisees did, as terrible and as self-consumed as it was, it may not be as uncommon as we like to think. In fact, their fault depicts an all-too-common human tendency, our tendency, to trade relationships for regulations. It happens all the time. Any time that we allow our desire or pride in the minutia of a matter to overtake the matter entirely. And the things that are sacrificed are the relationships we have with others, and with our God.

Consider your life. Perhaps you're so concerned about putting in the extra hours of work, that you've lost sight of who or what you're working for. Perhaps you're so concerned about getting through the week's to-do list, busying yourself with appointments and schedules, that you've lost sight of anyone or anything that those schedules were meant to serve in the first place. Perhaps you're so concerned about all the work you're putting into your house, that

you've lost sight of making it your home. Perhaps you're so concerned about being that perfect spouse, perfect parent, perfect grandparent, that you've lost sight of what it means to be a family.

And one of the most dangerous places this happens is at church. The place we spend so much time with all the spoken and unspoken regulations—we make sure the meetings take place, and the budget gets balanced, and the lawn is cut, and the Bible Study prepared, and the communion ware set up, and the bills are paid, and the kids get the right clothes on, and the service goes according to plan, and the sermon is just the right amount of time, and, most importantly, that things happen the way we've always done it...

Regulations are good for order and organization. But when any one of them become a law unto itself, or when we take pride in what we accomplish above and beyond what others do, or when we lose track of why we're doing all this in the first place, and may even begin to begrudge others we do because we're so busy with it all... then we're no better than the Pharisees.

We've lost any notion of our need for a God who makes Himself present for us in His Word and Sacrament, and gives us Sabbath rest on a day like today, so that we may delight in Him, and cherish the opportunity to hear His Word. And we have no ability to show concern for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. To show care for others when it requires us to step out our strict regulations, out of our comfort zone, out of self-centered concern for just a minute so that we could possibly serve another human being. Jesus' heart was grieved that day, and he became angry. And there may be days, especially days in church, when we've done no better because of our own hard hearts.

However, and this is only out his abundant grace, Jesus does not respond in kind. He shows us the better way. Jesus, the perfect fulfiller of all Law, the Lord of the Sabbath, and the Lord of all creation, chose to heal that man in the synagogue, and Jesus chooses to heal us, too. He heals us by his blood, which paid for all our sins. From the cross, he compassionately says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We are the unworthy recipients of the love and grace of God, who did not choose to hold *us* accountable to the Law. Not a man-made law, but the righteous Law of God that we have broken time and time again, and demands for our trespasses our eternal death. No, instead, God shows us that He has chosen His relationship with us over regulations. He sent His Son, Jesus, who denied himself in every way. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. It's why Jesus was willing even to die for us, so that we wouldn't be eternally severed from him, but instead restored to a new relationship in him.

You now have the joy to live in that loving, life-giving relationship with our God. And think about the implications that has. You don't live in your relationship with Him trying to figure out the "bare-minimum" that God wants from you. He wants you. All of you. Aside from any Law other than to love Him with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Bare-minimums are for those concerned with regulations, not for those concerned about a relationship.

And you also have the joy to live in loving, serving relationships with one another. Think about the implications. When someone needs you to care for them, serve them, honor them, you do it. Without thought to yourself. Without thought to the way you'd like things done. And if it causes you to deny yourself, to give up something that you thought was precious, to stretch your comfort zone, but you know it benefits your relationship with that person, then you do it. Because it's not about what you want. It's about what the other person needs. And the wonderful thing is that others will be thinking of you in the same way.

As the body of Christ, we have the joy of witnessing both these relationships working hand-in-hand: the relationship that Jesus has established in His grace and love for us, and the self-sacrificing relationships of love and concern that we are able to have for one another. May we at [Trinity/Mt. Hope] always be a church where we continually live in both, for the benefit of His people, and to the glory of our loving God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.