

Sermon: With an Outstretched Arm

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6**

The lectionary includes most of Psalm 139 as one possible reading for today, so we baked a little of it into the Call to Worship because it is such a great poem. The psalmist affirms the power and presence of God, and God's knowledge of us all; God knows us better than we know ourselves. The God of all creation has formed, known, and loved us all from the beginning. We can see God's work visible not just in our own selves but in one another as well. Close your eyes and think of the cutest newborn you've ever seen and there is the face of God.

With that in mind, consider the escalating conflict in our Gospel passage today, and not just the conflict between people, but also the apparent conflict between the Law and the needs of people, which is ironic, considering why we have the Law in the first place. Also consider that it is Jesus who does the escalating.

We are called to *observe* the sabbath day and keep it holy. That seems like a simple enough thing we can all do. The Pharisees thought so too. Their faith and lives centered around interpreting the Torah Law for everyone, though, as we saw last week, every now and then someone like Nicodemus will slip through and start asking questions. But, strictly speaking, the Pharisees saw to it that you toed the line and obeyed the Law. And that Law said that it was unlawful to do any work on the sabbath. An observant household would prepare their sabbath meals ahead of time without making any further effort on the day itself. All perfectly legal.

Then along came Jesus and his disciples. What they are doing is perfectly legal too, also according to Deuteronomy, chapter 23. Mark doesn't explicitly state that the disciples may have been hungry and gathering food for a meal; he just says they were walking through a field plucking grain by hand – there is no obvious motivation for this other than they were bored as they walked. But even so, they're not farmers doing work.

When the Pharisees challenge Jesus on this, he replies that what is good for people takes precedence over the Torah, which the Pharisees also believed, but this group – these particular Pharisees – seem to be rather inflexible on the point. It's almost as if Jesus and the Pharisees are baiting each other. Or maybe they're just testing him.

The conflict amplifies when Jesus enters the synagogue and sees a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to heal the man so that they could make their accusations, but when Jesus asked them if it was lawful to do good on the sabbath, they couldn't answer. This angered Jesus. In all the Gospels, this is the only time Jesus gets angry. So, he healed the man without even touching him. Does *that* qualify as work?

Why does Jesus goad the Pharisees with this healing? The man's problem is not life-threatening; it could wait until sundown. But Jesus provokes them on purpose.

The fact that the man had a withered hand might be a clue. The Gospel writers knew their Scripture, which at the time included the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Mark and Luke both include a story about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand. So, might a withered hand signify?

In Psalm 137, which was written by the rivers of Babylon during the Exile, well before Linda Ronstadt got ahold of it, the psalmist wrote, 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!' Jerusalem, of course, was the center of religious life and worship. But in exile, everything was different. There was no Temple in Babylon. People were afraid that they might lose contact with God, and the psalm is what came out, a lament that if that happened, well, we may as well be afflicted physically too.

Fast-forward to the first century. A man with a withered hand could not do work on any day, not just on the sabbath. If that was his only problem, then Jesus may very well have waited until sundown to heal him. But the man was also cut off from God. What Jesus did was an act of compassion, and it angered him that the Pharisees couldn't see that that was true the purpose of the Law, which is all about God's compassion and love for people.

Thus, Jesus of Nazareth became a threat to the Pharisees, who immediately went out to conspire against him, which, in itself, might not be allowed on the sabbath either. What was so dangerous about Jesus? All he did throughout his ministry, and especially here, was proclaim that God was not confined to our rules about God. All in chapter 2.

These days, it seems as if we have forgotten that we belong to God, not to our labor. More and more, we live in a secular world, connected only to ourselves. In a figurative sense, there are a lot of us out there with a withered hand. A world without God seems mighty bleak.

What I've just said is more or less true. We all experience this in different ways. My question is, why is it so? Are we threatened by Jesus? Has he recalibrated our vision of life in such a way that it disturbs our society? Are we afraid to be transformed by this kind of love? Do we prefer a distant God in heaven over an ever-present God who is active in our lives?

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book called *The Sabbath*, and in it, he wrote that 'Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.'¹ It is not an interlude, he said, but the climax of living.

In a lecture years later, he said that the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, had been translated into hundreds of languages, yet one word in the Hebrew could not be translated. No other language had an equivalent word for *shabbat*, so the various translators simply wrote the Hebrew word in their own alphabet; in English, it's Sabbath.

He also said that all the religions through the ages have their holy stuff: certain persons and places, holy books, holy articles of clothing and other relics, holy songs and liturgies, and so on. Only Judaism has a holy time, once a week, every week.

We have to look at the sabbath as both a command and a gift from God. It's not for nothing that God said, 'Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.' We are not to do what was done to the Hebrews. The sabbath is meant to give us 'regular release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind' us, writes Patrick Miller.² Even if that is not always possible for everyone, as a free people, we are called to remember.

Jesus reminds us that our lives come from God and are meant for God. Jesus' world view might upset our quiet lives behind the white picket fence, but we still want him around somewhere in the background, just in case. If we're not all in with God and religion, we at least like to hedge our bets.

The idea of the sabbath is to get us to dedicate some time for God, in worship, in study (including some Bible study), in prayer, and in service to others. Take a break.

Sleep in. Don't be late for church. Everybody gets a day off (but maybe not the whole day), and it doesn't have to be Sunday – Monday is my Sabbath.

God said, 'Observe the sabbath day and *keep it holy*.' While breaking bread with his disciples, Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' The Sabbath was made for people to be present to God. A meal hosted by Jesus is a meal in which Jesus is present to people. By observing the sabbath and participating in the Supper, we focus our attention on God, and rightly so. The sabbath was created for people, and it benefits all who observe it.

Just as God brought the Israelites out from Egypt 'with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,' so does our observance free us from the 'economic bondage of life,' as one scholar put it. On a regular basis, God commands us to stop what we're doing and reflect on our life with God.

Amen.

¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 13.

² Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 133.