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Mark 3:1-6, NRSVue.

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Withered hands, withered souls.

We are in the Gospel of Mark, the beginning of Chapter 3. Jesus has been on a tour of Galilee, preaching, performing healing miracles, and gathering the men who will be his Apostles. He is in a synagogue. Remember that there is one main Temple, the place where sacrifices are made, and a number of local synagogues. He is being watched carefully by the religious leaders of the day – who are already seeing him as a threat to their powerbase. They are looking for a reason to destroy his reputation, to silence him. Jesus comes across a man with a withered hand. This is known today as a condition that is sometimes caused by shrunken muscles and it could have been there since he was an infant. This is a far more debilitating problem than we might think: in this community virtually everyone but the rich few

have to earn a living with their hands. He has probably been reduced to the status of a beggar, unable to get work. As with the curing of the lepers, who were shunned and ostracized, and with other miracles Jesus performs, he is about to return this man to society, to respectability. Jesus is probably preaching when he sees the man. He calls for him to step forward. The original Greek makes it clear: he is telling this man to stand up in front of the entire gathered congregation. Remember that Pharisees are in charge of synagogues; Jesus asks them if it is lawful to do good or evil, to cure or to kill, on the Sabbath. They remain silent. Jesus becomes angry when they do not say that of course, it is a good thing to heal, to do good, on any day of the week. Jesus then cures the withered hand. Here is how it reads in Mark:

***3** Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.² They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward."⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent.⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

Notice the response of the Pharisees. They immediately plot against him, thinking that they now have conclusive evidence against him. We are not sure who the "Herodians" are, but we assume they are people loyal to the Herod family, who

have ruled locally in the name of Rome for quite some time, despite being Jews. When we read this as modern people, we tend to make a superficial comparison, as if Jesus had cured someone on Sunday. I can tell you with complete confidence that the hospital where I am a chaplain is open on Sunday. This is all normal to us.

But there is something deep here. Over the centuries, the Jews had collected vast numbers of laws that needed to be followed. Many of them are detailed in Leviticus, but there were other oral traditions that restricted the ability of people to do any sort of “work” on the Sabbath. Eventually, these oral traditions were compiled into two other holy books, the Mishna and the Talmud. By the time of Jesus, there were 39 categories of “work” that were prohibited on the Sabbath. These included anything to do with farming, making dyes, preparing skins, creating wool, anything involving construction, lighting fires or extinguishing fires, working with metals, writing anything, grinding wheat, tying or untying anything, measuring something to cut it, weaving, cooking, even carrying anything heavy. The Pharisees were extremely zealous Jews who believed that they could please God by meticulously following a long list of rules. They were largely responsible for the rules that had been put into place against virtually anything that could remotely be considered “work” on the Sabbath. That explains why it is such a big deal for Jesus to cure a withered hand on the Sabbath.

We must remember, as modern people, that these Jews were surrounded by pagans who hated them, that they had lived under the thumb of a long series of foreign powers, including the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and various Hellenistic powers. They drew their strength and their ability to survive under duress from knowing that they were the People of God. By following intricate laws, they differentiated themselves from their oppressors. These laws helped the Jews maintain their identity over millennia of oppression and slavery. But by the time of Jesus, this had all gone too far. The day of rest had turned into the day of stress, when the average person had to constantly make sure they weren't inadvertently doing something that would piss off the powerful Pharisees. Jesus was saying enough is enough – it's time to be rational. Jesus is saying that it's one thing to declare the Sabbath a day of rest where we focus on God, but it is another thing to turn the Sabbath into a day of following intricate laws. He considers the Pharisees to be hypocrites who are using their power to control peoples' lives, rather than to improve peoples' lives. The man whom Jesus cures has a withered hand, but the Pharisees have withered souls. It is a sin to thread a needle on the Sabbath, but it is okay to plot to murder someone.

Here is what Jesus is really doing. He is making a stand, demanding that we differentiate between religion and faith, between following rituals and following

the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This isn't the only time that Jesus gets into trouble for "working" on the Sabbath. Consider John 9:13-16:

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

Regular folks are beginning to realize that the Pharisees have lost track of God. They declare that by curing a blind man on the Sabbath, Jesus is breaking the law. But others say that it doesn't make sense that a man would be declared a sinner when he is clearly performing miracles. Obviously, God is enabling Jesus to do these things. The blind man himself declares Jesus a prophet. This is a great threat to the Pharisees – prophets were second only to God and were far above Pharisees.

It's important that we, as Christians, not fall into the trap of confusing religion with faith. We come here each Sunday to build our faith, to learn something about Scripture, to be present for each other, and to pray for each other and for the world. Here is something from Luke, Chapter 13, and I have edited it:

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he

laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Clearly, Jesus, by repeatedly challenging the Sabbath restrictions is trying to make an important point. He performs miracles largely to establish his authority as the King of a Heavenly Kingdom, as the Messiah, as the Son of God. But he also has compassion for people who are suffering. There is also something else: he is trying to move faith away from formalized ritualism and back to a simple, honest, clean relationship with God. It's clear in this miracle from Luke that he is winning the People of God over. They rejoice at the wonderful things he does, rather than condemning him for working on the Sabbath. Jesus fights the Pharisees over and over on this issue. He fights the Sadducees, the Chief Priests, the money changers, almost everyone who has found earthly power through their faith.

There is something else, though, in this miracle. Jesus says this: *"You hypocrites! Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"* To us, as modern people, it seems perhaps a little odd the way Jesus refers to a woman who

perhaps has what we call Kyphosis, which is an exaggerated curvature of the spine that is more often found in women. Arthritis and Osteoporosis can contribute to this condition. Jesus calls her a “daughter of Abraham”, meaning a Jew, to make it clear that this is a woman whom the Pharisees should be happy to see healed. But why would he say that she has been in bondage? The Greek word here is “*desmou*” and it means “bond”, and so indeed, Jesus is saying that this woman isn’t just sick, isn’t just disabled: she is being held in bondage by her disease. This is another example of Jesus making it clear that his job is to restore people, not just heal them. Jesus repeatedly lives out metaphors by performing acts that free people from being prisoners, preventing them from living full, joyous, social lives. What does this mean to us today? Jesus is here to heal us, to perform miracles on us, by freeing us from the bondage caused by a lack of faith. He repeatedly makes it clear, too, that faith is not to be confused with formal religion.

That’s what our faith should be to us, a vehicle for being set free, not for being tied down or restricted or held in bondage. Jesus didn’t believe in heavily organized religion. Jesus even goes so far as to somewhat dismiss the greatest rules of all, the Ten Commandments given to Moses on the mountain. He says that these ten are no longer relevant, that it all can be reduced to just two commandments. Jesus goes to the heart of legalistic faith when he says this in Matthew 22:

“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Most of you here can remember a man who belonged to this congregation for many years, and a while back moved away to be near his family. He came to church on Sunday wearing overalls. My heart was uplifted when I saw him walk in. My father wore a suit and tie to church every Sunday, his only suit and Sunday was the only time he ever wore it. He didn't even get that dressed up when Wendy and I were married. But John came into this sanctuary every Sunday in the clothes that he wore around his ranch. He wasn't here to please the Pharisees. He was here because of his faith. To me, he was precisely what Jesus wanted in a person of faith: a sincere belief in God and a desire be a member of a true faith community.

Here is one more instance of Jesus challenging the work rules of the Sabbath. It is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 5. Jesus has just cured a man who was badly disabled for 38 years and was desperately trying to get down into a healing pool:

Now that day was a Sabbath.¹⁰ So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.”¹¹ But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’ ”¹² They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk’?”¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared. “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.”¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.¹⁶ Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such

things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Jesus says that it's okay to work on the Sabbath because God the Father works on the Sabbath. This is true! God is working right now - on all of us. In church, we gather as a family to let God work, to let God heal us. We don't know in a literal sense what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. But it does mean that he uses the Sabbath to help us cleanse our souls, and to free us from whatever selfish, envious, hateful, angry feelings that we might be directing toward other people.

This is a church where God calls us to come and find him - not in a literal sense. God is everywhere. But by being in this place together once a week, we can help each other call on God to heal our withered souls. There are no rules here about what you wear. Afterwards, you can go home and work, if you want. God is fine with that. After all, God puts on his overalls - and God works on Sunday.

Please pray briefly with me. *God, put on your overalls. Heal us. Take our withered souls and make them pure. Never let us forget that faith is not rules. Faith is not religion. Faith is a deep belief in you and a determination to live like Jesus. Amen.*