

A Question Jesus Asks:

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If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?"

Luke 14:1-6

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The Sabbath was made for man not man made for the Sabbath.

Today's scripture is another of several incidents where Jesus turns the overzealous orthodox teachings of the Pharisees upside down. He developed a reputation for his willingness to challenge the restrictive religious practices as prescribed by the Pharisees.

As an example, consider the minutia that had crept into the practice of handwashing that was a daily practice in the synagogues and at home. In the Torah, the yadayim devoted seven chapters to the proper technique for washing of hands and the circumstances by which a person could become unclean. Having looked at these materials, I can tell you that each of us here today would be considered unclean by the standards outlined in this document. No 30 second rule in those days! Just a few points to show you how involved it had become. You would fill a special washing cup with enough water to wash both of your hands. You begin by cleaning your dominant hand first. You would pour the water twice over your dominant hand and then do the same thing for your non-dominant hand. You are to make sure that the water covers your whole hand, up to your wrist. With each pour of water you take care to separate your fingers so the water touches all part of your hands. Then you dry your hands and recite a blessing.

Now to turn to the scene in today's scripture. Jesus had been invited to the home of a Pharisee to share dinner. A man was there with dropsy. This is an older term for the edema in extremities usually caused by heart failure. In extreme cases it is painful and can cause shortness of breath. By means of testing the guests, Jesus asks, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? According to Sabbath rules healing is not allowed on the Sabbath. Healing is considered work and working is forbidden on the Sabbath. The guests do not respond to the question; instead they remain silent. Jesus heals the man and the man leaves shortly afterwards. Then Jesus follows with a second rhetorical question that is the subject of today's message. He asks, "which of you whose son or ox falls into a well will not

immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day? Open wells were common and accidents were frequent occurrences. Again the guests were silent. Having done some reading about Sabbath rules, it does not appear that it was against the Torah laws to save a person or animal from drowning if that accident occurred on the Sabbath.

William Barclay has a pertinent comment about the minutia embedded in the Pharisees and Scribes teachings. “the most amazing thing about the scribes and Pharisees is their staggering lack of a sense of proportion. They would go to endless trouble to formulate and to obey their petty rules and regulations; and yet they counted it a sin to ease a sufferer’s pain on the Sabbath day.”

Lest we excuse ourselves from taking a look at our own behaviors, might we need to reexamine our priorities and look at what disturbs our peace? Sometimes the things that disturb the peace in our congregations are often trifles. We develop habitual patterns of worship just as the Pharisees did. I turned a part of our cover page of the bulletin upside down just to illustrate the point. We hold on to traditional forms in our worship just as they did. Now thankfully, we do not go around calling things unclean or unacceptable to the degree we see in the Scripture lessons. But if we are honest, we have our own set of rules or standards that we cling to not just in worship but in the way we conduct church business. Taking a look at the Book of Order should convince us of that. I am not saying we should get rid of rules that help us make good decisions. However, we can also become slaves to minutia. Done well, decently and in order can be productive. Done with a slavish devotion to each little detail can derail the best of intentions and plans. Again a comment from William Barclay is pertinent here. “The things which divide men and women and which destroy friendships are often little things to which no sensible person, in their saner moments, would allow any importance. The little things can bulk so large that they can fill the whole horizon. Only if we put first things first will all things take their proper place—and love comes first”

How shall we take these lessons and apply them to situations that confront us as a church and as members of a wider community? Again, the rule of love one another is paramount. Just in that day, Jesus is asking us if we are willing to step out of our comfort zones to take action on pressing needs. Now I will step out of my comfort zone and speak up. Usually I take the position that the pulpit is not a

place for taking stances that have political or controversial overtones. Yet, with recent events in our country, there are obligations we have to take stands to improve the lives and safety of our fellow human beings. Jesus might well be asking us a tough question. What is of more importance? Maintaining partisan stances or compromising to accomplish important goals. In the case of prevention of violence, our answer is that we have an obligation to advocate for a reduction in all forms of violence, no matter what political party we support. It is time for sincere non-partisan discussions about how best to control the violence. I for one, would not have ever thought about sending kids to school with bullet proof backpacks or see armed guards in schools and churches. So my request to each of us is to contact our legislators and keep up the pressure until they take meaningful action on these issues. Washing our hands and waiting for answers is not going to make a difference. That is tantamount to letting the child or ox remain in the well and drown.

Lack of affordable housing is another issue that we will be tackling in the near future. Notice I say “will” not should. Tentative plans are being made to host a community wide forum designed to take a comprehensive look at what we as a community can do to help people find affordable housing.

Take these comments as constructive and done with a commitment to love. We follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Jesus made a commitment to stick up for people and he eventually gave up his life to honor that commitment. Now it is up to us to ask hard questions and expect cogent answers. .19Yes, it is time to turn things upside down.