

Sermon for Pentecost 2—Year B 2018
Stretch Out Your Hand and Your Heart

Earlier this week I finished re-reading James McBride’s book, *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother*. Many of you are reading it, too, since the readers group will be discussing it in two weeks.

If you haven’t or aren’t reading this book, I highly recommend it. This book offers a profound glimpse into the struggles of race and identity, struggles of gender and faith and poverty.

Without getting into too many details and having to issue too many spoiler alerts, this book is a memoir told in two voices—one is the voice of James McBride, the 8th child in a family of 12 biracial children.

The other is the voice of his mother, Ruth—a woman who was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in Poland who came to this country when she was a little girl. Her father was a learned but opportunistic itinerant Rabbi; her mother was a kind woman, paralyzed on her left side by Polio. Her family eventually landed in Virginia where they opened a small general store where Ruth’s father overcharged his customers—especially the poor black people in the community.

Eventually, Ruth left her family and came to New York where she married a black man in 1942.

Her husband—McBride’s father—was a preacher who as Ruth puts it—introduced her to Jesus, the God of love.

Ruth converts to Christianity, leaving her Jewish traditions behind her completely—and, as you might guess, her family disowns her—in fact, they literally declare her “dead” to them and sit *shiva* for her.

Both Ruth and her son James describe terrible racist abuse
but also wonderful acts of love and welcome—
especially from Ruth’s husband’s family
and the black Christian community of the church they founded.
I’ve been thinking about these accounts
of the way they were treated—both good and bad—
and today’s gospel which raises some questions for me—
What makes compassion possible?
What makes it impossible?
What truly counts as sacred,
and how do we honor the sacred
in the midst of desecration?
When callousness, apathy, and fear threaten our hearts,
how do we return to love?

In today’s gospel, the evangelist Mark
places two conflicts over the Sabbath side by side.
In part one, Jesus and his disciples
are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath.
When they get hungry,
the disciples pluck a few heads of grain to munch on,
Jesus doesn’t stop them,
and the Pharisees pounce, asking Jesus
why he’s allowing his followers to break the Sabbath.
Jesus answers,
“The sabbath was made for humankind,
and not humankind for the sabbath;
so the son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath.”

In part two, Jesus enters the synagogue,
and meets a man with a withered hand.
Knowing that he’s being watched,
Jesus asks the Pharisees
whether it’s lawful to “do good or to do harm on the Sabbath,
to save life or to kill.”

But the Pharisees refuse to answer.
Angered and grieved by their hardness of heart,
Jesus heals the man with the withered hand.
The story ends, predictably,
with the Pharisees leaving the synagogue
to plot against Jesus's life.

Now its really important that we don't fall into the trap of
interpreting this story as being about
a legalistic Judaism against Jesus.

That interpretation is not only anti-Semitic,
it also let's us off the hook too easily.

The Pharisees in this story are not a stand-in for Judaism.
They are a stand-in for all convictions, values,
traditions, commitments, doctrines, absolutes, preferences,
and essentialisms—

no matter how cherished, noble, or well-intentioned —
that stand between us and compassion.

In other words, the question this story asks is not,
“What was wrong with 1st century Judaism?”

but rather,

“What have we — here and now — codified at our peril?

What mortal, broken thing have we deified instead of love?

Who or what have we stopped seeing

because our eyes have been blinded by our own best intentions?

What are we clinging to that is not God?

We do an injustice to the Pharisees
if we write them off as bad people.

They were *good* people —

good people trying to preserve and protect those things —

laws, rituals, traditions, habits —

that mediated faith for them.

Now, stop and think for a moment:
Don't we do exactly the same thing
when we hold fast to our favorite worship practices,
our cherished spiritual disciplines,
and our beloved daily rituals?
Don't we just as readily decide what is sacred in our own lives,
and then refuse to budge even when those things
become obsolete and lifeless?
The Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath.
They were absolutely right.
But rightness is not love.
Rightness is not compassion.
Rightness will never get us to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.
Only compassion will do that.

This is just as true of those things we hold "sacred" outside of
church and worship and the Sabbath.
You could say that any time we have a decision
that involves "the law" we should think of Jesus' question
in the synagogue: *Is it lawful to do good or to do harm . . .
to save life or kill?*

This is an unnerving story.
It's a story about Jesus walking
through the sacred fields in our lives,
and plucking away what we hold dear.
It's a story about Jesus seeing people we're too biased to notice,
and healing people we'd just as well leave sick.
It's a story about a category-busting God
who will not allow us to cling to anything
less bold, less daring, less scary,
less exhilarating, or world-altering than love.

Why would anyone bring the business of a synagogue
to a grinding halt on a Sabbath morning?
Why would a man risk his own life
to heal a stranger's withered hand?

Apparently, nothing is more sacred than compassion.
The true spirit of the Sabbath — the spirit of God — is love.
Love that feeds the hungry.
Love that heals the sick.
Love that sees and attends to the invisible.
Love that does good and not harm.
Love that gives life not death.

The biblical witness is clear:
God gives us the law to help us get the most out of life
and, in particular,
to help us get more out of life by helping others,
by looking out for them,
by taking care of them and, by extension, each other.
In this way, the law creates a level of order
that makes human flourishing more likely.
Law offers a measure of protection,
particularly important to those who are most vulnerable.
Law establishes a modicum of stability
that makes it easier for us to prosper.
All of these things the law does.
Which is why God's law is holy
and we are taught to know, revere, and follow the law.

But as important as the law is,
it is – and shall always be – a *means* to an end,
a tool, a mechanism in service to a greater purpose.
It is *not an end in itself*.

Following the law is not itself the purpose of the law,
and the law is not capable of granting us identity.
It only helps us live into the identity of beloved children of God.
It only guides us in knowing the dimensions of what Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr. called the “beloved community.”
Because as Paul put it . . .
Love is the fulfillment of the law.

God created us to love and support each other.
God gave us the law to help us to do that.
Out of our insecurity, we think if we hold the law close,
even to the point of ignoring or abandoning
the need of our neighbor, we’ll be okay,
or even demonstrate our fidelity.
But in fact, it’s only when we abandon our own claims
to righteousness and are willing to put our neighbors need above
our own that we live into the God’s dream and desire
that *all* God’s children flourish.

But not only does Jesus talk about this truth
or even enact God’s love of neighbor,
he also takes on the scorn and resentment
of insecure and established religious people—then and now—
and overcomes it in love.

The opposition Jesus faces in these stories
is the opposition he always faces:
the contempt and fear of those who realize
Jesus is calling them out,
calling them away from the safety of justifying themselves
and into the vulnerable, risky world of just loving each other.

Understandably, perhaps, we prefer safety.
Yet Jesus calls us to vulnerability, to compassion.
But he doesn't just call,
he goes to the most vulnerable of places,
continuing to love, embrace, and help
all those he encounters
even when it leads to his capture and crucifixion.
Jesus goes to the cross
because he will not deviate from his commitment
to love everyone, even those who accuse him falsely.

But that is not the end of the story.
Through the resurrection,
God promises that those who love will triumph.
In the end, love is stronger than fear, hate, and death.
Love is stronger even than our penchant
to do anything for the illusion of safety that law and order offers.
We are called to seek to love,
to put the law to use for our neighbor, for the common good.
We will try and sometimes succeed,
but we also know we will often falter and fail.
Yet the crucified and risen Christ is still there, forgiving,
beckoning us forward, and loving us, even when we fall short.
At the heart of the law, it turns out, is love,
and that love, in time, redeems all, heals all, gives life to all.

And so, Jesus asks us today—
*Is it lawful to do good or to do harm . . .
to save life or to kill?*

Let us stretch out our hardened and withered hearts and be healed.