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The Second Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 4  
Year B

Track 1  
1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)  
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Mark 2:23-3:6

## SERMON

Will you turn with me to the gospel of Mark chapter 2?

What we just heard read as our gospel lesson for today is the end of a series of controversies that Jesus was engaged in and it will be good for us to briefly look at what those controversies were and how they shape a better understanding of faith and what it means to follow Jesus.

So let's look at chapter 2 beginning at verse 13. [read vs. 13 - 17]

Essentially, this first controversy is expressed in the Pharisees' question in verse 16, "Why does [Jesus] eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answers with this truism, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." In other words, "Healthy people don't need a doctor ~ sick people do." Jesus came "to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." (NLT)

Why would Jesus bother coming to earth as a human and dying a human death if all he was to do was hang out with people who already 'got it'? He didn't come just to hang out with the likeminded, the elite, or even simply the socially acceptable. No, he came for the ones, who, by everyone's estimation, didn't make the cut - or to use Jesus' words - he came for the ones who know they are sick and who know they need healing.

And that is the amazing misunderstanding of holiness and purity. The Pharisees took holiness and purity *extremely* seriously - which, of course, God does too - but what the Pharisees repeatedly failed at was their refusal to see that in God's hospital of forgiveness the spiritual sickness of others does not infect those who find their health and strength in the Lord. No, in fact, those who are true vessels of the healing balm of the Holy Spirit - those who are called Christians or believers - they don't become infected by the sinful sickness of the broken, but instead they become God's surgical instruments of repair and spiritual salve to the lost.

I don't mean this to say that the faithful shouldn't flee from temptation, but instead I am suggesting that God's holiness lived within us is stronger than any sinful sickness of this world. This fact is established on *God's* strength and not our own.

So, the takeaways for us are that sinners do not need to shape up and get their act together in order to be worthy of God's love and mercy. Transformation in our lives can and should happen when we place our faith in Jesus, but it is not a prerequisite for God's invitation to join his family. This does not suggest that we, or Jesus, condone sinful lifestyles, but instead it places the emphasis and attention on the preemptive transformative power of God at work in a broken and sinful world.

Another takeaway is the clear demonstration from Jesus that he makes no distinction between persons, and repeatedly refuses to classify humanity into dehumanizing sub-groups. Jesus repeatedly engages with both men and women, Jew and Gentile, the ritually clean and the ritually impure, those who bear the mark of the Holy Spirit and those who are controlled by demons, those

who are in positions of power and those who fall through the cracks in society, those who are allowed in the 'clubhouse' and those who aren't allowed in the 'clubhouse', those who live here and those who aren't from around here. Jesus is fearless in his engagement with this world because he knows that he - and his followers - are not of this world and the powers of this world have no hold on them. Therefore, he didn't need to be afraid of being contaminated by lepers or sinners. Instead of being contaminated he reversed the flow of contamination (meaning it didn't contaminate him) and instead he purified them with God's grace and his power.

Let's look now at the second confrontation and controversy that Jesus was caught up in in this section of Mark. Picking up at verse 18. [read vs. 18-22]

Once again, we have a question that gives definition to the controversy, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" To put it simply: fasting = good and holy, not fasting = bad and unholy. "So, how can your disciples, Jesus, be considered good and holy if they don't fast?"

We hear in Jesus' answer an unspoken understanding of fasting, at least in the manner in which the Pharisees were speaking. Clearly, from Jesus' answer fasting was a way to self-mortify, or denying the desires of the flesh in the hope of purifying one's faith. So, once again, if you want to be 'in' the group, then you must do the things that prove you are worthy of being *in* the group. In the Pharisees eyes fasting demonstrated a worthiness to be in the group.

And Jesus changes the conversation from being one of classifying someone as being 'in' or 'out' with regard to fasting and instead makes it a conversation about what truly characterizes a new version of being 'in'. Let me explain.

Jesus was turning the conventional Jewish understanding of faith on its head. He was doing and saying things that continually baffled the religious leaders and ultimately those things also led to his being killed on a cross. He was like a new patch on a piece of old clothing or on an already broken in leather wine pouch. Jesus wasn't simply repairing a broken religious system. He was ushering in a new mindset, a new way of living, a new covenant with the same God of the old covenant - the God who created all things and all people.

Jesus doesn't abolish the old, but instead transforms it - fulfills it - in such a way that it ushers in what Saint Paul calls "new creation." (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15) Or Jesus used the phrase, being "born again." (John 3) Jesus is in the business of "making all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

Therefore, in celebration of the new - in the holy logic of Jesus - it doesn't make any sense to go without and fast, but rather, making things new is a cause for celebration and joy! Jesus brings the party with him! It's the block party of restoration of relationships. It's the banquet of being wiped clean from all the sin that have stained our lives. It's a feast of being made whole and complete in ways we had lost all hope of ever being whole again. It's the surprise party of being counted as a son or daughter of God himself.

Jesus brings the new wine - healing and forgiveness - so it's time for the celebration and joy of being new wineskins - new vessels in Christ!

And that brings us to what he heard read today. Let's look again at verse 23 and following. [read vs. 23 - 3:6]

Here we have two controversies surrounding the Jewish observance of the Sabbath. Once again, Jesus is challenging the conventional Jewish understanding of faithfulness at that time.

The question in verse 24, as in the last two instances, presents the controversy. “Why are [Jesus and his disciples] doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” - picking handfuls of grain in the fields and performing a miraculous healing.

At the time, Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament command to keep the Sabbath day holy (Exodus 20:8) had expanded into over a thousand petty regulations roughly divided into 39 categories, and Jesus’ disciples had broken four of those 39 categories of rules by harvesting, threshing, and winnowing the grain, and also preparing a meal. It was a clear violation of their laws!

Jesus’ healing of the man’s hand was also a clear Sabbath violation since ‘elective surgery’ or non-life-threatening procedures were to be performed the day after the Sabbath.

Could Jesus’ disciples have procured a meal in an acceptable way and avoided the conflict? Could Jesus have waited to heal the man’s hand until the next day instead of provoking this encounter? It would seem the answer to both of these is ‘yes’.

So what’s Jesus doing then?

It seems clear that the regulations surrounding the observance of the Sabbath had become an idol to the Jews. The Sabbath rituals had become an insatiable god (small ‘g’) to serve and appease. The more you tried, the more you failed. It’s as foolish as carving a god out of wood or stone, putting it on your mantle in your living room, and then placing your life into submission to the very thing that *you* created! That doesn’t make any sense! The one who creates is the one who should be submitted to, not the other way around!

And who created the Sabbath? God.

And when did he create it? At the completion of creation in Genesis.

And for what purpose did he create it? To bless us with rest and not to burden.

Jesus says that God’s Sabbath is meant to bless and to lead to life, but instead it was burdensome and leading to death. A true Sabbath from God is a metaphor and symbol for the same new creation, the same new life, the same restoration, that is inaugurated into this world through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

For the resurrection of Jesus happened on the first day of the week, do you remember, because Jesus died and was buried on a Friday and he rose on a Sunday - which means that the day that was between his death and resurrection was ... Saturday, the Sabbath. Holy rest. Rejuvenating rest. Restoring rest. Powerful rest. Because what is produced from that day of rest between Jesus’ death and resurrection is nothing short of a brand new creation, a brand new way of living, a cleansing that reaches to the depths the creation of all things in the heavens and on this earth.

So this day, when we hear of the Sabbath; this day, when we hear of fasting; this day, when we hear of eating with tax collectors and sinners let us not hear the words and understanding of this world, but instead let us hear the understanding of Jesus. Jesus doesn’t join us because we are good enough, but instead he joins us because we need him. And when we accept him as Lord of our lives it is a reason for joy and celebration. Because Jesus is doing something so new and so transformative that you can’t just put it as a veneer over the old - you can’t just put on another patch. Because through the work of Jesus on the cross and the power of his resurrection we get to enjoy a perpetual and eternal Sabbath of freedom and rest from sin, ... and that is good news! Amen!