

## Heart Problems

Mark 2:23-3:6

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Please pray with me:

*Holy God –*

*May your living word be spoken.*

*May our waiting hearts receive.*

*And may it make a difference –*

*for our lives and for the world.*

*Through Christ, our Lord, amen.*

I don't think everyone here is old enough to know about *Blue Laws*.

*Blue Laws* are regulations stating what has to be shut down on Sunday. The best known is the shutting down of alcohol sales on Sundays – still in place in many states. But there used to be others: businesses having to be closed, certain entertainments that were forbidden on Sundays.

The group that's probably most well-known for their clamping down on things on Sundays were the 17th century Puritans in colonial New England. Everybody was required to attend church, not once, but twice every Sunday. If you didn't go, you were fined; and if you didn't go *a lot*, you were put in jail.

But some of what was forbidden was just odd. For example: a maidservant in Boston was put in the stocks for smiling on Sunday. *How dare she?*

And in 1656, a ship sailed into Boston Harbor on a Sunday, and a sailor – home, at last, after a three year voyage – was put into the stocks for kissing his wife. *Hope it was worth it.*

You recall the stocks: a framework of boards for locking up the hands, the feet, sometimes the neck. It was designed to shame someone in public – and, in these cases, all for a kiss or a smile on the Lord's day (Paul Simpson Duke, "What the Day Is For," *First Baptist of Ann Arbor*, June 3, 2018).

The Presbyterian preacher, Tom Long, tells this story: "My forebears were Scots Presbyterians and fierce sabbath rule keepers. My grandmother cooked her lavish sabbath feasts on Saturdays, so the stove would not be lit and no work done on the holy day. No sports, no games, no frivolities were allowed on Sunday – only worship, rest, and Bible study. (Although there is a family story of a strictly observant relative who would spend his sabbath resting in his backyard, where he could overhear the radio

broadcast of the Cubs baseball game coming through the window of a neighbor)" ("A sabbath way of life," *The Christian Century*, May 31, 2018).

We Christians have often had a difficult time trying to figure out how to observe the sabbath, haven't we?

And the craziest part is, the Puritans and those Scots Presbyterians behaved this way — enforced these laws and these rules — out of a desire *to please God*. Their intent was not to make life miserable, but to make God happy.

Only they had forgotten — or just never really understood — that God had given us the sabbath to make *us* happy.

Once on a sabbath day, Jesus and his disciples were walking through field of grain and, being hungry, they plucked some heads of grain and ate them. *That* was permitted.

Believe it or not, the book of Deuteronomy actually says that you can go through a grain field and pluck some grain for yourself, so long as you just use your hands and not a sickle, so that you don't take too much. That's a law of provision for the poor and the sojourner or the traveler in the land.

The problem was *this* happened on the sabbath, and someone had decided that plucking grain — even with the hand — was an act of harvest, and harvest was illegal.

So the "purity police" say to Jesus, "Why do your people break God's law?"

Jesus says, "*Really?* How petty can you be? Do you remember King David? He didn't keep the rules. When Abiathar was high priest, David got hungry and ate bread right off the communion table. Why don't you lighten up?"

Now the Pharisees could have replied: "First of all, if you'll read the scriptures more carefully, *Jesus*, you'll find there was no high priest in David's time. The office of high priest came much later. Secondly, *Jesus*, First Samuel gives the name of the priest (*who was not the high priest, since there wasn't one*) as Ahimelech — not Abiathar. This is *just* the kind of lax approach to scripture that we're worried about."

But Jesus' sermon isn't about the details of a story from First Samuel. It's about point and purpose of the sabbath: "The sabbath was made *for people*, and not the other way around."

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying that they had made the of the sabbath gift into a burden.

Some version of such Puritan behavior will always be with us. The condescending judgement looking down its nose, making up more rules than are needed out of a need

to control, to accuse, to impose little nit-picking purity tests. Politically, socially, religiously — this can be practiced on the right or on the left.

And when we practice our sabbath-keeping that way, we turn something that was intended to be a beautiful gift into a burden. We twist a freedom into a tyranny.

But Jesus isn't done offending the "purity police" yet.

Immediately Mark leads us into another Jesus story about the sabbath. This time, the hour of worship has come. Everyone was gathered in the synagogue — but so that we can hear this story as scripture intends, let's say that they were in *church*.

In the congregation is a man with a withered hand. His hand is somehow paralyzed. Maybe he's had a stroke. Or maybe an accident had happened. Or maybe it was a defect from birth. Whatever the case, the hand is unusable, and the man is probably a peasant who must work for his living, but now he cannot.

Now, as everybody knows, Jesus is a healer. And *here* is someone who needs a working hand, so that he can make a living. And the good news is the law said that healing on the sabbath was just fine. The bad news is healing is fine *only* if it is a life or death case. If not, put it off until tomorrow.

So the "purity police" in the room are keeping watch, hoping that Jesus would heal the man, *so that they could accuse him*. Surely, some disciple of his is thinking, "C'mon, Jesus, please — spare us some conflict, just once. Make an appointment and heal him tomorrow."

Not him. He says to the man, "Step forward, please, so everyone can see you." And he asks all of those watching him, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath? To save life or to kill?"

Now why does Jesus include the part he asks, "Is it lawful to do harm? Lawful to kill?" Nobody was asking or wondering about that.

In our culture almost all of the rules are prohibitions. The only thing necessary to be considered good is to do nothing. At most schools, the only requirement for an "A" in citizenship is staying out of trouble.

But with these questions, Jesus says that sometimes doing nothing is not good enough; sometimes doing nothing is tantamount to doing harm.

When Jesus asked those good and decent church folk this question, they had nothing to say. They just keep watching, waiting for what he will do. And it made him *angry*.

The text says that when those people were silent on the subject of making people whole on the sabbath day, Jesus swept his eyes across the room with anger. And also that he

grieved at *how hard their hearts had become*; how obstinate and closed-minded, elevating rules over compassion, and it breaks his heart.

He looks, now, at the man with a different kind of light in his eyes, and he says, "Stretch out your hand." And he does... and there it was: his freedom, his life, his wholeness *restored* to him.

Jesus wasn't trying to annihilate the sabbath. He was trying to *restore* it to its true purpose.

Tom Long says it like this, "Jesus and the Pharisees probably do not disagree about the protocols of the sabbath. The Pharisees know full well that saving life and doing good are lawful on the sabbath. It's just that Jesus' opponents aren't in worship that day to fulfill God's will. They are there to gather evidence and, as is so often the case, one gets from worship what one seeks" ("In the lectionary: Ordinary 9b," *The Christian Century*, May 9, 2018).

They didn't come to worship looking for God, so they didn't get God. They came looking for a reason to be upset with Jesus, and guess what they left with.

So, what are we here looking for?

Too often, I think, we come to church looking for church to reenforce what we already believe. Keep us comfortable. Don't upset the applecart. But we never really grow when we're comfortable, do we?

Peter Marty tells this story: "[It's spring again.] Birds are coming at our house from all directions these days. Last week, a loud thud against our east-facing picture window signaled to me a bird crisis. I went outside to investigate, and there on the patio lay a house finch on its back, feet straight the sky.

He wasn't wearing a helmet, so I assumed the bloodied look of his feathers was from the high-speed collision. But the red hue of those head and breast feathers was just his God-given beauty. His breast rose rhythmically, suggesting to me a heartbeat was still in play. That stopped after 10 minutes, so I fetched a shovel and dug a grave... This finch had been drawn to the reflection of the trees, shrubs, and sky he saw in my window on a sunny day, and he flew straight into what he perceived to be an inviting extension of his habitat.

On the west-facing living room window of our house, a male robin pecks persistently on the glass multiple times a day. What he sees is his own reflection, mistaking that image for a menacing rival trying to usurp his territory... This robin doesn't see an inviting reflection in the glass; he sees a threat to be attacked" ("Reflecting on our reflection," *The Christian Century*, May 2024).

All too often, when what we want from church is for it to reflect back to us what we already believe, we end up attacking anything and anyone who we suspect will upset our religious applecart. But, like those birds, the one we are actually hurting is ourselves.

Jesus called it “a hard heart” – a heart that’s too set in its ways to be changed or to be moldable or transformable. How can a hard heart possibly grow? It can’t. Harry Fosdick compared it to a “river dammed by its own ice.” It’s become its own undoing.

The central question of these two stories isn’t about the sabbath so much as they are about how our understandings and expectations of our faith either *open* our hearts or *harden* them. The shriveled hand of the man is a symbol of the shriveled hearts of all those who think the purpose of faith is to keep others in-line.

God’s interest isn’t in hardening hearts. God’s interest is in *opening* hearts – opening them to something new, something restorative, something whole. And God consistently chooses to do it in the most unexpected of ways.

Sister Maria Hobday tells of growing up poor during the 1930’s. They weren’t penniless, but they lived on the edge of insecurity.

One Saturday evening she was working on her homework in the living room. Her brothers were outside and her parents were in the kitchen discussing their financial situation. It was quiet, and Maria found herself following the conversation. Her mother and father were talking about what had to be paid that week. There was little money – only a few dollars. As she listened, she became more and more anxious, realizing there wasn’t enough to go around. The bills weren’t going to get paid.

Suddenly, the conversation stopped and her mother came into the room where Maria was studying. She put some money, a couple of dollar bills and handful of change, on the desk. “Go find your brothers,” she said. “Run to the store before it closes. Use this money to buy strawberry ice cream.”

Maria was shocked. She objected, “We have to use this to pay the bills. We can’t spend this on ice cream. I’m going to ask Daddy.”

She told her father what her mother had asked her to do. Her dad looked at her for a moment, then laughed, “Your mother is right. When we get this worked about a few dollars, we are better off having nothing at all. We should celebrate instead. Do as your mother said.”

So she collected her brothers and went to the store. In those days you could get a lot of ice cream for a few dollars. They came home with arms full of packages. Their mother had set the table, made fresh coffee, and had invited the neighbors, and they had one *great* party.

And Sister Maria Hobday says she has remembered that evening many times of the course of her life and ministry. She says that spending that little of money in that way become for her the symbol of the gospel that calls us to the unexpected.

What if the purity police had joined the party instead?

What if they'd actually seen the reflection of their own heart in that man's hand? Could Jesus restored their hearts, too?

I believe the answer is "yes," but they didn't go to worship that day looking to be restored. As it stands they got from worship exactly what they were looking for.

So what are you looking for on this sabbath day?

Be careful how you answer that question. The state of your heart may just depend on it.

Amen.