

To Save Life

Mark 2:23-3:6

June 3, 2018

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

Jesus was a bit angry...something we do not see too often in the Gospels.

The issue was the Sabbath. Well, this was the issue for the Pharisees and some of Jesus' other detractors. It was not an issue for Jesus.

You know in all my years of preaching and teaching, I have been pretty tough on the Pharisees and the Scribes and the teachers of the law and all those other religious leaders. Not that they didn't deserve some of it. I mean, their actions obviously contributed to that sham of a trial that led to the death of Jesus. They were so very narrow-minded.

But then I got to thinking and reflecting. And none of this is meant to excuse them, but in their hearts and minds they were just trying to serve God as best they could...as best they knew how. Isn't this true of each one of us? Consider their situation at the time of Jesus. Israel was under the control of Rome. The people were paying taxes to Rome, and all that. Folks were torn. How did their allegiance to the emperor conflict with their allegiance to God? Stuff like that...stuff followers of Jesus deal with today. We follow Jesus. We obey Jesus. And we do so while living in this world with all its rules and regulations...this world which also governs our behavior. What does all that mean? What if the two come into conflict? Know what I am saying here...or trying to say? I will obey God over any human authority.

That was what the Pharisees and all the other teachers and religious leaders preached and taught. While living under the earthly, political rule of Rome, they still had to obey God above all.

So they taught the law of God...taught it rigorously. Obedience to God above all. Obey. Obey. Obey.

What happened, then, was they began to see God only as this stern taskmaster who would punish even the smallest violation of the law...and they failed to see God as the loving Father who would forgive even the most egregious violation of the law. They saw God only as judge, and they failed to see God as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. They heard God say, "I am the Lord your God who led you out of bondage, therefore you will have no other gods...you will obey no one but me...or else." They were not hearing God say, "As a loving father, I led you by the hand. I led you with cords of compassion."

If only they could have known God as a loving Father. This is what I think we see at work in our text for today.

The Pharisees picked at Jesus' disciples because they were harvesting on the Sabbath. They were just picking some heads of grain. Jesus reminded them of an incident from the life of David...their most revered king. You can read about this in the twenty-first chapter of First Samuel. David and his companions once entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread. This was a reference to the twelve loaves of bread that were arranged in two rows on the table in the Holy Place. Each Sabbath, the loaves were replaced with fresh loaves. The old ones were then eaten by the priests...only the priests. Well David waltzed right in, big as you please, and started eating that bread. He gave some to those who were with him. This was a clear violation of the law. Why did David do that? He did it because he and his companions were hungry. He wasn't attempting to desecrate anything. They were just hungry. Jesus seemed to be okay with that.

Then we get this second incident. Jesus went into the meeting place. It appears it was a Sabbath. There was a man with a bad hand. There were people there just looking for a reason to get on Jesus' case. Would he do something illegal on the Sabbath? Jesus asked a question. He wanted to know what really was the lawful thing to do on the Sabbath. Good or bad...to save life or to take life. When he received no answer, he was bothered a bit. The Pharisees responded by hatching a plot to kill Jesus.

So what is our takeaway from this?

Well...first, I want to point out that Jesus did not come to do away with the law. In the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel we read that Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." Jesus observed the law and all the feasts and celebrations and stuff. So there is that.

But, second, Jesus also taught that the law is so much bigger than our narrow applications of the letter of the law. For example, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment."

And then there was that expert in the law—an expert in the law—who asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest one in the law. Jesus said the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all we have. Then Jesus added a second. In fact, Jesus said the second is like the first—not second to the first, but like it—we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Later, Jesus would say we are to love as he loves. Jesus said all the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments to love. Loving God...loving one another...that's the deal.

What Jesus shows us in this text is God is not a stern taskmaster. God is our loving Father.

Jesus shows us in this text that it truly is all about grace. What Jesus shows us in this text is how to live the law. And we live the law by loving. When we love God and when we love our neighbor, we are—in fact—obeying the law...all the law...even if that means doing an act of kindness on the Sabbath. That is the lawful thing to do.

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.