

The Second Sunday after Pentecost Mark 2:26-3:6

The service of worship had begun, the first hymn sung, along with an opening prayer well spoken, when they saw this older woman hobble down the center aisle. All eyes in the congregation were fixed upon her. There was a collective gasp in the little church as they watched this person who looked strange to us in her dilapidated clothing, stooped, having difficulty as she came forward.

There was a corporate sigh of relief when she plopped down in the second pew from the front, left side. Everyone turned their eyes away from this distraction and tried to refocus on our worship. They weren't a stuffy congregation, but they were dignified and rather formal in worship and were quite unaccustomed to such intrusions.

Well, just before the scripture for that morning's sermon was read, they were all jolted by a cry from the front of the church. It was the intruder, speaking up and speaking out, disrupting the service by shouting loud enough for everyone to hear, "Help me! I don't know where to turn. Even my son has cut himself off from me! Even my son. I just don't know where to turn."

The pastor, always a proper, dignified, respectable person stood their horrified, mouth open. Just stood there. And they, the congregation, did as well. They were literally stupefied.

What were they to do? Who would take charge and get the service back on track? What could they do to recover the proper dignity and solemnity of worship?

In this woman's outburst in our Sunday service, our church was being put to a test.

Now, let's join Jesus at church. Jesus goes into a synagogue, something like our church, on the Sabbath, sort of like our Sunday, and a man with a withered hand asks to be healed. Jesus tells him to stretch out his hand and, wonder of wonders, the man is instantly, miraculously healed.

In response, the Pharisees and Herodians, that is, the religious professionals, the theologically trained officials, that is, the people whom I most resemble standing up here behind the pulpit, see nothing to celebrate this wonder of healing. Rather they step back, criticize, point their judgmental fingers, invoke the sanctity of the Sabbath, and are outraged that Jesus appears to be taking divine prerogative. Only God can heal. Only God can fundamentally alter this man's situation. How dare Jesus do so on the Sabbath?

The Pharisees and Herodians are like invitees to a party who, rather than come join the party, criticize the music that's being played by the band, and the food being served. A wondrous miracle has just occurred and they are upset that Jesus has not respected the rules when healing the man.

I wonder if this is a story about Jesus's sadness when they, followers of Jesus, reduce our practice of the faith to a matter of propriety, personal behavior, rules and regulations. Is Jesus aggrieved that we make God into some distant, uncaring, inactive, mostly absent impersonal force?

"I've given them the Ten Commandments. They've got the rules. Let's see if they can chin up to that bar."

Or was Jesus sad and angry that God's people had become confused about their true identity and purpose?

These critics of Jesus dog his every step. They criticize his teaching, the way his disciples pluck grain from the fields on the Sabbath, and now even criticize him for doing good work on the Sabbath when he ought to know—as a faithful student of the Torah—that it's not right to work on the Sabbath.

And yet, when faced with the criticism of his detractors who say, "He's not obeying scripture! He's not following the rules!" Jesus is sad and angry. It's enough to make one ask, "What is the point and purpose of the church if they do not follow the laws of scripture?"

As important as the law is, it is—and shall always be—a means to an end, a tool, a mechanism to service with a greater purpose. It is an end in itself; following the law is not the purpose of the law and the law not capable of granting us identity but only helps us live into the identity of beloved child given us by God. And that's where good religious folks get confused. We mistake the law for its end. We think following the law is the point and we forget the law was established to help others. We establish our identity based on our ability to obey the law – or at least to obey it better than whatever comparison group we devise – rather than using the law to help those we would compare ourselves against. God created us to love and support each other. God gave us the law to help us 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 neighbour, we'll be okay. However, it's only when we abandon our own claims to righteousness and are willing to put our neighbours' needs above our own that we live into God's dream and desire that all God's children flourish.

Jesus talks about this truth and enacts God's love of neighbour. He takes on the resentment of insecure and established religious folk – then and now – and overcomes it in love. The opposition Jesus faces in these scenes 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 into the vulnerable and even risking the world of just loving each other. We perhaps prefer safety. Jesus calls us to vulnerability. 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.

Through the resurrection, God promises that those who love will triumph. That in the end, love is stronger than fear, hate and death. We are called to go and share and to put the law to use for our neighbour, and we know they will try, sometimes succeed, but often falter and fail.

Today Jesus offers a corrective to those most religious then or now that we should not achieve our religiosity at our neighbours' expense but rather because he demonstrates how powerfully attached to the notions of law and order at any expense. And yet the crucified and risen Christ is still there, forgiving, beconing 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.

The rest of the story: When that woman came into the church and stood up and interrupted the order of worship, they knew enough to know that the church was being put to a kind of test. I'm pleased to say that they responded fairly well. A woman nearby, one of the oldest members of the congregation, immediately stood up, moved toward her, embraced her saying, "You poor thing. You're not alone. God has sent us to be with you. I'm speaking for everybody here in this church. We'll be with you and help you get through this."

The woman in need stayed with them, joined the congregation a few weeks later, and blessed many by her presence and her witness.

Surely that day, Jesus smiled and rejoiced that here was a congregation and some Christians who at least on that Sunday, got the point. Amen.