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Mark 2:23-3:6

WHAT'S THE POINT?

It is not often that we are given a glimpse into the heart and mind of Jesus. Usually the gospel writers simply tell us what Jesus did or what he said. But today the gospel writer of Mark tells us what Jesus *felt*. And we are given a picture of a most upset Jesus. We are told by Mark that Jesus was both angry and grieved.

What has Jesus so upset are the attitudes he has witnessed among the Pharisees regarding the observance of the Sabbath. Sabbath observance was an important aspect of the Jewish faith. The commandment to observe the Sabbath day had been a gift from God, given to the Jewish people shortly after they had been freed from slavery. It was a day of blessed rest, when no work was to be done, in order that God might be honored and the people be restored for the living of their days.

The Pharisees, those religious leaders of Jesus' day, didn't like how Jesus and his disciples observed the Sabbath. They first got disturbed when they saw Jesus' disciples plucking off bits of grain and eating them as they walked through the grainfields. The Pharisees saw this behavior as a violation of the Sabbath commandment against working. The reason, however, that the disciples took the grain is that they were hungry. We today are so used to snacking every few hours that we may not know what real hunger feels like. Jesus' disciples were poor men. Food was not something they ate all day long. Meals were likely meager rations compared to what we are accustomed to. Hunger was a familiar companion in life.

As a faithful Jewish man, Jesus understood the importance of the Sabbath but he was not bothered by this grain-plucking behavior of his disciples on the Sabbath. In fact, when

confronted by the Pharisees and their criticism, Jesus defends his disciples, explaining first that there was scriptural precedence for such behavior when people are hungry, and Jesus cites a story from scripture to defend his position. And then Jesus goes on to add that the Sabbath day was created to serve humans, not the other way around.

No sooner had this confrontation taken place than we are told about another Sabbath day conflict. This time Jesus was in the synagogue where he sees a man with a disabled hand. Because of this disability the man would be considered "unclean" by his society. He would likely have been ostracized by others. In addition, his disability no doubt made it impossible for him to work, adding a significant financial burden to him and whatever family he may have had. Healing this man meant far more than a physical healing--it would have lifted both the social and economic burdens born by this man.

The trouble is, it was the Sabbath day. Jesus knows that the religious leaders are just waiting to catch him doing something wrong. And so he asks the question: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" The Pharisees don't answer him. They know there is no getting this question right. And Jesus looked around at them with anger. He was angry and next we are told he was grieved by their hardness of heart. So caught up were they in following rules, making sure the religious laws were followed, they had missed the whole point of what the Sabbath day and their faith was all about. The Sabbath was intended to be life-giving. What could be more life-giving than to heal this man and give him back his life?

This story reminds me of all the ways Christians have historically and presently missed the whole point of their religion. I think about people who profess to be Bible believing Christians and who go to church on Sundays but then see no contradiction in voicing hateful and intolerant anti-gay or anti-minority rhetoric. I think of Christians who joined the KKK or the

Nazi party. I think of Christians who have been so caught up in defending what they believe to be correct doctrines and beliefs, or correct behaviors that they have been motivated to burn offenders at the stake, to excommunicate, to withhold the sacraments, to refuse leadership positions or membership to people who don't meet their standards, to conquer foreign peoples, kill foreign peoples, steal from foreign peoples. And they justify these actions on their faith. And I think about us, you and me, and the times we have missed the whole point of our faith, when we have refused to forgive, loved money and status more than justice, adopted alternative priorities to the gospel of Jesus Christ, gossiped and slandered, withheld assistance because people didn't follow our rules. And I think of how Jesus might be angered and grieved at us.

Some scholars of languages maintain that the word *religion* comes from the Latin word meaning "to bind" or "to tie up." Our first impression is that the notion of binding someone is negative. But think for a minute about how all of us need some kind of structure or organization in our lives. Think about small children and how they thrive when they are given rules for behavior, structure and order in their day, an organization to their lives--and how much they suffer when they are given no parameters at all. Chaos does not make for healthy living. And that is true for us adults as well. We all need structures and organization to contain our minds and hearts and actions. What will be the parameters in which we will live? When they are at their best, religions help organize people's lives and actions in healthy ways--binding them within a meaningful framework.

Christians have just such a framework in which we live--a framework to contain us, bind us, if you will, inside. Jesus tells us this framework in another chapter of Mark. When a religious leader asked Jesus which was the most important commandment of all--since commandments help to organize us, to bind us within a certain structure--Jesus gave what was a

very faithful answer for a Jew and what remains a faithful answer for us Christians. Jesus responded that the most important commandment was to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The kind of love Jesus spoke about did not mean a warm sentimental feeling but rather was a love based on a willful commitment to the wellbeing of others. It is a love lived out with patience, forgiveness, steadfastness, justice, compassion to all people around us--whether stranger or friend or family. This commandment gives us a framework, a structure, for how we are to organize and shape our lives. It is the whole point of our faith, of our religion. And it is the whole point of your life and my life.

If we don't live a life loving God with all our being and life of love and compassion toward other human beings, then really, what is the point of all this religious activity? What is the point of coming to church on Sunday if it is not to grow in love and compassion? What is the point of maintaining and preserving these buildings, of living out our traditions, of holding our worship services, of gathering as a congregation and working out budgets and holding programs if it is not about nurturing a life of love and compassion? What is the point of coming to this table to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper if it is not to help us live out a life of love, compassion, forgiveness, justice and generosity?

Mark gives us a glimpse of how deeply upset Jesus was when he witnessed the religious leaders so completely missing the point of the Sabbath. Bound as they were to their rules, they couldn't be bound to the way of love or compassion. Their hearts had grown hard. And that is a terribly sad way to go through life.

In what ways may have our hearts grown hard without our even realizing it? Where have we missed the whole point of our religion, of our worship, of our being a congregation? Where in our individual lives or our collective lives have we forgotten love and compassion?

Those leaders who were upset with Jesus' behavior on the Sabbath were indeed "bound up" in their religion, in the negative sense of that word--bound to rules, and bound to doctrines of what was right and correct. But being right will never get us to Jesus. Only love and compassion will lead us to where Jesus may be found.