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Rules

Mark 2:23-3:6 23 One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 25And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." 27Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath. 3Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." 4Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

One of the funniest moments I ever experienced in church had to do with "rules." It was about twenty years ago at a Disciples congregation in Indianapolis. On that particular Sunday, the pastor was leading the Children's Moment. There were problem fifteen or twenty children gathered around him, and they were energetic and eager. His sermon that day was going to be on the Ten Commandments. Now that's kind of a heavy topic for a children's moment, but he had a very nice approach to it that fit the children's ages. He started out by saying, "*Boys and girls, I know that all of us have rules we have to follow in our families or at school. Can you tell me what one of the rules are in your family and why you think it's a good rule?*" Well, a very precocious three-year old began waving his hand so frantically I thought it might fly off of his arm. And the pastor put the microphone up to his face and the toddler proceeded to announce in a VERY LOUD voice: "*One of the rules in our family is that WE DON'T EVER PEE ON THE FLOOR!*" The congregation roared, the child's parents turned eight shades of red, the child smiled beatifically and the pastor sputtered and finally said "*Yes, that's a very good rule to have. I always try to follow that*

rule myself.”

Rules. I’ve always liked rules, myself. One of the things I most dislike is when I am in a new social or other situation where I don’t know the rules – what you say, when you say it, how you dress, etc., etc. I like to know what’s expected. And I like understanding rules. Some of you know I have this weird penchant for discovering how many segments you can fly under a particular airline’s fare rules for the same price as a non-stop flight. Did you know that you can manage to fly from San Diego to San Francisco on four separate flights? And, I have a small confession to make: left unchecked by more normal people, I can take joy in enforcing rules. For over a decade I’ve been what they call a senior volunteer leader on an internet travel bulletin board, and one of my jobs is to enforce the board’s rules. Barbara once noted that I seemed to take far too much glee in suspending or otherwise sanctioning someone who had broken one of the board’s rules; she asked me *“Were you born a hall monitor, or did you just grow into it?”* Ouch.

Our story for today from near the beginning of the Gospel of Mark – a gospel we are going to be spending some time on this summer – looks like, on first blush, the story of some over-zealous Judean hall monitors out to make sure that no one breaks any rule, no matter what that rule is. Mark and all of the gospels are full of what scholars call “controversy stories” and they take the same form: Jesus does or says something and an opponent, the hall monitor of the moment, protests the apparent breaking of the rule. And then Jesus does or says something that in effect transcends or re-interprets or even denies the rule. Yet, before we get much further into the Gospel of Mark, we need to make sure we don’t make some terrible mistakes in interpreting these “controversy stories.” First, we need always keep in mind that Mark was writing around the year 70 or so, forty years after the time of Jesus. Much has changed. And one of the most important things that has changed is that because of the evil actions of Rome in destroying Jerusalem, it is only now that there is coming to be an animosity between some Christians and Jews. When Mark

writes of “the Pharisees,” he’s using an 8th decade concept to describe a 4th decade situation. But in fact, what we **actually know** is this: the Pharisees **in the time of Jesus** were actually very close in their thinking to much of what Jesus preached! Many of Jesus’ teachings about the love and grace of God are paralleled in the teaching of the rabbis of his own day. To put it another way, whatever Jesus’ disagreements with some of the religious leaders of his own day were, it was an “in-house” family argument. Those disagreements in his own day simply did not have the rancor and animosity and sharp edges that came to be the case forty or fifty years later as Christians and Jews sadly turned against one another too often in response to the awful persecutions by Rome of both of them!

Yet too often, sadly and even tragically, the Church has often used stories like this one to wrongly indict all of “the Jews” for misunderstanding and denying Jesus. And we know where such attitudes have led – to vicious anti-Semitic laws, to practices that degraded and abused Jewish folks, and even to Hitler’s “final solution.” Such a history is why it is utterly crucial that we read our Bibles with the help of scholars who can help us to realize that sometimes taking things at face value is actually misleading, and, in fact, can distort and undercut the very gospel of grace that Jesus learned as a Jew and then Himself preached!

With all that in mind, then, let us return to our scripture and see what it can, indeed, teach us. First of all, let us ask about those in the story who wondered whether Jesus’ actions in eating the grain and healing that man’s hand on the Sabbath were allowed. Again, it would be much too easy for us to slur our Jewish brothers and sisters by simply dismissing the concerns that motivated them. Too often those concerns have been **caricatured** as being “silly legalism.” But they’re not. In fact, *the motivations of those who questioned Jesus were actually good and noble*. Let me use an analogy to explain: Every one here wants to come to worship God in a way that truly honors God. On that we can

agree. (Just as both Jesus and those who questioned him agreed that because of God's command, no "work" should be done on the Sabbath). Where the rub comes is when we try to determine and agree on what is and is not "honoring" of God, or, for Jesus' time, what is and is not "work." These are **not** idle questions. For we **all** want to honor God; that's indeed a value we share. But applying that value – that's not always a simple matter, is it? Do you remember when that value of "honoring God" meant, for example, that "of course" the deacons would wear white gloves and no woman would think of coming to church without wearing hose and no man would ever come to worship without a tie? There was a day in which it was clear to most everyone that that's part of what it meant to apply live out the value of "honoring" God. But that's no longer the case, is it? And we can find ourselves in good-natured disagreement nowadays about what sort of dress – or customs or practices or habits in our worship – does or does not "honor" God.

This is very much like what was going on in Jesus' day. *Everyone* agreed that one shouldn't "work" on the Sabbath. Yet to put it bluntly: it simply isn't obvious whether grabbing some grain from a wheat field counts as "harvesting" it and thereby counts as work or not. It simply isn't obvious whether doing a non-emergency medical procedure – because that's what it was, the man with the withered hand was not going to die from his condition that day - counts as work or not. You see, we and those whom Mark labels the Pharisees do exactly the same thing: we try, by our best lights, to figure out what will and what won't "count" as an appropriate example of living out this or that value. If it were as "obvious" as some suggest about how you apply and live out values and rules, we probably wouldn't need so many lawyers in our country, and we Disciples probably wouldn't have split twice in the course of our 180-year history over questions of what does and does not honor God's wishes for us? Do you see what I'm talking about?

When I used to teach Ethics courses in college, I would often use the example of the missionaries to one of the thousands of islands in the Indonesian archipelago who

were delighted to discover that the islanders shared the same value enshrined in the fifth commandment, “*Honor thy father and thy mother.*” But they were *horrified* when they learned that to the islanders that meant that when their parents became old and increasingly infirm, they killed them in order to spare their parents the shame of going into the afterlife without their full faculties. From the islanders’ perspective, **not** to have done so would not be to “honor” their parents! It’s not the value sometimes, it’s the application and the living out of the value!

So how does Jesus approach this issue of what is and is not allowed on the Sabbath, what does and does not count as “work” – remembering that the real issue is what does and does not truly honor God? Well, He does two things that are instructive for us. First, in good and timeless and wonderful Jewish fashion, he cites earlier instances – King David eating the bread that only the priests were supposed to eat – and then says this eating-the-wheat is like David’s eating the bread. That’s pretty much what we do too when we’re trying to figure out a churchly issue: we look for analogies and precedents that might give us insight into answering our questions now. But secondly, Jesus says this: “*The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; o the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.*” But – What does that *mean*? Well, once again, notice that Jesus does not dispute the fact that it’s important to figure out whether this or that action counts as “work” on the Sabbath, he doesn’t dispute the fact that we should do that which truly honors God on the sabbath. Yet with that in mind, I believe that Jesus’ final answer, to cut to the chase, means this: When something is **urgent**, in the wonderful phrase of Barbara Blaisdell’s,¹ *relationships trump rules*. **Relationships trump rules.**

The man with the withered hand was living a life that, in an agrarian “working class” rural culture, terribly truncated his ability to work, to live, to feed himself and his family. To spend one more day in such a situation, when the gracious God of Abraham, Isaac, and

¹Private conversation, June 14, 2012.

Jacob wanted him to know the best life possible, was simply intolerable. And so Jesus healed him then and there in order that he might have a more fulfilling life, a life more able to respond to God's purposes for him, in order that his relationships with friends, family and society would be healed and made whole. The rule about not "working" on the Sabbath was a good and fitting rule, but sometimes **relationships need to trump rules**.

What might this mean for you and me? Well, I think it suggests several things. **First**, it means that you and I are called to truly listen to and truly try to *understand* folks. Sometimes, as with those Indonesian islanders, it's not the *values* that we disagree on, it's the *application* of the values. Ask yourself this morning: Do *you* need to more fully listen to your friends, your children, your parents to see if you might have failed to understand? **Second**, it means that we ought to be not so quickly judgmental in our assessments of others. Our own wonderful and wise Mick McHarg wrote this a few days ago about this story, saying it that it tells us that our prayer should always be: "*Lord Jesus, keep me from too easily pronouncing judgment on those I pass on my journey.*"² Amen! **Third**, relationships trumping rules when the opportunity is urgent means that our first priority must always be those whom God is calling us to reach, rather than simply our own preferences or desires. So, for example, is that particular "prayer chorus" that sometimes gets sung in worship something you think is hideous? Well, Jesus' words remind you and me to keep in mind that that song may be the very thing that brings a lost and hurting soul back into relationship with a God of grace, that helps someone who thought God was out to judge and bash him to discover that, no, God embraces him as a dear child.

Rules are important. We ought not pee on the floor. We ought to indeed have rules that help us honor God in a way that is fitting. But let's never be too quick to dismissively presume what "fitting" must mean. Let us indeed seek to listen better and to try to

²Mick McHarg, "Prayer Phone 6-12-12." Mick's daily reflections are available via email by writing him at MickMcH@aol.com or calling the First Christian Church Prayer Line: 719-635-4000

understand one another better. Let us indeed not be too quick to be too judgmental. Let us indeed remember that sometimes our own desires can be the very things that could keep someone from knowing the gentle God of grace that we know. Will you join me in seeking these things?