

As the cross draws near, we again find ourselves in the wilderness: the wilderness of hardened hearts. It's a wilderness we all know because it has to do with sin. Remember that there is no wilderness space too harsh or threatening for God's love. The setting for today's story moves from a grain field back to a synagogue. At this point, Jesus already has a reputation that causes him to be under surveillance by some of the religious authorities. In studying for today, one question kept coming up for me. What does it look like to love like Jesus? Jesus didn't only show love to his friends but also to his enemies. Keep in mind that loving others doesn't mean letting them walk all over you nor allowing them to treat others differently or unjustly. No. Jesus stood his ground and sometimes he became angry and also grieved. In Mark's Gospel Jesus becomes angry six times and this time in today's story makes the second time. Jesus was equally human and God, and it matters a lot to God how we treat one another.

For today's purposes I'm thinking of "enemies" as those who want to destroy a life. Let's take a brief look at Jesus among enemies- among the people who would plot, collude, and CONSPIRE to kill him. Who knew he'd find them in church...I mean, the synagogue ...right? Before we start pointing fingers at any individuals or groups, let us be real careful. We need to pay attention. This is a very short story, BUT it is our story AND it concerns us. It is the script of our life. It is our script as we journey closer and closer to Jesus' crucifixion. We need only to decide the role in which we are cast (Brueggemann, *Collection of Sermons, Vol. 3*). There is a thread running through Mark's Gospel, and that thread is controversy between

Jesus and devoted laity. Today's story is the fourth story in Mark's Gospel where the rules of Sabbath are called into question by the church leaders, and the tension is building. Before we turn to God's word, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

As theologian and Duke professor, Kate Bowler, stated a week or so ago in her weekly Lenten devotion, "Some weeks, Lent feels like a gentle invitation to reflect. Other weeks, it feels like an Olympic event in patience and restraint- especially this week. Tension is high. Trust is low. The world is an absolute mess. And somehow, we are still called to love one another—not in theory, but in *practice*. But what does that actually look like" ([here](#))? I especially wonder this when I heard a few weeks ago about a school in Idaho that forced a public middle school teacher to take down two signs in her classroom that had been there for five years due to them being controversial. The first one read, "Everyone is welcome here" and had an illustration of hands with different skin tones and the second read, "In this room everyone is welcome, important, accepted, respected, encouraged, valued and equal." This 6th grade history teacher "says she won't comply with the order, arguing that the message is a fundamental part to ensuring a positive learning environment for her students. She says her commitment to inclusivity isn't about politics. It's about her passion for education and students and now she is at risk of losing her job because of her values" (Today [show](#)). Then I came across a comic strip this week ([here](#)) that featured Jesus sitting beside a brain and a heart. Jesus, while looking at them, said, "I came to open you up, not close you down!" The comic strip

made me sad and reflective, and it made me think of a quote I recently saw that read, "Christianity should sound like, 'the world is full of neighbors to be understood and loved,' not 'the world is full of enemies to be feared and conquered'" (Rev. Benjamin Cremer, @Brcremer). And then I thought about Tuck and Charlie's baptisms today. We all ooohed and awwwed over them because they're so sweet and cute and innocent. This is how we all start out- even our enemies. Would this image help us love more like Jesus?

First let me be really clear. All pharisees or church leaders are not Jesus' enemy. Jesus was a Jew, and he very much respected the Torah, the Law. So did the Pharisees. So why talk of enemies?! Because I wonder sometimes if we don't set out to be enemies yet somehow we end up there. Maybe our perception is that others have it out for us (and maybe they do)? Our minds and hearts often dictate that someone becomes our enemy because of what they do or don't do or say or don't say. And like one of my favorite Anne Lamott quotes, "You can safely assume you've created God in your image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." Our hearts can become hardened, like this group of church leaders in today's story. Theologian Richard Rohr emphasizes that a "hardened heart," characterized by judgment, fear, and a need to be right, can distort our ability to see and experience love and truth, hindering spiritual growth and healthy relationships" ([online](#)). Again, to be clear "the Pharisees in the story are not a stand in for Judaism. They are a stand-in for all the convictions, values, traditions, commitments, doctrines, absolutes, proclivities, preferences, and essentialisms - no matter how cherished,

noble or well-intentioned - that stand between us and compassion” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

Right before today’s story, Jesus announces that the Sabbath is for people, not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Make no qualms about it- while Sabbath isn’t as big a deal today to some people in both Judaism and Christianity, Sabbath was most important in 1st century Judaism. Sabbath helped to establish Jewish identity within Palestine and beyond. “The object of the Sabbath is to give mortals relaxation from continuous, unending toil and by refreshing their bodies with a regularly calculated system of remissions, to send them out renewed to their old activities. Jewish groups debated among themselves which activities were permissible on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were a church leaders who dedicated themselves to superlative adherence to Torah in all walks of life. They were regarded as upstanding, devout, Bible-believing pillars of the community. To paraphrase Pogo Possum from Walt Kelly’s old comic strip, ‘We have met the Pharisees, and they are us’” (C. Clifton Black, workingpreacher.org).

Mark tells us that the Pharisees are waiting and watching to catch Jesus violating Sabbath- again. The Pharisees’ thought they had power: the power to say who gets access to what and when. Their interpretation of the Law was that only if a man’s life was in danger was healing on the Sabbath permitted- but not otherwise. Admittedly, the man was not dying, but his hand was crippled. Jesus asked some pointed questions with obvious answers that I’m sure was humiliating to the church leaders gathered there. Jesus’ public attack silences them (3:4). You can imagine that there was

probably no eye contact made. Jesus wanted them to see this crippled man. Jesus' point? "Why should the Sabbath, of all days, be the one day on which he refrained from bringing blessing to this man" (Ferguson)? In other words, Jesus' take is that doing good for people overrides prohibitions on work on the Sabbath. With the restoration of this man's hand, "he probably also receives back his ability to work in the Galilean economy. In receiving that ability, he may recover his ability to provide for a family. This event represents a restoration to wholeness and dignity, and isn't that the purpose of the Sabbath? It means to promote life and human flourishing. Foretastes of resurrection cannot wait" (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org). But to the Pharisees, this was in clear violation of Sabbath. Sabbath was, after all, a commandment deeply embedded in the Jewish scriptures and culture. "So why does Jesus appear to drive a coach and horses through it? Perhaps because it had become a weapon? Perhaps it had become a sign of his fellow Jews' commitment to a fierce and exclusive nationalism. Along with other badges and flags, it spoke now not of Israel as the light of the world but of Israel as the children of light and the rest of the world as remaining in darkness. For many groups, it wasn't enough to be a loyal Jew; one had to be a better loyal Jew than the other lot. And in this no-win situation the whole point of the commandment- celebrating God's creation and redemption- past, present, and future- had been lost sight of. The rule mattered more than the reality" (N.T. Wright, *From Wilderness To Glory*).

Angered by such hard-hearted fault-finding, Jesus had enough, and he forces their hand. To be clear, "with anger- even hatred- Jesus looked upon

the thing; with grief and love he looked upon the persons” (William C. Placher, Mark). Hear the distinction? In the synagogue, Jesus summoned a man who is crippled and whose name we aren’t told- a man who has NOT asked Jesus for healing- and Jesus restored another body to wholeness- on the Sabbath. Technically speaking- Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand (therefore, Jesus didn’t touch him or spit on him). Jesus simply speaks, and the crippled man is healed as he stretches out his hand. Then Jesus allows his witnesses to draw their own conclusions. “Only 79 verses into this Gospel, and now this group of Pharisees and Herodians want to destroy Jesus. We’re only in Chapter 3 of Mark’s Gospel and Jesus has managed to offend two very different groups. Imagine the editorial staffs of both *Mother Jones* and *National Review* finding something or someone they both vehemently oppose” (Skinner)! The Pharisees didn’t have power themselves. If they were going to attack Jesus, they needed some unlikely alliances, as it would be at the end, when Caiaphas and Pilate together sent Jesus to his death. “In this story, Jesus does not assail Judaism. He does not reject the law. He does not render the sabbath obsolete. He does not even call the Pharisees blind guides or abusers of their perceived power” (Skinner). Jesus never closes the door to the Pharisees. When callousness, apathy, and fear threaten our hearts, how do we return love?

“What’s the big deal about a withered hand...and why it can’t wait until tomorrow?,” some of us may join the Pharisees in asking. Because Jesus declares that the kingdom has come **to you today**. Only Jesus could restore this man to the joyful condition for which he had been created, not the Pharisees. Only Jesus could help this man really to enjoy the blessing of the

Sabbath day, not the Pharisees. And perhaps, that was why they immediately began to plot how they could destroy Jesus?! “Only Jesus can give the grace we need to enter into the joys of obedience to the commandments of God. It is grace which produces such obedience, not legalism” (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let’s Study Mark*). Scripture and our traditions around it are never meant to be used as a weapon. We get in trouble when the rule matters more than the reality of the life of the one standing before us. The Pharisees were good people and were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath. They were absolutely right. But rightness is not love. Rightness is not compassion. Rightness will never get us to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. Only compassion will- only action in love for others will. This Thursday we will gather with 30+ other congregations, including people of Christian, Jewish, and Bahai faiths (and perhaps more?) at GOAL Justice’s Nehemiah Action, to say that we believe that all people matter, especially the ones with no voice who need restoration to wholeness and dignity. All people need access to sidewalks and to proper lighting at dangerous intersections where too many people have died. All people need access to housing courts when they’re threatened with or served evictions. Showing up and fighting for justice is one sure way to love like Jesus! Who or what are we not seeing because our eyes have been blinded by our own best intentions? In what things, have we made ourselves the enemy of God? God is God and God will love whomever God wants to, even when that means giving up God’s Son so that we all, even our enemies, may have life and have it abundantly. Let us be fed and then go and love like Jesus, especially when it’s hard! Amen.