

1 Samuel 3:1-10  
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Mark 2:23-3:6

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The Rev. Karen Haig

### To Be Of Use

Long-time Episcopalians are known for being more familiar with the Book of Common Prayer than they are with the Bible. It's also that most Episcopalians didn't start out as Episcopalians – well over half the people who call themselves Episcopalians weren't born into the Episcopal church, so those folks might raise our scriptural literacy a bit! Of course, I'm exaggerating - we know well that the Book of Common Prayer is rich with scripture, and still, my guess is that most of us don't spend a lot of time studying its nuances. One of my very favorite things to do is to spend time steeped in scripture, particularly when I'm preparing to preach. We've had a big scriptural shift today and I want to mark that for us. All throughout Easter we've been reflecting on John's gospel, and today we return to Mark. The gospel according to Mark is very, very different from John's gospel.

Mark's is the earliest gospel, very plot-driven, lots of action, everything happening immediately and not much dialogue. In Mark, Jesus' mind, as well as his divinity, remain relatively hidden. In John's gospel, written decades later, there is less action and much more dialogue, chapters of dialogue in fact, as Jesus makes expanded discourses to explain his identity and his mission. In John, Jesus' divinity is both demonstrated and described throughout. Mark on the other hand, doesn't linger over much of anything.

We are only in the second chapter of Mark's gospel, and Jesus has already been baptized in the river Jordan, tempted in the desert wilderness, called a couple of disciples, cast out demons, healed a whole bunch of people, cleansed a leper, cured a paralytic, gone on a preaching tour throughout Galilee ... in short, Jesus has been very, very busy doing the work he's been given to do. And while he continues to preach and teach and heal, the words we heard today are the very beginnings of Jesus turning toward Jerusalem and the cross. Today's words mark the beginning of the opposition Jesus will encounter throughout the rest of his earthly ministry - opposition that will ultimately lead him to the cross.

In today's gospel, both the religious and political authorities have had it with Jesus. While the Roman occupiers weren't typically aligned with the religious authorities, in Jesus they found a common enemy. The occupying government didn't want any trouble, didn't want the riff-raff stirred up, didn't want anybody thinking they could move out of their appointed place. The peace and justice and blessedness Jesus was preaching disturbed the political authorities because it was making the low-life's a bit uppity. The religious authorities were just as upset. Jesus wasn't only up-ending societal structures, he was making a mess of the religious institution too. All the miracle healings were disturbing enough, but when Jesus healed a paralytic and told him his sins were forgiven, the religious authorities came undone.

“Only God forgives sins” they told Jesus. But instead of saying “Hey, I am God!” Jesus healed the man and doesn’t seem much concerned about the words that he used. “Your sins are forgiven... pick up your mat and walk” either way, the words don’t matter. What matters is that came to do God’s work in the world, to bring healing and peace and life-giving love to the world, regardless of the rules. Poking and prodding and nit picking and being sure that everything is just exactly right, or just exactly as it’s always been, is simply distraction. What we need to be asking ourselves is: what is the point of what Jesus is doing? What is the point of what I’m doing? Does our practice need to be perfect? The more “perfect” we try to make ourselves, the further we move into ourselves and away from the injustice, unkindness and suffering in the people around us. Those people are who Jesus attends to and they are who he wants us to attend to, too.

Jesus engages the very real humans, the ones who are right in front of him, healing and making them whole. Jesus doesn’t only forgive, making everything broken whole and holy, he actually gravitates toward the broken people, something made evident when he chose a tax collector – a man who is a part of the most notoriously corrupt system of his time – to become his disciple. And immediately after calling him into discipleship, off they went for dinner with all the notorious sinners!

What we hear today is just one of many attempts made by the established religious folks to insure that the wild, upside down and unpredictable kingdom of God wouldn’t infiltrate their church, and especially not on the sabbath. Remember, the pharisees were sticklers for rules, for maintaining existing rules and lines of authority at any cost. And what they’re concerned with today is more than mere rule. It is the third of the 10 commandments, the one that says to remember the sabbath and to keep it holy. Remember the sabbath and keep it holy. What does that mean to you? We can return to scripture to understand what the pharisees would have known. Listen:

*Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Deuteronomy 5:12-14*

Seems pretty clear, doesn’t it? God commanded that no work be done on the sabbath. But what happens when we listen to the rest of that passage?

*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. Deuteronomy 5:15*

Do you see? The point of the sabbath, the point of remembering the sabbath is to remember that the people of God – you and me and all the ones who came before us –were enslaved in Egypt until God brought them out of slavery into a new life of freedom from the bondage of working from sun up ‘til sun down day after day after day after day. The point of remembering the sabbath is to remember our God is a life-giving God, a loving God, a God who brings us out of the bonds of slavery to whatever it is we’re enslaved to, into a new life of justice and peace and love. So of course when the disciples were tired and hungry because they hadn’t packed their lunches the

night before, they ate the grain that was in front of them – hardly a crime, Jesus says, when the mighty king David did so much worse, entering the holy of holies and eating the bread meant only for the priests. People are hungry. There is plenty of food. Eat. So simple. So just. So loving. And all so totally out of order that the authorities wanted to arrest Jesus because of it.

So when Jesus encountered the man with the withered hand in the synagogue, he knew the authorities were gunning for him, knew they were watching to see what rule, spoken or unspoken, he would break next. Jesus knew what they were doing. His response?

*“Shall I do good, or shall I do harm on the sabbath?”* he asked. *“Which is lawful?”*

Well, as you might imagine, nobody spoke up. It made Jesus really mad. Can you imagine what that must have been like? *“...he looked around at them in anger;”* Mark tells us. *“He was grieved at their hardness of heart.”* Mark 2:5

Shall I do good, or shall I do harm on the sabbath? Which is lawful? Which is of God? It is so easy to get caught up in rules and shoulds and certainties, being more concerned about doing what we’re supposed to be doing than actually doing what we are called to do. God calls us to love, to justice, to peace-making, to healing. God has given each of us unique and wonderful gifts so that we may be useful in bringing God’s kingdom to bear. That’s what God asks of us you know - to be of use. Because to be of use is to give what we have without judgment – without self-aggrandizement or self-criticism. It’s different from being good at something. Being useful brings deep peace and a kind of contentment that doesn’t come along with being good at something. Being good at something requires judgment and comparison. Being good at something has within it the possibility of being not so good. Being useful means that we have a place, and that we have something to offer. And having something to offer crosses all boundaries of age and gender and race and ability and everything else. Being useful doesn’t require only very particular qualities - as long as we’re present, we can be of use. And when we think about our lives that way, all our self-doubt and self-criticism can turn gently toward self-compassion.

In that beautiful story we heard about Samuel, God’s generosity is so clear. God is surely calling Samuel into God’s own service, but Samuel might never have found his way there unless Eli, the old worn-out priest whose whole world was about to end, had been there, listening for God and interpreting God’s word for Samuel. Even Eli was essential for God’s work to get done in the world.

My dears, we are all called to serve, each and every one of us. We don’t need to be perfect, don’t need to try to do more than we are truly called to, but neither should we do less. Being called to serve offers us the opportunity to be of use, to be of use in a world that needs all of our gifts, whatever they may be. What is God calling you in to? How is God calling you to best be of use? What could happen if every single one of us gave up on trying to get everything right, and instead simply wanted what God wants, and acted on that at every turn? What could happen if we walked around in the world praying “Speak, LORD, for your servants are listening?” Amen.