

Proper 4B  
June 3, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington  
Fr. James

I Samuel 3:1-20 Psalm 139:1-5,12-17 II Corinthians 4:5-12 Mark 2:23-3:6

### **When Conflict is Needed**

The writer of Mark's gospel does something remarkable in the second and third chapters of his text, that is, at the very beginning of his work. He profiles a series of five controversies which Jesus has with Galilean Pharisees, those remarkably committed religious people of his day. These five controversies include: the authority to forgive sins, the call of Levi the hated tax-collector [how little things change during the centuries], Jesus' eating openly with known sinners, the eating of grain, and the healing of the man with the withered arm. These controversies along with five others that the author spells out at the end of his evangel, and which took place as he was going to or being in Jerusalem, as opposed to Galilee, were what led to Jesus' death at the hands of the authorities. The last two controversies mentioned, that of eating grain on the Sabbath and the healing of the man with the crippled arm, were focussed on Jesus seeming inattention to

what was legitimate for him to do on the Sabbath.

The most prominent forerunner of the Sabbath was in the story of creation found in Genesis one and two. That is, after God had sung into being the universe with all its incipient life, on the seventh day he rested. By the time the Sabbath became a day of religious observance in the time of a clear Jewish identity, most likely under Moses' leadership, rules began to be laid down about what one could and could not do on the Sabbath. For example, the manna which fell on to the ground each morning for forty years of Jewish wandering in the wilderness, could be collected each day, each day, that is, with the exception of the seventh day, the Sabbath. To enforce this rule the manna collected in the morning would spoil by nightfall if not used. But if collected on the sixth day, half could be retained for the seventh without spoilage. Consequences resulted for disobedience on this matter and so it was that human-oriented consequences surrounded Sabbath observance or perhaps I should say Sabbath non-conformity. The issue was not that Jesus and his disciples were eating fruit from

someone else's orchard, it was that they were doing so on the Sabbath. So restrictive were the Sabbath rules, that their nibbling as they passed through the field was considered to be 'reaping' that grain . And the Sabbath was a day when no work could be done, that could not be just as easily completed on one of the other days of the week. Jesus took issue with the complaint pointing out that the intention of the Law was not that they could not eat as they walked casually through the field, its intention was to prohibit actual harvesting and laying by that crop.

I remember as a boy being raised strictly to religious observance and eating a few grapes off a neighbor's vineyard as I passed through. Then I felt like I had stolen the grapes. It became a guilt trip for me of greatly imagined proportions. Imagine my relief when I read the Hebrew Scriptures and found that casual grazing was not prohibited, nor considered theft. So it was not the eating that was the problem, it was doing so on the Sabbath. “The action of plucking grain was interpreted as an act of work in violation of the Sabbath rest. Reaping on the Sabbath was

formally prohibited by the Mosaic Law (Ex. 34.21), and of the 39 main categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath in the Mishnah, the third is reaping [680:114].

Interestingly, Jesus tied into the Pharisees. He was not at all concerned about getting into an argument. He even pulls out the old story of David [I Samuel 21], who fleeing Saul's wrath with some of his men, stops and begs shewbread, that is consecrated bread, not unlike the consecrated bread we keep in our tabernacle, from a local priest. Yes it had a special purpose, but that did not include feeding a vagabond militia. Presumably, it did not occur on a Sabbath either, but Jesus doesn't quibble about having an exact illustration for his argument. His main point seems to be that God created the Sabbath out of his day of rest for the delight of his creation. I say, his creation, because not only did the humans get to rest, but they would be leaving the remainder of creation alone for a day, as well. That is, the day was created for the benefit of creation, not to restrict its enjoyment. And the piece de resistance of his argument was that "The sabbath was made for

man, and not man for the sabbath” [Mark 2:27]. There may be a hint in vs. 28 of that ancient Genesis line that the human creature is to have 'dominion' over all other life forms, a word I would read as 'stewardship' in our own time. The legalism of his Pharisaic critics was, in Jesus' eyes, entirely out of line.

In chapter three of Mark's Gospel is this story of the man with withered arm. Mark seems to have included it to have it adjacent to the story we have just been considering. When Jesus entered a synagogue, there is this man with a mal-formed hand or arm. The Pharisees are there and they are just waiting to see whether or not Jesus will heal the man on the Sabbath. Again, presumably healing him on Monday would be acceptable, on Saturday? Forget it. They might accuse him for being a law-breaker if he does. Jesus seems to know their intentions, their thoughts, their barely withheld criticisms and rather than take the easy way out like I might, he uses the man as an example for a way to argue with them, to make a point of their own sinfulness. “Is it lawful on the sabbath day to do good, he asks? Or should I walk

away and do harm? They didn't answer him, they weren't going to be drawn, and Jesus response is immediate anger and just as immediately, sorrowful because of their hard, unfeeling hearts. Suffused with all these contradictory feelings, Jesus simply goes right ahead and heals the man. He provokes them. He promotes a controversy, a conflict. And the Pharisees leave, go talk with the politicians around Herod the king, and begin to look for ways to kill the man. Oh, my goodness. This was serious and Jesus could have avoided the conflict. Isn't it good to avoid conflict? We know something about the negative consequences of conflict. Surely Jesus knew that this would lead to his passion, his death for that is what happened and happened early on.

It seems to me that what we learn here from Jesus is that not all conflict, not all controversy is to be shunned. That is not the lesson we should be taking from our recent unhappiness. Last month the Christian Science Monitor had an article about a French priest, The Rev. Patrick Desbois. For several years Fr. Patrick had been studying mass graves left by the Nazi's with Jewish and

Roma in the fields and forests of Eastern Europe. These are outside the killing camps of Treblinka and others known to each of us. One day after making an appeal for help to continue his work, a Jewish man responded by saying that as valuable as Fr. Patrick's work was, he was giving his money to uncover present day genocide, and he mentioned the Yazidi's being killed by ISIS by the thousands. Fr. Patrick began to read about it and finally to realize that he had to expand his vision, and today he is perhaps the leading expert on the methods of genocide used across our increasingly violent world. He is stirring up old horrors everywhere he goes, even in places where his own safety and that of his colleagues is called into question. It is for him God's call. [Christian Science Monitor Weekly April 23 & 30, 2018]

When there are important issues, critical truths, behaviors relating to justice and mercy, love and compassion then we should speak out, let the consequences be what they may. As the Vestry and I work together this year exploring what real leadership looks like in a parish church we will get to this point of asking, how shall

we be counted. What does following Jesus mean? And I hope and pray that we will be able to come to see controversies worth tackling, meaningful enough to raise our voices and our witness and our commitment to Jesus far above the maintenance of buildings or peace for that matter.

There is a silly story about a man who walks into a bar and says, "Bartender, give me two shots."

The bartender asks, "You want them both now or one at a time?"

The guy says, "Oh, I want them both now. One's for me and one's for this little guy here," and he pulls a 3-inch-high man out of his pocket.

The bartender asks, "He can drink?"

"Oh, sure," says the man, "He can drink."

So the bartender pours the shots and sure enough, the little guy drinks it all up. "That's amazing" says the bartender. "What else can he do, can he walk?"

The man flicks a quarter down to the end of the bar and says, "Hey, Jake. Go get that." The little guy runs down to the end of the bar



and picks up the quarter. Then he runs back down and gives it to the man.

The bartender is in total shock. "That's amazing" he says, "what else can he do? Does he talk?"

The man says "Sure he talks. Hey, Jake, tell him about that time we were hunting in Africa and YOU CALLED THAT WITCH DOCTOR AN IDIOT!" Not all conflict is healthy or desirable.

But some conflict ought to be unavoidable. Hardly a week passes when I don't read about some injustice in my own locality, my own nation that someone, perhaps me, or you should address and bring to the attention of the world around us. "Be careful," said Jesus, "when all people speak well of you." (Luke 6:26) *So be it.*