

*Freedom For*  
Sermon 223 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 9, 2024  
Mark 2:23 - 3:6

I. Intro

Today's reading dives straight into the heart of Mark's Gospel.

Though it may *seem* like the beginning, remember Mark is quick, concise, efficient with his words and so do not be fooled by the chapter and verse, Jesus is already long at work, stirring up trouble - *good trouble* - if we may borrow that phrase from the late Civil Rights leader and Senator John Lewis.

What kind of trouble has Jesus been stirring up? You may want to know.

The kind that involves inviting the wrong kinds of people to dinner which puts everybody's social status, professional acquaintances, and friendships at risk. We can understand this a little bit. We know how important business dinners, golf outings, and other networking events are to our own sense of place and personal or professional security.

But this is just a hint of how things used to be in Jesus' world.

*(One scholar wrote in 1966)*

For them "every table fellowship [was] a guarantee of peace, trust, or brotherhood." For them every, "symbolic action [meant] more than it does to us, [for they] would immediately understand the acceptance of the outcasts into table fellowship with Jesus as an offer of salvation to guilty sinners AND as the assurance of forgiveness. Hence the objections of the Pharisees... who held that the pious could only have table fellowship with the righteous [Jeremias, 1966:204]."

Jesus' actions here:

his radical inclusion of the outcasts, his stubborn insistence that some things were more important than what Leviticus and Deuteronomy said about Sabbath, his persistence toward feeding the hungry and healing the wounded - even when the religious traditions and laws gave him every reason not to - Jesus pushed the limits. And folks didn't like it.

Need proof? Just look at their reactions in 3:6, read just a moment ago.

*The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

There was something about the way Jesus liberated his disciples to pick the grain from the field even if it was the sabbath. There was something about the way Jesus freed the man with the withered hand, there was something about that *healing* that pushed them beyond the limits of their love.

There was just *too much freedom*, perhaps. No accountability.

Jesus seems to have given the Pharisees and religious leaders more than they could handle. So they conspired against him.

## II.

“God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

At least that’s what people say when we are struggling with the really heavy stuff. With illness and injury, with grief and loss and flat out bad luck. When things just don’t seem to go our way, sometimes for a long time, people offer all kinds of platitudes like that.

“This is just a trial, a test of your faith, *God won’t give you more than you can handle.*” they say. But when I hear these words, I wonder sometimes if God has a *realistic* assessment of what we can *actually* handle. Don’t you?

I have come to agree with Kate Bowler who put this on her list of things *not* to say when trying to walk alongside our friends through bad news and bad times. I agree with her because it

- (a) isn’t helpful and
- (b) reinforces a theology, an image of God who is sitting on a throne somewhere in the sky, inflicting pain upon us as if our pain is the appropriate collateral damage to some greater purpose.

I am not convinced that God works that way. In fact the story today paints a completely different picture of God pushing our limits. (not a God who throws down trouble from on high, but a God who walks with us, talks with us, and pushes us to the limit - for the sake of loving our neighbors)

Today we read two short stories side by side with a little catchphrase joining the verses and giving away the theme:

*“The sabbath was made for humankind,  
and not humankind for the sabbath.”*

The first one is about disciples picking grain and the second is about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand - both take place on the sabbath, when work was supposed to be avoided.

Jesus and his disciples pushed the limits of the law.

It was more than the Pharisees and other religious leaders could handle - as evidenced by their reaction - they did exactly what we do when we are pushed beyond what we can handle. They got angry.

We know that anger is sometimes an expression of fear or uncertainty. Anger is sometimes how we react when we feel vulnerable or exposed. Anger is our defense mechanism when the world around us is changing and we need someone to blame, Anger is complicated and polarizing and dangerous. and often times... Anger is the companion of fear.

And if we read our Bibles carefully, we will often find that fear and anger are the antagonists to the *good news* that Jesus offers...that anger and fear are the antagonists to freedom and love.

## III.

Take today's reading for example. Disciples walking through someone's corn field, picking the produce and then when questions arise,

Jesus points to David (Israel's most beloved King)  
who commandeered the holiest of holy food  
when his people were hungry.

So it is here with the disciples, who push the limits of Sabbath law.

In the same way also, Jesus heals *in the synagogue*, a man with a withered hand. Now, Jesus could have pulled him into a side room, taken him out back, secretly healed him and no one would have been the wiser. But that isn't what Jesus did. He called the man to him, drawing the attention not only of the one in need of healing, but also the attention of the Pharisees.

One New Testament scholar calls this  
political theater, civil disobedience,  
in other words, *good trouble*.

But it is important to remember that Jesus' engagement in good trouble isn't *good* simply because it is defiant. It is only *good* because it is rooted in a mission of freedom, healing, and love for the people who need it the most: the hungry, the sick, the outcast, the other.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To let the oppressed go free To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

"For freedom!... set free!" My old professor, James Dunn, used to say.

For freedom's sake, Jesus pushes the limits of law, which often felt like handing the Pharisees more than they could handle (spiritually speaking of course) in hopes that they might do something productive with their dis-ease, their fear, and their anger. (but that is not what they do when pushed to their own limits)

You know it's interesting, Jesus also becomes angry in this passage. Jesus is angry and grieved at the hardness of heart shown by the Pharisees, a hardness that closes them off to meeting the real need, the opportunity for healing that is literally staring them in the face. Jesus is angry too, but he works through that anger differently than the Pharisees do.

The anger of the Pharisees leads them to withdraw from Jesus, to make friends with the Herodians, and to conspire against Jesus.

But Jesus' anger leads him towards those in need, regardless of what the law or tradition said about them... Jesus' anger leads him toward those in need to offer healing and freedom from everything holding them captive.

Evidenced by the man with the withered hand who was healed, liberated from his physical impairment.

What's more, (here's the frustrating part!!!) the Pharisees could have been healed as well. By showing them this healing, by bringing it to the front and center, Jesus offered them liberation from the laws that kept them bound up and unable to love freely.

The Pharisees could have been freed as well that day; but they chose instead to destroy the one who offered freedom. When pushed to the limit, the Pharisees shut down, retracted, and resorted to destructive anger. pushing our limits - not for ourselves - but for our neighbors. When offered "Kingdom of God" freedom, they chose instead to protect the status quo.

#### IV.

This is where things get real for us. Recognizing that we are also religious folk, people whose spiritual lives have been fed by the institution for a long time. People with traditions and our own established set of rules.

Our limits have served us well, kept us in line, and in many cases connected us with God through discipline, ritual, and tradition. These beloved traditions have been a source of freedom for us. Freedom from societal expectations, freedom from shame, freedom from judgment, freedom from isolation and loneliness.

But as we remember the freedom that we have come to know, we have to ask ourselves: Are we willing to continue growing and

*How far are we willing to go for the sake of love?  
For the sake of healing?  
For the sake of freedom?*

I think all three of those are bound up together in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (freedom, healing, and love) Jesus pushes the limits of law - always for the sake of love.

*You have heard it said... but I say to you, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*

*For Freedom, Christ has set you free! Now go... and set free!*

Jesus frees us so that we can free others. It is a gift, this freedom, but it is a gift with a purpose.

Freedom for  
the work of healing,

the work of liberation,  
the work of love.

We have been set free, in order that we might set others free.

#### V. Our healing is connected

One final thought as we wrap this up. Sometimes, especially in this country, we become sort of infatuated with the idea that freedom is an individual privilege, or right, or gift from our political system. But the freedom that we have come to know in Christ is bigger than that - and there's nothing individualistic about it.

Rather, the freedom Christ offers teaches us that we have been set free - yes - but that's not all. Christ has set us free for the healing of our neighbors, for the freedom and liberation of the outcast, for the sake of a Love (God's love) that is ready to transform this world into the immanent Kingdom of God. And that is a gift for all of us, to share as one.

So as we think about all that we have been set free from:

The guilt, the sin, the shame... the rat race, the materialism, the perfectionism, the prejudice and the divisiveness of our world today;

we also need to remember that we are not just free FROM, we are free FOR a reason.

And that reason is love -  
love which will push us to the limits  
of what we can handle (spiritually speaking) -  
but love which if we press on toward Jesus,  
love that will change our whole world,  
and maybe even change us in the process.

Love that begs the question: *How far are we willing to go?*  
*How much can we handle?*  
*What will we sacrifice,*  
*for the freedom,*  
*and healing,*  
*and love of our neighbors?*

You see, freedom pushes us to an uncomfortable place. A place where we must choose to act either like the disciples or the Pharisees. Either expanding the limits of the religious laws, or working to destroy Jesus and his mission.

What will be our response?

I'll end with the poetic words of Alla Renee Bozarth, who reminds us that:

There is no difference between  
healing your body and healing the Earth  
or helping another to heal.  
It is all the same Body.

There is no difference between  
healing Earth's body and healing your own  
or helping another to heal.  
We are all the One Body.

Begin anywhere.  
Begin with one tree,  
or a bird.

Begin with your own heart  
or skin, clean out your liver,  
clear your mind.

Begin with the growth of a child,  
your family's food.

Then continue to include  
one small part at a time.  
You will be healing the Whole.

– Alla Renee Bozarth, "Listen"