

**Pentecost 02 B, June 2, 2024**

**"The Open Hand"**

**Read: Mark 2: 23 - 3:6 and/or memorize Mark 3:5 NLT**

**Although our lesson for today only includes two stories, the context has a third one. The issue is the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The conflicts concern fasting, the Sabbath and worship.**

**It's awful easy to talk about the Pharisees as bad guys. I know I've done it. The reality is, they were good people in many ways. As a matter of fact, in at least three important ways, they were very close to Jesus in understandings.**

**First, the Pharisees, like Jesus, were reformers. They wanted to renew the Jewish faith by instituting changes to make it a more vibrant one. They believed that many people had forgotten the basics of the Bible and the law of God. Jesus agreed with them.**

**They were alike in a second way. They believed that vibrant ministry must include lay ministry as well as ministry of the priests. Jesus, like the Pharisees, taught that faith is not centered in clergy, but in the people of God. When it came to reforming the practice of their religion, Jesus and the Pharisee's agreed.**

**The big difference between the Pharisees, Jesus and the Sadducee's was their belief about life after death. The third reason Jesus and the Pharisees were alike is they believed that there is a resurrection after death. Sadducees didn't believe that at all.**

**Though Jesus and the Pharisees agreed in many areas, there was one key area in which they were at odds. The Pharisees were judgmental. The way they interpreted the law left no room for any grace. There was no grey area to allow for circumstances. Jesus had an entirely different spirit.**

**We see that illustrated in the three conflicts in Mark 2 & 3. In the verses right before our lesson, the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples for not fasting. To the Pharisees, fasting was an outward sign of inward faith. Jesus looked at the heart rather than the outward action and found them lacking.**

**When the Pharisees fasted and prayed, they often did so to show off their piety. They were looking for people to praise them. Jesus wanted those outward actions to be a sign of a changed heart, one turned to God. He was not seeking to abolish fasting, but saw it from a much different perspective.**

What He said to them was, "No one pours new wine into old skins" He was talking about the new teaching He was offering, a teaching of joy. The old wineskins were the religious ritualistic duties, rules and regulations they followed. At the time of Jesus, wine was fermented in wineskins. You needed to use new wineskins to ferment the wine so that there was some elasticity in it. Old wineskins would just break when they were stretched.

Jesus taught that the new wineskin of joy, not fasting as self-display, is the heart of real piety. The Pharisees called attention to themselves to be admired for their piety. Jesus wanted hearts to be changed. He knew that their emphasis on outward actions, caused them to miss out on the joy of selfless service to God and people. Their views on fasting, Sabbath and worship led them to become closed, hard-hearted and unyielding.

The second conflict had to do with the observance of the Sabbath. Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that it was important to honor and obey this commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." God's idea of Sabbath was to give people time to worship Him and spend time with Him.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees came out not in the content of the commandment, but on the legalistic way they applied it. They criticized Jesus and his disciples for picking ears of corn on the Sabbath, because, according to their interpretation of the law, that was considered work.

Jesus reminded them that David himself had eaten the consecrated bread set aside for the priests in the temple when he was in distress. The point they missed was that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. People were not to be victims and slaves of the rules.

From the very beginning, God intended the Sabbath to enhance life, rest and worship. What really teed them off was when He said that "the son of man is Lord of even the Sabbath." Jesus saw that the Pharisees had stubborn hearts that were getting them into trouble.

Finally, we come to the last area of conflict, worship. In this instance, Jesus goes the synagogue to worship; the Pharisees go to see if they can catch Him in error. Those reasons are at odds with each other. Interestingly enough, their conflict with Jesus will lead them to create a political agreement with another religious party, with whom they differed, to come together to figure out how to kill Jesus.

**So, what's the conflict about? Whether Jesus should help someone on the Sabbath or not? Our problems today tend to be the opposite. The Pharisees were legalists. They used their piety, outward reverence for God, to prove they were right in their teachings. Today, people seem to have become so secular that piety is largely neglected. The Pharisees were hypocrites, pretending to be more religious and better than everyone else.**

**Today, many people seem to hide their piety, for fear of being judged as religious fanatics. The Pharisees were concerned about following religious rules so they would get heavenly rewards. They were closed minded. Today, many people are also closed minded, fearful of not having enough money, or material things, but not fearful about matters of eternal life.**

**What human malady is Jesus trying to help us deal with today? The Pharisees and the man with the withered hand may differ in circumstance and detail, but the problem is still legalistic spirits, hypocrisy and stubborn hearts. To say it another way: the problem is closed minds, hard hearts and clenched fists.**

**The Greek tells us that his hand condition was the result of some illness. We might call our illness sin. Are any of us struggling with that problem which prevents us from stretching our hand to serve God? Think about the symbolism of a stretched-out hand that touches all of us. In this, Jesus was talking about the spiritual condition of closed minds, hard hearts, symbolized by clenched fists.**

**The Pharisees aren't there to worship, but to catch Jesus in some error. When He asks, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" There is no response from these religious experts, which makes Jesus angry with their hardness of heart. Once he healed the man, now they were ready to judge him. Jesus was saying that the Pharisees refused to open their hands to God in the spirit of receptivity. Are we keeping our hands clenched to God, when we refuse to forgive?**

**Henri Nouwen, a noted religious author, tells the story of a woman in a psychiatric center who was acting out, wildly swinging at everyone and everything in sight; scaring everybody. They took everything away from her, except for a coin she held in her possession. She grasped that as if it was the last treasure she owned. If she lost that she would have nothing. Nouwen says that is also the greatest factor in our worship and prayer.**

**In worship and prayer, you are asked to surrender yourself and open your tightly clenched fist to give up your last coin. When you won't open yourself up, you are saying, you feel it is safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust a new future. In doing so, you fill your hands with small, clammy coins, which you don't want to surrender.**

**When we've been hurt and refuse to forgive, we are clenching our fist and holding onto the hurt. The problem is, in holding on, we are hurting ourselves, because it makes us unable to worship, to pray and unable to be who we are intended to be by God.**

**Clenched fists keep us from the joy God wants us to experience in Him. We are afraid to let go of these false treasures for fear of what will happen if we really open our hands to God. We hear Jesus say, "stretch out your hand" and we panic. We will do anything but that. Stretching out our hands means we have to let go of all of the things which we've built our lives upon.**

**To all of the self-defeating attitudes and issues that often times keep our hands clenched, God calls us, through forgiveness, to open our hands. To do that, we have to be vulnerable and self-forgetful, not focusing on ourselves, which is at the heart of worship. When Jesus asked the man to stretch out his hand, He was asking him to accept vulnerability, but also to take the chance of being healed.**

**He had a physical problem. The Pharisees had a spiritual problem. They were unwilling to acknowledge that. They judged others, but would not acknowledge their own sin. Jesus agreed with them in many ways, but they sought to kill Him because of the difference.**

**God is calling us to decide if it is worth taking the chance to open our hands, because it is the only way to experience new life. We often want to change others. The truth is, we can only change ourselves. Until we're willing to admit that, we have a problem, we cannot be healed of it. All those things we seek to hold onto, keep us from depending on God. Even worse, they keep us from a relationship with Him.**

**In some self-help groups, they have a motto, "Let go and let God." Jesus is saying, "God is just an open hand away, but you won't know it until you stretch out your hand. Open your hand to God. Let go of yesterday's clammy coins. God has real treasure to give you."**

**Count me in: How will you "stretch out your hand" to allow God to free you from the bondage you are in?**