

Sermon for Sunday, Feb. 2, 2025

Luke 6:1-16

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Sometimes we hear a Scripture reading like the one from today and we say, “Well, that’s just Jesus. Of course he can say these things. He’s “Jesus.” But when we say it with that tone of voice we are building on a lifetime of knowledge of Jesus. Remember, WE KNOW THE END OF THE STORY! But the people surrounding Jesus 2000 years ago didn’t. All they knew was that he was a man who was raised in Nazareth. They heard his interpretations of the Torah and many thought he was truly gifted. They were surprised at the strength of his arguments about the Scripture.

Then as Luke tells it, Jesus begins healing people. Stories that we don’t hear this year in our readings of Luke are stories like the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and others as they crowded around the door of the house. (BTW, this healing was done on the Sabbath!) He also cleanses a “leper” (person with a skin disease) and heals a paralytic. (This man was let down through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching.) BTW, in this scene Jesus begins by pronouncing that the paralytic’s sins were forgiven—which causes a ruckus because only God can forgive sins! Just who is this man?

After these stories Luke continues to gradually add layers of evidence to strengthen his argument that Jesus is God (or rather God’s Son.) Today’s Scripture reading is providing more evidence for Luke’s premise.

In the opening verses Jesus is walking through grainfields on the Sabbath and his disciples start plucking heads of wheat. The Pharisees call them to account. The problem is not that they are “stealing.” According to the Torah it was perfectly permissible for anyone to pick a few bits of wheat to satisfy their hunger. The issue over which the Pharisees were finding fault was the act of cleaning the grain of its outer covering so that it could be eaten. They considered that harvesting and that was an action forbidden on the Sabbath.

Let me go off on a tangent for a bit. The Jewish people had three tenets that defined them as God’s chosen people. These were the non-negotiables—not so much because God had decreed these

actions, but because these outward actions demonstrated to the rest of the world who the Jewish people were. Sometimes these tenets are thought of as a fence around the Torah. (I’ll explain more about this idea a little later.) What are the three tenets?

1. Circumcision of all Jewish males
2. Observing the Sabbath by refraining from work
3. Keeping kosher—meaning that one observes the dietary prohibitions laid out in the Torah

The Pharisee’s deep concern was to maintain the definition of what it meant to be a part of God’s chosen people. As I said earlier, adherence to these tenets was a way to show the rest of the world which God you followed...and you did so even when it was challenging. Sometimes people refer to this idea as “keeping a fence around the Torah.”

Back to our Scripture reading for today. The disciples were in a field—a public place where other people could see them and they were harvesting grain. These actions might be interpreted as breaking the Sabbath by innocent or uninformed observers. As always, the Pharisee’s deep concern was in regard to maintaining the Jewishness of the people.

The problem with Jesus is that he keeps on stretching the boundaries of those definitions of Jewishness. And the Pharisees are afraid that by stretching those boundaries the people are going to lose something really important—their identity as God’s chosen people.

Today’s Scripture reading contains two stories about Jesus stretching the boundaries of Sabbath. The first has to do with harvesting. The second has to do with healing. My resources clarified that there is no prohibition against healing on the Sabbath especially if it is a matter of life or death. But the scene pictured in the Scripture of the man with the withered hand does not appear to be a matter of life and death. There is no sign that he is on the verge of imminent death (as perhaps Simon’s mother-in-law was). There is also no indication that he asked for healing—the man with the withered hand says nothing in Luke’s description of the scene.

Nevertheless Jesus healed this man. But the boundaries around healing on the Sabbath are clearly stretched, again. Over the years, the rabbis and religious scholars had determined behaviors that were inside the “fence around the Torah” and behaviors that were outside of that fence. Healing that fell within the fence was the “matter of life and death.” Healing the withered hand of a man could be argued as outside of the fence. Jesus is pushing the

boundaries of the fence. And that's why these two stories are paired together. And this pushing the boundaries of the fence is what makes the religious authorities so angry.

One of my resources indicated that there are 39 rules that shape the boundaries of work on the Sabbath. The simple moving of one's arm or hand is obviously acceptable behavior. And that's all that Jesus asks the man to do—stretch out your hand. The man obeyed and his hand was restored. But did Jesus actually perform a healing that could have waited until the next day—the day after the Sabbath? As believers in Jesus and in his power to heal, we would say, yes, absolutely, Jesus performed a healing. But for those present, is there unquestionable evidence? Probably not.

As verse 11 indicates, the religious authorities are angry, again. Jesus keeps stretching those boundaries around Jewish law. But let's not call it Jewish law...let's call it Jewish identity coupled with the idea of who is in and who is not. Up to this point Jesus has been healing Jewish people and teaching in the Jewish synagogues. But he is building a reputation as one who stretches boundaries. In stretching boundaries he is showing the people around him (and us) that the message of God's love and care is for all people—all people.

I opened my sermon with the words, WE KNOW THE END OF THE STORY! If the stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection hadn't been repeated, hadn't been passed on from one generation to the next, we wouldn't know any of this. We wouldn't know about the height and depth and breadth of God's love for us. Even more important, we wouldn't know about the promise of the resurrection that is given to each and every one of us. Having that reassurance settled in our hearts and minds makes it possible for us to go forward each day with confidence. It makes it possible for those who have received tough health diagnoses to go forward each day with confidence. It makes it possible for those who are entering hospice care, and those who have experienced the death of a loved one to go forward each day. No, it isn't easy....in fact it's gut wrenchingly difficult...but we cling with all of our strength to the promise of the resurrection even when it's hard, even when it hurts, even when we are in the midst of deep grief.

As I close this meditation I ask to you to remember the words that the women brought to the disciples on that first Easter morning. They said, HE IS RISEN! Your response should be, HE IS RISEN INDEED!