

Serious Rest

By

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Rules.

Our lives are full of them.

Most of our lives are governed by rules in some fashion. We have the rule of law, those codes enacted that help our society keep order, to keep us from chaos.

We have Robert's rules of order, that have been used for well over a century to guide how we order meetings and make group decisions. We also have unwritten rules, rules that determine how we greet people, how we interact with others in a polite way.

And we have moral codes, codes that are often derived from our faith or cultural background about what is right, and what is wrong. All of these rules give us a sense of order, of routine, that provide security for us and allow us not to feel anxiety, since we know the rules, and how we and others are to behave.

So rules do have their benefit.

But are they always a good thing? Are they always absolute?

Do we live by following the rules?

Or do we follow the advice of many in their youth who say that "rules were meant to be broken."

Today's gospel lesson from Mark poses that very question. Through two short vignettes, we are asked to consider the validity of the rules concerning observing the Jewish Sabbath. We are presented with two very different points of view. On one hand, there is Jesus and the disciples, and on the other hand, we have a

group of Pharisees that appear to be traveling along with them on their way back to Capernaum. In both cases, either the disciples or Jesus, violate the rules governing how one is to observe the Sabbath as commanded by God in the Ten Commandments.

Who is right and who is wrong?

It can be all too easy to paint the Pharisees as the bad guys, the ones in the wrong. We often do this because Jesus himself does that very thing on a fairly regular basis, with good reason. As I'm sure I've expounded upon many times previously, they did use the law to maintain their elevated and privileged status in society, often to the detriment of the common folk. But in this instance I don't know that their motivations are entirely negative. They, like us, value the rules and the security they provide.

Those laws were how humans came to terms with the expectations of their deity, how they defined their relations with God. They were meant to ensure that it was clear what was meant by "remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy." It kept their world black and white and attempted to eliminate any gray.

Sabbath laws were just how things were done.

In order to be absolutely sure that you did not violate the provision to do no work on the Sabbath, you would never consider doing any physical activity whatsoever that wasn't absolutely necessary. And in all fairness, Jesus is intentionally setting them up for a fall. There is no indication that the disciples are in any way starving and need to pick those heads of wheat for vital sustenance. The text reads like they are lackadaisically picking wheat as they stroll through the field.

It should also be stressed that Jewish Sabbath law would in no way prohibit someone from receiving life-saving treatment on the Sabbath. Jesus is again being provocative and overly dramatic in that illustration as well. There is no reason he couldn't have waited until sundown to heal the man's withered hand. It wasn't a matter of life and death.

So why is Jesus initiating this quarrel, what is the reason for these apparent acts of sacrilege? He's obviously making a public statement about the purpose of these rules that have become such a central part of the contemporary Jewish faith of the time. But what was that statement and how did Sabbath fit into all this? Well, it helps to give some thought to the intended meaning behind all these Sabbath codes.

In the Creation story of Genesis, God creates the world in six days, and on the seventh, God rests. Does an all-powerful deity really need to take a siesta? Is God really so tuckered out that he needs a nap? Or maybe the message of that story is more about us than God. As a God who is also all-knowing, the Divine presence recognized that we as his creation needed regular breaks. God knew the stress and struggle of everyday life that we would face, and the toll that would take not only on our physical health, but our mental and spiritual health as well. We need a day to disconnect, to relax and enjoy life, to smell the proverbial flowers. So God made it a requirement that we take time to do just that. So when the Israelites received that imperative for self-care, they came up with what were common sense criteria at the time, to make sure people were reminded to take that special time for themselves. The point that Jesus is trying to make is

that over time there was so much focus on following the rules, that the original intent had been lost. The Israelites, in their very human desire to have things be black and white, canonized the rules that made sense in the original context into absolute eternal dogma with no exceptions.

And while Jesus was a threat to the Pharisees power and status, perhaps the more pressing threat for them was his challenge to the ritual and time-honored traditions that ordered their faith live into neat little categories. Everything was yes and no, black and white, with no significant gray to be found. This new approach of Jesus would be terrifying to them. Instead of focusing on the text and traditions, Jesus is saying they need to focus on people, on how these rules affect real people, as individuals, and as community. They need to evaluate how those rules work with the original intent.

“The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.”

I'm just so thankful though, that Jesus clarified all of that and it's just an old discarded problem from the old days of Judaism. Right? I mean, it's not like we get stuck in absolutes or biblical literalism, and only want to see things in black or white. Or are we too, tempted to side with the Pharisees sometimes, to become angry and irritated with everything that falls outside of our customary and familiar reading of Scripture, and our traditions that come out of that reading.

Now all traditions and orthodoxy are not necessarily a bad thing, it's how we find concrete ways of living out and celebrating our faith and dedication to God. But this story reminds us of the terrible price that is extracted when these commitments become idolatry; when we obsess with religious conventions, and

morality, and we lose sight of cherishing the actual people of God, and mirroring the compassion of God to those same people.

Sadly, as much as we desire to make Scripture and our God be black and white, cut and dry, that's not the way this God operates. God will never fit into any box we try to fit God in, and in the same respect, we should never try to fit ourselves or anyone else in a static box either. Times and circumstances are always evolving and changing. Jesus instructs us to always be looking to make sure how we worship, how we interpret scripture and develop doctrine, carries the same message and meaning, love and compassion, as it did in its original context.

What does it look like to take Sabbath rest in the 21st century?

How do we step away from the work and worry of our daily lives effectively today? Is it unplugging for a day? Is it enjoying a day of sports with the family? Unfortunately, in the last couple of centuries, there has been a movement to read scripture and create dogma in a very literal way, to force the rules to be "black and white" and "cut and dry" in the same way the Pharisees sought to do. And just like those Pharisees of old, that way of doing things often misses the same point. How many moral standards do we cling to that are based in ancient contexts that no longer have the same meaning?

One thing that comes to my mind is women's hair coverings. In Near East and eastern Mediterranean cultures, it was considered a sign of modesty for a woman to cover her hair in public. Paul in reinforcing that one should be modestly attired and have a holy focus in worship, said that women should have

their heads covered in worship because of the local customs of dress and propriety. Yet because that was written in scripture, and taken as black and white, as the faith spread to other geographical areas with different customs concerning what kind of dress was modest, head coverings continued, with the Anabaptist traditions clinging to the tradition well into the modern day.

The point is, when the moral code or doctrine we cling to no longer serves the same purpose, or is actually harmful for individuals or communities, we need to rethink how we are doing things and what criteria we use.

“We’ve always done it that way”, or “that’s the way we’ve always read that Scripture” are the exact arguments the Pharisees would make in our stories today. Sound familiar at all? This walk we are called to by Jesus, unfortunately, is rarely “black and white.” It’s not a once and done study. Like the Sabbath, ours is a faith walk brought by a Savior who’s all about lifting up the people of God, easing their burdens, not adding to them.

Like the Pharisees, when we harden our hearts to another because of Scripture or doctrine, that’s a sure sign we got some study and reflection to do. Nobody likes the gray areas of life, but often that’s where we find God. Not in comfortable surety, but in change and adaptation.

*I hope and pray that we can seek Jesus’ gray path,
that favors compassion and love over legalism.*

Amen.