

Deuteronomy 5:12-15  
Psalm 81:1-10  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Mark 2:23-3:6

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St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
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Pentecost 2, Year B

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Jesus' anger is always a jolt. It's a fierce reminder of his humanity. And yet it can be hard to integrate with our archetypal image of the tender, loving, and protective savior who preached, after all, that the greatest commandment was love.

Yet the stakes were high. Despite the cost, Jesus never backed down when it came to love. "The time is always right to do what's right." Those ten words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sum up the three years of Jesus' ministry as well as any other.

This morning's reading from Mark is easy to grasp on the surface which makes it seem more simplistic than it actually is— and there's nothing wrong with simplicity on a fine spring morning--- but we cheat ourselves when we take shortcuts in faith.

The simple reading is that it's better to feed the hungry and heal those in need of healing, sabbath or no sabbath. Most of us think that's what we would do and then move on.

Jesus knew the Pharisees in the synagogue watching both him and the man with the crippled and hand. He demands to know what they would do and they remain silent. Mark tells us that "Angered at their hardness of heart" Jesus restores the withered hand to wholeness. The Pharisees depart, plotting to kill him.

That in itself is a good reason to be angry. Every miracle ups the bounty on Jesus' life.

But here's what's interesting. Biblical scholarship examining different translations of this text makes a credible case for the belief that what Mark originally wrote was the word "compassion" which was changed to "anger" by a translator. This draws us more closely into the text.

The simple reading of the text risks being antisemitic. The Pharisees, as the Jewish elite, prioritized rules over love. Writes public theologian Debie Thomas:

The Pharisees in this story are not a stand-in for Judaism. They are a stand-in for all convictions, values, traditions, commitments, doctrines, absolutes, proclivities, preferences, and essentialisms — no matter how cherished, noble, or well-intentioned — that stand between us and compassion.<sup>1</sup>

This she writes leads us to the question we need to ask ourselves:

What here and now have we ossified at our own peril? ... What mortal, broken thing have we deified instead of love? .... The Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath. They were absolutely right. But rightness is not love. Rightness is not compassion. Rightness will never get us to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. Only compassion will do that.<sup>2</sup>

This brings the text right to our doorstep. We Episcopalians are wedded to our traditions. A silly story of my own from years ago when I had communion in a prominent Episcopal Church in San Francisco: The wine was white. I was mortified and asked someone afterwards about it. The response? "It makes it easier to clean the linen."

While I don't think that quite makes me a Pharisee, it makes the point albeit simplistically. We can be so blinded by our own sense of rightness and tradition without even realizing it.

A more serious example that goes to the heart of the text is the Catholic Church and the LGBTQ community. There are dioceses in this country — such as the one in Michigan's Upper Peninsula — that deny the sacraments of baptism and communion to trans, gay, and nonbinary Catholics.

Here in Philadelphia, Eli Musselman, a Catholic trans teen who transitioned when he was 15, said when his parish priest refused to use his masculine pronouns, he began to have anxiety attacks in church. Some parishioners gave him nasty looks. His family found another church.

"A place that had once been a safe haven for me had become a place of dangers," he said two years ago during his freshman year at St. Joseph's University — a Jesuit school where with one exception he

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, Debie, "Journey with Jesus," A Weekly webzine for the Global Church, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

said he's been largely welcomed and supported. "But since coming out," he added, "my spirituality has grown. ... I feel whole for the first time in my life."<sup>3</sup>

Everything in Jesus' life and ministry-- every miracle, every healing, was about restoring people to wholeness—to the fullness of their being as God's beloved—which hands down, beats rules every time.

But there are Catholic churches that act out of love rather than rigidity. Christine Zuba came out as a trans woman at 58, although she had said she'd known she was different at 4. She's a Eucharistic minister at her Catholic church in New Jersey and said:

We are not trying to defy God, nor to play God....By staying visible, not only outside these walls but inside our churches, we change hearts and minds, one person at a time...Once in a while we may get thrown out, but if that happens, we're not going away. We're coming right back in.<sup>4</sup>

I would not be preaching in this pulpit on this day were it not for 11 brave women ... and 3 brave bishops who 50 years ago this summer violated their clerical vows and church rules to ordain them because according to canon law, only men could be priests. It was the culmination of a decades-long and hateful fight that threatened to split the church. Some of the priests who supported the women lost jobs and some of the women were threatened and shunned.

"The Philadelphia Eleven" a documentary that's making the rounds and one I hope to show here at St. Martin's.

The Pharisees --from 2,000 years ago -- make easy targets in Christianity especially if we fail to look at ourselves. But the rule breakers 50 years ago stood up in compassion and love for what was right and we, as a church, are better for it.

Over and over again Jesus chose compassion and love. Over and over again, he paid a price for it. Yet we who believe in him, worship him, and profess to follow him often fall short because the stakes feel too high.

This month we celebrate PRIDE. Unlike our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, most of us have never been judged, condemned, or hated for who we love or how we were born to be in this world. I will never forget the lesbian couple who attended St. Martin's years ago before moving to DC who said to me, "We can't just walk into any church."

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<sup>3</sup> Crary, David, "Rejection or Welcome: Transgender Catholics Encounter Both," Associated Press, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

May we be inspired by the courage it takes to love openly and freely and may we continue to open our own hearts to be bigger, bolder, and braver in Jesus' name.

AMEN.