

4B 2024

How do know when the rules apply?

Today's gospel asks a universal question and offers one of Jesus' more important teachings.

So first, we need to look at context. Notice that we're in chapter 2 of Mark's gospel – this morning's incidents take place VERY early in Mark's presentation of Jesus' ministry.

As we've observed before, Mark's gospel takes off at a stunning pace: in Chapter 1 we're introduced to all of the themes and patterns that will characterize Mark's narrative. Jesus is baptized, tempted, calls disciples, casts out an unclean spirit, heals at Peter's home, preaches, cleanses a leper, and attracts a crowd of followers in forty-five verses!

Chapter 2 introduces a new element, the beginnings of opposition, which will also be a theme threading throughout the gospel. It's interesting that conflicts arise not with civil authorities, but with religious leaders. These tensions clearly reflect the impact Jesus was having on increasing numbers of people, which were causing discomfort among leaders in the community.

In the opening verses of chapter 2, Jesus finds himself in conflict with religious leaders over his declaring forgiveness of sin, his dining with tax collector, and his fasting practices.

Today's story involves two issues related to observance of the Sabbath. Jesus was allowing the disciples to pick grain, and he healed a man with a withered hand, all on the Jewish sabbath.

We can recall that "honoring the Sabbath" is one of the Ten Commandments. Jews of both Jesus' time and today understand the Law of Moses – introduced in the Ten Commandments and elaborated in great detail in subsequent chapters – as God's gift to God's people as the means for human beings to be in right relationship with God.

Systems of law – both within faith traditions and in ANY human community – aim to create a safe and orderly environment in which members can get the most out of life. Law ensures a consistent environment in which people can make choices, grow and flourish: Thomas Jefferson called it the "pursuit of happiness". Laws protect the vulnerable, the less powerful members of a community, from the impulses of the more powerful.

I have great sympathy for position of the Pharisees in this morning's gospel reading. You may or may not know that prior to my life as a parish minister I spent 32 years in educational settings with responsibility for rule enforcement, and the last 15 of those as a Dean with primary responsibility to maintain order.

In that context, I understood disciplinary systems as helping young people learn to be accountable and to internalize skills of self-discipline and responsible choice-making – skills we all need in life!

As a teacher of Religious Studies I also taught Ethics for many years and so have done a lot of thinking about rules, including both how we formulate them and how we live with them. I appreciate having rules that order the way we live together, and I fundamentally trust the processes we have for establishing and enforcing our shared rules.

I acknowledge that level of our national life, there are serious flaws in the way laws are applied, but I value that all of us have a voice in the determination of our laws and in selection of those who enforce them.

Getting back to today's gospel, the Sabbath law is a GOOD law. (If you'd like to think more about it, I recommend Abraham Joshua Heschel's classic book, *The Sabbath* as a beautiful, in-depth meditation on the importance of Sabbath.) Keeping Sabbath requires people to take time for refreshment and renewal, pausing from the cares of business and personal advancement to take time with family, and with God. Observance of the Sabbath provides us a break from the pressures of life to re-center ourselves.

Within the Jewish community Rabbis have always had responsibility for establishing and understanding of what activities constitute the “work” from which faithful people were required to abstain, as a means of “honoring” and “keeping holy” the Sabbath.

I want to think Pharisees were not just interested in asserting their own authority, as a way Mark's story might be read, but were genuinely trying to protect the interests of people they felt responsible for. The Pharisees were trying to protect a way of life they understood as having come from God, and which they understood to be the path to righteousness.

But Jesus complicated the picture by challenging their most basic assumptions: *The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.*

Jesus reminds them, and us, that while the Law is holy, it is a tool that serves a greater purpose – a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The Law given by God does not exist IN ORDER to be followed, but in order to help us live into our potential as children of God.

Jesus' implication in response to the Pharisees' criticism is that if choosing to feed themselves to sustain their ministry required violating Sabbath laws, that was a choice that honored God's will.

And then, along the same lines, providing healing to a suffering person was most certainly consistent with God's will, even if it conflicted with general understandings of Sabbath observance.

So, back to basics. When do the rules apply? Usually, but not always.

Is this an easy principle to use? Of course not.

As did the Pharisees, all of us can fall into uncritical attachment to the importance of the rules and standards we have established. I'm sure you can think of as many examples as I can of where American society in general, and the Episcopal church included, have been rigid in enforcing needlessly narrow and exclusive principles. (Being in Pride month is a single example of how American society has largely, though not at all fully let go of exclusionary rules around ways in which people love one another.)

At the same time that we're inclined to cling to the letter of the law, we can equally (and maybe even MORE easily) justify to ourselves why the particular case in which WE have an interest is the legitimate exception in which the rule should not apply.

So how do we figure it out?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, of God's love for humankind, helps us in remembering what is truly important. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has said, many times, that "if it's not about Love, it's not about God."

On the St. Mary's website is the statement, right under the parish' name, that describes us as "A Community of Faith, Helping Our Neighbors and Celebrating God's Good News".

Certainly, between these two principles – "Love" and "Helping our Neighbors", we have the yardsticks against which we can evaluate whether any given moment is one in which to honor the rules, or the moment in which to break them.

We know that God's love is stronger than the safety that law and order offers. Jesus' life calls us to put the law to use for our neighbor, and at the same time to know that as often as we succeed, we will falter and fail. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection promises that, at the end, it is God's love that we can trust to show us the way.