

IF YOU CHOOSE

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Mark 2:23-3:6

There is a story that takes place early in the Gospel of Mark about Jesus healing a man afflicted with leprosy. Leprosy was a catch-all term for a wide range of skin conditions. If a person was labeled a leper they were required to leave their home and live outside the boundaries of the community. If, somehow, they were healed, then they would have to appear before a priest to be declared ritually clean before being allowed to return to the community.

Jesus is preaching somewhere in Galilee when he is approached by a leper. This was problematic because a “clean” person like Jesus was not allowed to associate with an “unclean” person. This leper approaches Jesus begging and saying, *If you choose, you can make me clean*. The leper must realize that Jesus is not a priest and not authorized to declare him ritually clean. The man is asking instead for true healing, not just ritual healing. He wants to be made well and he has faith that Jesus can accomplish this. Jesus has pity on the man and he reaches out and touches him saying, *I do choose. Be made clean*. And immediately, the leprosy leaves the man. Jesus instructs the man to go and locate a priest to order to be declared clean again so that he might resume his life.

I love the dynamics that we find here. The leper acknowledges Jesus’ power when he says, *If you choose*. He knows that Jesus possesses the power and ability to cure him but only if Jesus so chooses. This man has fallen as far as one can fall. He is a diseased outcast with no community. He subsists on the charity of others. He has no leverage to ask Jesus to heal him. He simply recognizes Jesus’ power says, *If you choose, you can make me clean*.

In the chapters of Mark’s Gospel, choice is important. Mark is writing to a people who feel trapped in a system that denies them choice. This system is the Jewish Law. The Law itself is not bad or evil, but “keeping the law” had become burdensome for most people. Their relationship with God was hindered—if not blocked completely—by the byzantine system of rules and obligations. Furthermore, the Law was used by those with power to control access to the faith. It was no secret that it was easier for wealthy people to keep the Law than for the poor. Honoring God had become an external exercise of diet and charity and religious observances.

The purpose of all this Law-keeping was to become righteous—to achieve a right relationship with God. Those barriers between us and God need to be removed. Because we are sinners, the road to becoming right with God is be absolved of our sins. The accepted way of doing this was through prayer and sacrifice and strict observance of the Law.

But Jesus enters the picture offering an alternative. You remember the story of where a paralyzed man is lowered through the roof of a house in order to be brought closer to Jesus. Jesus says to the man, *your sins are forgiven*. There are some who witness Jesus saying this and ask, *Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?* Yes, God forgives sins but the process is as simple as a heartfelt repentance. In fact, the first thing Jesus says when he begins his ministry is, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news*. Jesus' message is one of repentance, asking God for forgiveness. His message is radical in that it by-passes the complex system of religious observances. It also challenges the authority of those in power—the gatekeepers of righteousness. With Jesus, their hold on the institution of faith is weakened. That makes them dangerous.

Our reading for today consists of two stories which take place on the Sabbath. In the first story, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field, and as they go the disciples pluck heads of grain. What they are doing technically is work—harvesting grain to eat—and therefore something that is not to be done on the Sabbath. The Law demands that food for the Sabbath is to be prepared the day before. The Pharisees observe the disciples picking grain and confront Jesus asking him why the disciples are doing something that is so patently un-Lawful. Jesus responds by recalling the story from scripture about the time that David and his men were on the run from Saul and they enter a temple and eat the sacred bread off of the alter. Because it was a matter of life and death Jesus asks if their actions were lawful? Then Jesus makes the statement that is the heart of this reading when he says, *The Sabbath was made for humankind, not the humankind for the Sabbath*.

The Sabbath, of course, is the seventh day of creation, the day God decreed to be a day of rest. The Sabbath is to be kept holy. However, over time, keeping the Sabbath had become an end in itself. Jesus forced the people to ask, 'Do we keep the Sabbath as a testimony to God, or do we keep the Sabbath because we must keep the rules?' Jesus is arguing that sometimes there are greater values or needs that need to be taken into account, especially those that promote a person's well-being.

For Jesus to say that we need to look at the larger picture was not anything new. His words are not scandalous. Rabbis had long recognized a sense of perspective in keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a gift from God for humankind—a time to rest, a time for renewal, a time for worship

The story of the disciples plucking grain is followed by the account of the man with the withered hand. On a Sabbath, Jesus enters a synagogue; among those in the synagogue is a man with a deformed hand. We aren't told if this deformity was the result of an accident, or illness, or if he had been born this way. The Pharisees in the synagogue watch Jesus closely to see how he is going to respond. Will he heal this man? Healing is viewed as work. And work is prohibited on the

Sabbath. Jesus calls the man to him. Jesus then addresses the Pharisees saying, *Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath...?*

The Pharisees say nothing. Jesus instructs the man to stretch out his hand. The man does so and his hand is restored. He is made well. For the Pharisees, this is enough. They begin conspiring on how they might destroy Jesus.

Like with the leper, here in the synagogue, faced with the man with the withered hand, Jesus has a choice. He can heal this man and make him whole and upset the Pharisees or he can do nothing and maintain the status quo. Was this man's life in imminent danger? No. He could certainly wait until the Sabbath has passed to be healed. But Jesus is present; the opportunity for healing is at hand. Why wait? Would waiting honor the Sabbath? Is God's salvation doled out on some schedule? There was a need and Jesus addressed it even though there were some who objected. These objections would eventually cost Jesus his life.

The good news of the gospel that Jesus brings is that we have a choice. If we desire to be changed, to be made clean, if we desire to be right with God, then all we must do is repent. We are not bound by rules and laws and are not judged on how well we keep those laws. We have a choice. We can repent.

The leper said to Jesus *If you choose* and Jesus chooses him. The good news is that Jesus always makes the choice to heal, to make whole, to make clean, to forgive. If we are hungry for spiritual nourishment there is no one on this earth who can say 'sorry, nothing for you now.' If we feel less than whole, there is no one who can say, 'just wait a day or two and we'll get to you when it is convenient.' Our choice is always God.

Finally, as Christians, we are also disciples of Jesus and are called to be his voice in this world. Just as the Sabbath is for people, Jesus is for people, and so should we be for people. When someone comes to us saying, 'If you choose, you can help me,' then we must respond as Jesus. Just as Jesus always chose good over harm, so must we. We must always choose good. We must do so with no regard or calculation for the cost, or the rules, or the expectations others may have for us. We must choose good knowing that just as there were ultimately a cost for Jesus, there will be a cost for us as well. But that is just the price of doing business in the kingdom of God. Amen.