

Title: “Speaking for God in the Silence”

Series: Life Transformation

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6

Date Used: February 19, 2022

Focus: Society and its many institutions can get caught up in the most ridiculous things. Obsessed with rules and meaningless regulations, concerned more with power and control than with fulfilling God’s purpose, we build power structures to presence our own interests. The church is called to be the voice for those harmed by these destructive powers. Will we speak or will we remain silent?

There were and there are some interesting laws on the books in some states and in some cities throughout our country. Even though these laws are no longer enforced, some of them are still on the books.

For instance:

- Did you know that in Hawaii it is illegal to insert pennies in your ears?
- In Santa Ana, California, you are not permitted to swim on dry land.
- In Gary, Indiana, it is illegal to attend the theater within four hours of eating garlic.
- If you attend a wedding in Colorado, you need to know it is against the law to throw shoes at the bridal couple.
- Oklahoma, a state surrounded by land, has a law about catching whales in its waters.
- In Nevada, it is illegal to drive camels along the highway.
- In California, it is illegal to trap a mouse without a license.
- In Paulding, Ohio, it is legal for a police officer to bite a dog in order to quiet it down.
- In Illinois, teaching your household pet to smoke a cigar is illegal.
- It’s illegal to set a mule on fire in Maine.
- It is an infringement of the law in Alabama to wear a false mustache in church if it makes people laugh.
- It is illegal to eat peanuts in church in Massachusetts.

As I read over these laws, I wondered what situations led to the establishment of some of these laws in the first place. Like in Lang, Kansas, you cannot drive a mule down Main Street during the month of August without wearing a straw hat. Where did that come from?

Some of these laws make about as much sense as the ones Jesus had to confront during his ministry. You can’t do any sort of work on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees and those who adhered to their ways understood rigorous observance of the Sabbath as a sign of genuine faith. They would debate fine points of the Law, such as whether a man was allowed to carry a handkerchief with him on the Sabbath, since the carrying of any load on this day of rest was forbidden; or whether he should tie the handkerchief around his arm, that way the kerchief would be an article of clothing. They viewed debates such as this as an expression of their earnest attempt to be obedient to God’s Law and therefore, obedient to God.

From the perspective of the Pharisees, to keep the Sabbath Law was to honor God. It was how an individual revealed one’s obedience to God. They also viewed the opposite to be true: To disobey the Sabbath Law was to reveal one’s disobedience toward God. So, when Jesus’ disciples plucked the heads of grain on the Sabbath, when Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees saw these actions as transgressions against the Law of God and therefore, they believed Jesus and his disciples were dishonoring God.

Jesus was concerned that any expression of obedience that simply follows the letter of the law was less than full obedience. You get that. People can fulfill the letter of the law without having their hearts in it. There is a great Dennis the Menace cartoon where Dennis is in trouble, and he is sitting in the corner once again because he told his playmate Margaret that she was ugly. Dennis' mother is upset and demands that he apologize to Margaret at once. And Dennis protests and says, "I did apologize, I told Margaret I was sorry she was so ugly." Technically, he did apologize, but it's clear his heart was not in it.

We can do all the things we have been commanded to do not because we have been moved by compassion, or because we have any desire to do the right thing. We can do what is required of us simply because we must in order to keep God's commandments.

In the context of our gospel lesson today, Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to look at the intent behind the Sabbath Law. What is it really about? What is the real reason for this law? Is the Sabbath Law really about the avoidance of work or is it about the importance of focusing on God and what it is God really desires from us? Jesus is saying the real reason for the Sabbath is to get us to focus on God and on the person God wants us to be.

What is so troubling in this text for me is the tenacity of the Pharisees. They represent what we often see in social systems that need to change. They are so caught up in the preservation of their ways that they have created arguments to justify what they do, arguments that cannot be penetrated. They have created a system that is not open to confrontation.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights leaders took on the Jim Crow laws of the South they found themselves taking on a set of laws that were nearly impossible to penetrate. The southern states had created a system of government that ensured the preservation the system of segregation.

So, when civil rights workers marched, they were arrested for marching. When they protested, they were arrested for protesting.

When they were arrested, King and other religious leaders were criticized by fellow Christians because they were operating outside of the realm of the church, they were addressing social issues. They were criticized and told by fellow Christians that the church was supposed to be concerned with spiritual matters, not with the government and the issues of society.

Throughout time, Christians involved with social change have been criticized by others in the faith for getting involved in social issues. They often hear things like, "What has that got to do with religion. Christians should be concerned about the souls of people and not get caught up in political and social issues."

It's as if for many people of the faith the world is divided into two separate realms – you have the sacred and the secular. You have the realm of faith and that of society and politics.

But Jesus does not accept this distinction. He realizes, it is all God's. Every aspect of our society and every aspect of our lives is under the reign of God.

For the past couple of weeks, we have been looking at life transformation. The first major step in life transformation occurs when we decide to accept Jesus' invitation to follow him. And that transformation continues when we enter into that ongoing life process of allowing various parts of who we are to be transformed by the power of Christ.

Life transformation is not just an individual thing. The Gospel lesson this morning reminds us that Jesus came not only to transform individuals, but he came to transform the structures of society as well. When he proclaimed that “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand;” when he proclaimed that now is the time to believe that God can change a life and move it in a new direction, he wasn’t just talking about individuals. He was talking about the institutions we belong to as well.

Just like individuals, organizations and the institutions within society can lose sight of the Creator. Systems within society can fail to remember that they ultimately exist for the purpose of accomplishing God’s will. Like the institution the Pharisees created, institutions can become consumed with seeking only their own good, doing what is in their own best interest and not worrying about the effect their laws have upon others.

In this text from Mark’s Gospel we heard this morning, we witness how Jesus sought to transform the institutions of his society. We see the methods he used.

1. One of the things Jesus did was to try to break into the closed institutions of his day by calling into question the false truths they were built upon. Jesus used the methodology of making short statements and asking questions that were intended to force his critics to examine the foundations of their beliefs and practices. In this instance Jesus asks, “Now tell me, were we created to observe the Sabbath? Did God create us to observe the Sabbath or did God give us the Sabbath as a gift for us? And since you are so concerned about doing what is right, is it lawful to do good or to do harm to someone on the Sabbath?”

By using this method, the hope is that by asking questions will force the people in power to examine their own beliefs and practices. The hope is that in examining their own beliefs and practices they will come to some self-understanding of the error of their ways.

When Dr. King took on the practice of segregation in the south, he knew he couldn’t take on the local and state laws that upheld the practice of segregation. Instead, he questioned the constitutionality of such laws in light of the United States Constitution. Ultimately, he questioned the validity of Jim Crow laws in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In order to transform institutions, we have to ask questions. Questions have a way of exposing the foundational principles and actions institutions base their beliefs and actions upon.

When we ask questions as Jesus did, we allow people to wrestle with things and examine things for themselves.

2. In this story Jesus wants the Church to know that to be individually transformed by the Gospel is to join in his work of seeking the transformation of all that belongs to God. It is to confront the unjust and ungodlike practices we see in the institutions of society and invite them to reconnect with God’s purpose. Sometimes when those institutions practices are so unjust and do so much harm to God’s children, we will have to do more than simply invite them to examine themselves and we will have to push them toward change.

There are times the voices of the strong can be heard loud and clear and the voices of those victimized by their actions have been almost completely silenced. God calls us to listen to those muted voices and when God’s way has been transgressed, to help those voices be heard.

When the Pharisees complain that Jesus is healing on the Sabbath, while everybody in the synagogue is watching, Jesus calls the man forward that needs healing. Jesus puts the man in need, whose cry is threatening to be silenced, he puts him in front of the microphone. In effect he is saying, “Here’s the guy you want to refuse help to. Look at him! Listen to his story!”

When Rosa Parks, who became the national symbol of the Civil Rights movement died several years ago, her funeral received national attention. At one time in her life, she was nothing more than an oppressed black woman living in Birmingham, Alabama. That is, until she refused to be silent anymore. The moment she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, her voice grew louder. It grew even louder when her experience became the symbol of the Birmingham bus boycott. Her voice became a roar when her story became one of the foundational stories of the Civil Rights movement.

Church, are we listening to the voices of those who are often muted in our society. When we listen to them, can we hear the voice of God calling for a more just society.

3. It's not easy work. Challenging the powers that be usually calls us to endure pain and hardship. Institutions with power do not give up power easily, they remain locked in their circular arguments, and they keep pointing out the error of our ways and the falseness of our arguments. They will do what it takes to maintain their power.

No sooner does Jesus heal the man on the Sabbath and the Pharisees conspire with King Herod's buddies about how they can kill him. There is always a price to pay when you mess with people in power. Many reformers that have sought a more just society, that have sought to bring the transforming power of Christ into certain elements of society have paid a heavy price. In the late 1950's and 1960's Civil Rights workers had their homes and churches bombed, they were beat, jailed and some were even killed.

Institutions can be so convinced that they are right that they will do whatever it takes to maintain their power. And they will pervert the understanding of what they do to justify their actions.

What did they finally say about Jesus, "He stirs up the people. He's going to cause riots, kill him." And Pilate did.

Jesus demonstrates that we need to keep questioning the unjust practices and the foundational beliefs those practices rest upon. We need to allow the voices of those who have been silenced to be heard. And we have got to be ready to pay a price – social transformation does not come easily.

But the presence of Christ's Spirit in our lives keeps moving us toward that ultimate end that God seeks – a transformed society where the kingdom of God is at hand, a just society where the value of all of God's people is recognized and celebrated.