Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 3, 2018

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THE WEIGHTIER DEMAND Deuteronomy 5:12–15

Psalm 81:1–10

Mark 2:23–3:6

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark sets the stage for a deepening conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day, which will eventually lead to his death. The prophetic ministry of Jesus has hardly begun, and here he is, already embroiled in controversy, this time over the keeping of the Sabbath.

At first glance, it seems that Jesus is confronting the holiness code of Jewish religious practice. The keeping of the Sabbath lay at the heart of the holiness code. On the Sabbath, no work whatsoever was to be undertaken. That meant, and still means for Orthodox Jews, that anything that could be considered work was prohibited. That included plucking heads of grain or acts of healing or preparing food or cleaning the house. The Sabbath was to be kept as a day of total and complete rest. Some Orthodox Jews today will not even press the button of an elevator on the Sabbath but must get someone else to do it for him or her.

So when Jesus allowed his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, it appeared that he had little regard for the rules governing the Sabbath. The Pharisees got after him. Jesus brilliantly quoted the Bible itself to justify the behavior of his disciples. Did not David give the bread placed in the tent housing the Ten Commandments, which was to be eaten only by the priests, to his companions when they were hungry? (1 Samuel 21:1–6) Would God want anyone to go hungry on the Sabbath? Remember, said Jesus, human beings were not made for the Sabbath; to the contrary, the Sabbath was made for humankind.

Then Jesus, again contrary to the laws governing the Sabbath, heals a man with a withered hand. Jesus again confronts the Pharisees. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on Sabbath, to save life or to kill.” (Mark 3:4) It is a rhetorical question. Of course, it is right to do what is good and makes for life on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are silenced, but begin to conspire with the Herodians, the Jewish group that collaborated with the Roman authorities. Together, the Pharisees and the Herodians set out to destroy Jesus.

At first glance, then, Jesus stands in opposition to the religious rules of the holiness code, the rules that govern the keeping of the Sabbath. On the other hand, he recovers the essential value of the Sabbath. God created the Sabbath for humankind. God created the Sabbath so that human beings might know what makes for life and wholeness. In Deuteronomy, the keeping of the Sabbath is linked to the liberation of the ancient Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt. They are to remember that they were once aliens in the land of Egypt, and so they are to extend the life-giving benefits of the Sabbath to the resident aliens living among them.

But let us recognize that Jesus’s actions, which run counter to the strict religious rules governing behavior on the Sabbath, are highly symbolic. That is, they point beyond themselves to larger and more important issues—namely, issues of justice and peace.

When the disciples pluck the grains of wheat because they were hungry, the issue is hunger itself, and not only the hunger of the disciples, but also the hunger of the poor. In the time when Jesus carried out his ministry, the minute a crop was harvested, it was subject to the purity rules and the rules governing the percentage of the produce that was to be given to the priests under the watchful eyes of the Pharisees. All this meant less food for the peasant farmers. Even the rules governing the Sabbath year, every seventh year, which stated that no crops could be planted and harvested, placed a burden on peasant farmers who barely had enough to eat. The plucking of the grain by the disciples pointed beyond itself to the larger issue of justice for the poor.

Then, when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, his gracious act again pointed beyond itself. The healing pointed to the larger issue of peace—*shalom*— and we need to remember that *shalom* did not just mean the absence of war and conflict. Shalom meant the presence of wholeness and wellbeing, and that is exactly what Jesus gave to the man with the withered hand.

It is as if Jesus is saying that the Sabbath itself points beyond itself to the need for justice and for peace in the world. The demand to keep the Sabbath must give way to the weightier demand for the hungry to be fed and the sick to be made whole. The weightier demand is the demand for peace and justice.

As for us, we are no longer required to follow the strict purity code outlined in the Book of Leviticus. We can eat shellfish (as long as we are not allergic to it). We can wear clothes made of mixed fibers. We can cook on Sunday. Shigeo Kimura and I tease each other about taking our long walks on the Sabbath, but I think it’s probably OK to do so!

At the same time, we have our own forms of Christian piety. We value the need for Sunday worship. We value the need for prayer. We value the practice of giving a portion of our wealth to the ministry and mission of the church. Those of us who are able give of our time and energy to serve on the boards and committees of our church. All of these are forms of Christian piety.

But the weightier demand beyond the demand to participate in worship and prayer and giving service to our church is the demand to be makers of peace and doers of justice in our world. Our worship and our prayers are important, but perhaps even more important is God’s requirement that we love kindness and do justice and walk humbly with our God. This is the weightier demand.

Our world and our nation are in a sorry state. Children of South American immigrants who cross our boarders without papers are separated from their parents, and all immigrants are looked upon with suspicion. There is a crisis in health care and the safety net providing basic necessities to the poor is full of holes. The norms of acceptable public civil discourse are being set aside in favor of vulgar and crude language. And we could go on. I think you know what I mean.

The question becomes: how can we as a Christian community respond? Perhaps we can once again work through FACE, Faith Action for Community Equity. Perhaps we can establish a new task force on peace, justice, and the stewardship of creation to help the congregation respond to the weighty issues of our day. Perhaps we can work with other faith communities to bear witness to the peace and justice of God’s realm.

Whatever we do, we can never lose sight of God’s will for the world, God’s weightier demand—God’s desire for peace and justice in the earth. This is central to our resolve to be a missional church, doing what we can to further God’s mission in the world. Let us, then, as best as we can, never cease to respond faithfully to God’s weightier demand. God help us so to do. Amen.