

## **Sermon: A Lesson about God's Love**

In our reading today, we're back in Capernaum, or almost there. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to church on the Sabbath, and the disciples are hungry.

So, they pick grain as they walk through a wheat field, and eat it on their way to synagogue. Apparently, the Pharisees use this same route to church because they are right there, asking Jesus why he lets his followers break Sabbath laws.

Jesus tells them a story they already know, but as he does, he likens himself to David – claiming a kind of kingly authority that comes only from God.

In effect, Jesus tells the Pharisees not to get so bound up in their rules that they become your purpose for living. Let the Sabbath do its job, which is to provide rest and refreshment, and an opportunity for worship and study. God gave the Sabbath for your benefit. God didn't create you for the sake of the Sabbath.

The three major things that the Jewish understanding of the Sabbath included were rest, worship, and study. But the Pharisees were so worried about breaking Sabbath law that they really couldn't rest, or worship, for fear of breaking a rule. They had all these rules about keeping the Sabbath that were not part of the original 10 commandments, but were ways of their interpretations of the 10 commandments.

They had become so caught up in legalism that they had forgotten the purpose of Sabbath. Instead, they were constantly checking themselves. Had they made one step too far for a Sabbath journey, or lifted a weight that was slightly heavier than they were supposed to be able to lift on the Sabbath?

They were so busy working on the "do no work" part of the commandment to observe the Sabbath, that they had forgotten the "keep it holy" part. Their definition of Sabbath and God's intention for it were not the same thing.

The Pharisees were the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people at that time. They were the ones who followed the Law most strictly, and were thought to be the most righteous.

If you wanted to be considered truly faithful, you followed the way of the Pharisees. But they weren't leading in a way that honored what God had intended.

Have you ever found yourself in a long line of cars behind a slow driver? That happened to me this week. It started out as about four of us, then grew to six, then nine. We were following a pickup truck traveling about 78-79 kilometres per hour in an 80-kilometre zone.

That driver was obeying the law. He made sure he did not budge over that 80 kilometre per hour speed limit by staying just under it. And the line of cars behind him kept getting longer and longer.

This is a stretch of Highway 2 with just enough curves and hills in it that there isn't much opportunity for passing. And the oncoming traffic on a Friday afternoon was just heavy enough to limit those opportunities further. So, the line behind this pickup truck grew.

Now, you and I both know that the posted speed limit is not the real speed limit. The real speed limit is the speed at which the car ahead of you is traveling. If that car is driving 90 kilometres per hour, that's how fast you can drive without having to pass the lead vehicle.

And if you meet an OPP car parked along side of the road while you are traveling at, say, 90 kilometres per hour, even if the posted speed limit is 80, you probably are not going to get pulled over, if you are in the middle of a column of safely spaced cars traveling at that speed. If the lead car is traveling at 90 kilometres per hour, that's how fast you can go.

A sign on the side of the road does not dictate the real speed limit. The driver in front of you does.

I got to thinking how this driver, determined to stay within the legal speed limit, might have considered himself a leader, of sorts. After all, he was at

the head of the line. The way in front of him was clear and his view of the road was unimpeded. Maybe he even thought of himself as a protector of all the cars behind him, preventing the rest of us from breaking the law by leading us down the road at 78 kilometres per hour. He was keeping the rest of us safe.

But the people behind him weren't following him by choice. We were all following this pickup truck out of necessity. He might have seen himself as the leader of the pack, but in fact, he was an obstacle. This guy was so determined to not go over the speed limit that he was making driving dangerous by going under the speed limit. He was an impediment.

And that is exactly what Jesus was saying to these Pharisees. You are an impediment to what God intended for true Sabbath observance. You're not letting the Spirit flow in the speed and direction it needs to go, because you are so bound up in the conformity to the law.

The Sabbath was made for people, not the other way around. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Not the other way around. Let's put the Sabbath in its rightful place.

So, what does that mean to us? How do we observe the Sabbath in a way that honors God, and sets aside time for rest, worship, and study? Who – or what – is Lord of our Sabbath? How can we keep Sabbath in its rightful place, not as a grudging obligation, but as a source of joyful refreshment for our spirits?

When we look at the second story in this passage, Jesus has made it to the synagogue. They've apparently made it through the field of grain okay, and now, Jesus is questioning the Pharisees who are gathered in the synagogue. Keep in mind that this is not the Temple in Jerusalem – it's the synagogue, in Capernaum.

It's the same place where Jesus cast out a demon back in chapter one of Mark's gospel. It's where people were astonished by the way Jesus taught with authority. We've just seen him claim authority equal to King David's, as he argues with the Pharisees on the way into town. And now he stands in

the synagogue, challenging them with a moral dilemma. Which is more important – to adhere strictly to the rules people have applied to the Sabbath, or to give life? What is really lawful? What's really right?

There's a man here with a withered hand. Now, clearly, this man is not on the brink of death. Whatever has caused his hand to wither, however long he has endured this withered hand, it isn't life threatening. He isn't going to die from a withered hand, at least not right away, on the Sabbath.

But think of what that withered hand meant. It meant this man could not worship in the Temple, because he was deformed. It meant he probably had difficulty earning a living in a place like Capernaum, where physical labor was the primary form of employment. And it meant he suffered disgrace. People took one look at his hand and wondered, maybe even aloud and in his hearing, what evil he had done to deserve such a fate.

So, Jesus looks at this man and he looks at these Pharisees who are so bound up in driving 78 kilometres an hour in an 80 kilometre an hour zone, and he says, what's really right? What's really lawful? Is it better to give life, or to follow the rules?

And they won't answer him.

This is one of the few instances in scripture, where we find out that even Jesus has limits to his patience. We see Jesus getting a bit angry. The scripture uses the word he "looked at them in anger" and "deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."

And I wonder, how are our hearts stubborn in such a way that it grieves Christ? How are we making Jesus angry? What are the rules and the routines and the regulations and the stipulations that we keep as an unwritten law, that prevent us from traveling freely at the speed and in the direction the Spirit wants to lead us?

The Pharisees weren't leading anymore than the guy in the pickup truck driving 78 kilometres an hour. And it distressed Jesus. And it distresses Jesus when we get so caught up in conformity of the law, that we prevent the Spirit from being generous in healing and supporting life.

So, Jesus tells the man, stretch out your hand. He does and he's made whole. We can imagine that, just like the time when Jesus cast out a demon in that same synagogue, people are astonished and give glory to God.

Everyone, that is, except the guy in the pickup truck, and the Pharisees, who hurry out to conspire with their enemies, the Herodians, to find a way to destroy Jesus. We're only in the third chapter, barely 70 verses into the Gospel of Mark, and they are already looking for a way to kill Jesus.

So where does that put us?

Are we like that pickup truck driver on Friday, and the Pharisees who were challenging Jesus? Are we so afraid of breaking the law that we insist on driving 78 kilometres per hour in an 80 kilometre an hour speed zone? Do we see ourselves as the guardians of not only the law, but the Christian faith itself, wanting to protect it and keep it pure?

Do we think we are keeping the church safe by enforcing the rules, to the exclusion of healing and feeding people who are hungry for life? Are we afraid of the power Jesus might use in our midst, and what that might require of us? Are our hearts stubborn to the familiar, the safe, the way we are used to doing things, even if it doesn't seem to attract people to Christ?

Are we liking to those worried Pharisees?

What field is Jesus walking through in our lives, plucking ears of corn from our sacred rituals? What are the essential categories of our lives that Jesus threatens?

I invite you to ponder this question this morning. What do you need to surrender to Christ, so that he can be Lord of – not only your Sabbath, but Lord of your life. Amen