

Sermon for
All Saints Episcopal Church, Steenrijk
Leidenstraat at Heelsumstraat
Willemstad, Curacao

Proper 4 (B)

June 2, 2024

DRAFT

“Is Human Law Divine Law?”

by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

One sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his

disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?”

And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.

They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.”

Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Dear Lord, heal us and make us whole.
Amen.

Question: What do you call alternative medicine that works?

Answer: Medicine

An Old Testament speculation about ‘withered hands’ was that they were retribution from God for some terrible sin

committed. Psalm 137 sees the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem and Jerusalem's destruction in 587 BC

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(587_BC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(587_BC))

as an event deserving of God's retribution against the Jews themselves should they forget their native land's capital city

Jerusalem: Psalm 137 says, "... the famous oath, where the Psalmist goes from the plural -- *we* sat down, *our* captors, how can *we* sing -- to the singular, and swears: "If *I* forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand..." may my right hand what? The

translators can't agree: “may my right hand forget its skill”? “...forget its cunning”? “...be forgotten”? “may my right hand wither” (as in the Bible used by Harvard's Memorial Church)? The Hebrew word in Psalm 137 means “paralyzed”: “may my right hand be paralyzed”. [Luke’s version of this miracle says specifically that the man’s ‘right hand’ was withered.] But [the Hebrew word is] the same verb as “forget”, and most translators use some form of this verb to keep the effect of reciprocity: if I “eshkach” (forget), may my right hand “tishkach” (be paralyzed).

Psalm 139 goes on: ““may my right hand be paralyzed; may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth -- that is, may I also lose the power of speech!” This is not an arbitrary pairing. Doctors and neuroscientists will recognize the devastating symptoms of a major stroke to the dominant, left side of the brain, which controls both speech and the right side of the body. Even in 2024, such a stroke is a horrifying and [usually an] irreversible misfortune. To the Judean exiles in Babylon, it could only be divine retribution’

[should they forget their native capital which was in ruins.]

<http://www.math.harvard.edu/~elkies/mp2.t>

[xt](#)

But the sixth century BC prophets saw the Babylonian invasion as something the Jews had deserved for forsaking Yahweh and their worship of their God Yahweh for so many years. But should they forget that their misfortune was due to their waywardness in worshipping God, then the Psalmist wished on the Judeans that the terrible misfortune of a withered hand would befall them.

So, when Jesus reverses the withered-ness of the man's paralyzed hand, Jesus was not only healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was also giving specific forgiveness to this particular man for having forgotten his God. And Jesus, God's Son, shows he is able to forgive even that horrible sin of forgetting the Most Holy God.

The lack of forgiveness for the Pharisees who had observed this miraculous healing is compounded when "the Pharisees went out (of the synagogue) and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him (Jesus), how to destroy him" (Jesus).

So the ‘green eye’ of jealousy and envy of Jesus’ detractors becomes the Pharisees’ own stumbling block; finally Jerusalem and its sacred Temple would be forever destroyed in 70 AD by the Roman legions; the Temple itself would never rise again.

‘Once the poet of Psalm 139 has accepted this principle of reciprocity for himself if he ever forgets Jerusalem, he goes on to apply it to the “sons of Edom” -- the Babylonians -- who sacked Jerusalem and reveled in its destruction. He prophesies that Babylon, in turn, will be devastated, and states explicitly the principle of reciprocity: (may God)

“repay you for what you have done to us”.

That this repayment will be *divine* retribution is implicit in the Psalmist’s original address to God, “Remember, O LORD””.

Any overt recollection of this famous Psalm 137 would likely have enraged the Pharisees who witnessed this miraculous healing by Jesus, and they would see Jesus as quietly undermining their superficial Pharisaical religiosity, even comparing them with their dread Babylonian enemies of the sixth century BC. This they could not

tolerate, so they began the conspiracy against Jesus and his Good News.

‘The healing is one of the seven miracles that Jesus Christ performed on the Sabbath. Today, of course, we look at this and we are not nearly so much concerned as much as a Jewish man in the day of our Lord might have been concerned, for we do not think about the Sabbath day in which they regarded the Sabbath day. They regarded the breach of the Sabbath law as a very serious thing. And then in addition to the law of Moses, they had added to that Sabbath law a number of traditions of their

own, and these were regarded as being on the same level as Moses and the Old Testament.

‘Our Lord pierces through to the heart of the issue and makes it clear that the Scriptures of the Old Testament never did forbid what he was doing, and that it was really the traditions of the Pharisees and Scribes which forbade that. He had gone from his ministry just preceding this into the synagogue to teach, Luke tells us in his gospel. And as he went into the synagogue to teach, there was there present a man with a withered hand, with a paralyzed hand.’

<http://sljinstitute.net/gospel-of-matthew/jesus-establishes-his-authority-conflict-with-the-hebrew-elders/the-man-with-the-withered-hand/>

I encountered a homeless woman on the street in New York who said she never had a drink on Sunday. She lived in the nearby women's shelter. I commended her for that one day of abstinence but noted that maybe she could extend that a bit to at least having one other dry day during the week.

However, I could tell from her demeanor that that was a tall order.

Maybe we are ‘Sunday’ only people. We avoid conflicts on Sunday. We obey traffic laws on Sunday. We give to the poor on Sunday, and so on. But maybe God wants a bit more, maybe a Monday and a Tuesday or a Wednesday giver, what do you think?

My father faithfully “cooked” Sunday dinners, well, we had some small meals, perhaps cereal or soup. But he always wanted my mother to have a special ‘day off’ on Sunday evenings, since she cooked for us on every other day. To whom can we give a ‘Sunday off’?

A number of towns in New Jersey have ‘Blue Laws’, when most business establishments are closed, at least the liquor stores have been closed in several places. Maybe that is the ‘puritan way’, but more recently Sundays have become a day of massive sales at all the major malls, and stores have begun to open on Sundays in most places. But is shopping on a Sunday the way to ‘keep the Sabbath holy’?

In my hometown we had a lot of ‘country people’ in nearby rural areas, and one store owner in the nearby city in particular catered to them. He had the only grocery stores

open on Sundays, and he justified it by saying that many of his customers did not have refrigerators, and he was probably correct. But nowadays, trying to find any store that does not open on a Sunday is nearly impossible. It is ‘business as usual’ on Sundays, nowadays.

I think we need to rethink what the Commandment to ‘keep the Sabbath holy’ means for us. How have we found fit to ‘keep our Sabbath holy’, or have we?

Surely, visiting the home bound and those in nursing homes and hospitals is a way to ‘keep the Sabbath holy’, don’t you

think? And maybe we have other good deeds we can do on the Sabbath, deeds that won't get done unless we focus on others who need our Christian presence and our help. There are 'so many lonely people', as the Beatles sang, 'where do they all come from?'. Our task as Christians is to bring Christ's love to all, those who follow Jesus and to those who don't. Because by our efforts the gospel is proclaimed. How we serve others is closely related to how we serve God. As we love, we express the love Christ showed us on the cross, denying his

inconvenience, his hurts, his needs, so others might be saved.

Wouldn't it be great if we could be the Lord's better witnesses in the world?

Amen.

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Description:

Jesus challenges the power of the Pharisees in doing a miracle on the Sabbath, healing a man with a paralyzed hand. But the Sabbath law had been taken over by the Pharisees, and they used Jesus' actions to begin their plot to remove him from any power he was

gathering. How do we ‘keep the Sabbath holy’?

Tags:

Jesus, Christ, God, healing, paralyzed, withered, man, hand, right, Luke, Mark, love, pharisees, sabbath, temple, Jerusalem, Babylonians, prophets, miracle, Sunday, liquor, store, malls, shopping, good, deeds, hospitalized, nursing, homes, shelter, Sunday, Psalm, 139, Roman, legions