

If you have ever wondered why Jesus was perceived as a threat by the religious authorities of his day, our scripture this morning is a perfect example. Jesus is just beginning his ministry and is walking with his disciples through a field of grain. It is the sabbath day, the seventh day of the week on which Jewish folks of every economic and social class were expected to rest. Keeping the sabbath was established in the 10 commandments and had been practiced for generations and generations of Jesus' ancestors. Deuteronomy 5:12-14 reads, "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." But as Jesus and the disciples are walking through the field, they begin to pluck the heads of the grain.

At first, we might think that what the Pharisees are upset about is that Jesus and his gang are stealing someone else's crops. But the ancient Israelites had a different understanding of food and community. Deuteronomy 23:24-25 reads, "If you enter your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket. If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain." There was an understanding that you could take what you needed for the moment but nothing more.

What the Pharisees are upset about is that Jesus and his disciples are traveling and picking on the sabbath. If they followed the law, they would have stayed put on the sabbath and prepared their food the day before. The Pharisees question Jesus about this behavior and Jesus responds with multiple arguments. First, he reminds them of a story about when David and his soldiers were given holy bread to eat because it was the only food available. Even though it was only supposed to be eaten by priests and replaced immediately with new bread, the high priest allowed them to eat it because they were hungry.

The scenario of David and the priest is different than what Jesus and his disciples are doing, but the story illustrates a concept that Jesus reveals in his second argument which is “the sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath.” By saying this, Jesus calls into question the reason why the sabbath is observed and what that says about the nature of God. Jesus argues that the laws rules of the faith are meant to better human lives rather than demand obedience to God. Observing the sabbath is not meant to make life more difficult, but more whole. The commandment I read earlier doesn’t end where I stopped. It continues in verse 15, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” The sabbath was a reminder of their people’s liberation from slavery. Keeping the sabbath was a justice issue. No one could make you work on the sabbath, even if you were a slave, an immigrant, or an ox or a donkey. The sabbath was liberation from the 7-day work week.

But this alone isn’t what upsets the Pharisees. Jesus continues saying “so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” He is challenging their authority and intentionally provoking them. But the grain field is just the beginning. In case anyone missed the point, Jesus takes his message one step further. He enters the synagogue where he encounters a man with a withered hand. Jesus had already healed many people including a possessed man in the synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus doesn’t immediately heal the man. Instead, he looks around and asks a question, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” Jesus is determined to make a point and make sure there is no question about his motivations. In healing the man’s hand, he is further provoking the Pharisees, as if to say, “you think picking grain on the sabbath is unlawful, watch this!” This healing is a non-violent protest of what Jesus perceives as a misinterpretation of Jewish law and a poor understanding of God’s relationship with humanity. God does not desire such strict obedience to these laws that they become more important than our love of neighbor, our loving ourselves, or our love of God. Jesus isn’t saying don’t observe the sabbath. In fact, in today’s culture that practically

worships capitalism and proving your worth through your level of busyness, observing the sabbath is needed now more than ever. But this story is bigger than that.

I remember a few years ago a story went viral about a 90 year old man who was charged for feeding the homeless in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Arnold Abbott and 2 pastors were facing a \$500 fine and potential jail time for not obeying the ordinance. Luckily a circuit judge halted the ordinance and no penalty was issued. But the trend continues in other parts of the country. In January of this year, 12 volunteers in El Cajon, California were arrested for distributing food in a city park. The concern of the city officials in El Cajon was the spread of disease due to an outbreak of Hepatitis A. But the basic need for food in the homeless community was not addressed. As the organizer Mark Lane stated, “Yes, we have a problem with Hepatitis A, but you don’t battle that by not feeding homeless people,” said Lane. “You battle that by giving them proper restroom facilities, proper hand washing facilities, and vaccinations, education.”¹ Yes, sanitation is important. Yes, stopping the spread of disease is important. But laws that do harm to the health and wholeness of our siblings on this earth need to be challenged.

In the United Church of Christ, we don’t have such laws or rules. We are a non-creedal, non-dogmatic church. Each congregation is autonomous with the understanding that we live in covenant with one another, with other churches, and with the Conference and the Denomination. But even in our freedom-loving congregations, each church has spoken and unspoken rules and traditions that might get in the way of loving our neighbor, loving ourselves, and loving God. One of my seminary professors once said they could tell a lot about a church’s priorities by looking at the building. She noted that the more pristine the church, the less likely they were to be ministering to the community. When everyone is welcome through your doors, the church is not going to look brand new. “What do you think is more in line with God’s will?” she asked. “A spotless building or offering healing and wholeness to the hurting people of the community?” Hosting New Pathways is a great example of one way we put our call to

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/homeless-el-cajon-california-arrests_us_5a5de4f4e4b0fcbc3a1355f4

love our neighbor above the need for a perfect building. Little kids are messy. They have accidents, they drop food on the floor, they might even color on the walls or damage something expensive. But we welcome them, and care for them, because that's what our faith and our sense of God's call for us would have us do.

As church we must constantly reexamine the ways in which we live into our calling. It has been said that the 7 last words of a dying church are "We've never done it that way before." Whether it's a change to the style of worship, or a new style of music, or redefining the purpose and nature of membership, change is difficult and scary. As new people come through our doors and as others move on, the very make up of the church changes and we are challenged to change with it.

This doesn't mean throwing out tradition and rules simply for the sake of change or trying to be something we're not because we think that's what millennials want. It means asking ourselves if we are bending our purpose to fit the rules or if the rules support our purpose. This reexamining was so important to our denomination that it even appears in our constitution. Written in 1957, the constitution of the United Church of Christ includes this statement: "[The United Church of Christ] affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God."

We just began a new season of church leadership at our annual meeting in May. As our new council and committees do their work discerning our call as a church and supporting that call with programs, events, outreach, maintenance, policy and bylaw changes, and more, may we support their creativity and their openness to hearing anew the way God might be working in us and through us. May we offer up our own thoughts and ideas. And in every aspect of our lives, may we act in ways that add wholeness and healing to ourselves, to friends and strangers, to our community and the whole human family, and the to very planet itself. May we not be afraid to be provocative and even oppositional if needed. After all, we follow in the footsteps of a man who did not let even the fear of death get in the way of the radical love of God. May it be so. Amen.