

Proper IV Year B: 2/3 June 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr

**We need to learn to listen to each other's story, not in order to reply,
but to hear what God is doing in our lives.**

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23-3:6
Psalm 81 1-10

"After all, the Sabbath was made for humankind and not the other way around."

A little over a week ago, the country of Ireland held a referendum that would have a lasting impact on the nation. This passion-filled vote was seen by some as a test of the nation's moral character as to whether Ireland would continue its "progressive" stance or adhere to a more traditional socio-religious understanding. Once the vote count was in, the people of Ireland, as well as the world, were more than a little surprised. The referendum passed by more than a 60% margin. Thanks to the internet, I was able to watch the faces of a gathered crowd of supporters as the news of the vote was announced. There was immense disbelief and joy that the referendum regarding reproductive rights had passed by such a margin. I also have had the opportunity to read articles post-result from those who feel this is a moral "slippery slope" and a grievous error. Throughout the varied editorials, there appeared to be little common ground between these two camps – those who fought for reproductive rights and those who fought to maintain strict safe-guards. I don't believe that there are winners and losers as much as I believe that there is common ground and each side needs to sit down and listen, I mean really listen, to one another to find a way that respects each view and honors the concerns of the other rather than descend into character assassination to achieve one's own biased agenda.

Just this past week, a Hollywood actor exercised their right to “free speech” and spewed racial slurs about another individual who has served in the political arena and the backlash to the remarks was swift. For the major network that aired the sitcom, a line had been crossed by this actor’s rhetoric and it in turn drew a line saying the network couldn’t condone such behavior and speech. One has the right to say what they want, but they don’t have the right to denigrate another person, to dehumanize others or ridicule them for their stance in supporting a different understanding. One’s right does not trump another’s especially when it concerns one’s personhood and humanity. Once again, the question of common ground surfaced; of our social ability to disagree on a topic without demeaning those who differ from our view.

Jesus wasn’t unfamiliar with such antics. Matter-of-fact, he was the recipient of such verbal attacks. However, Jesus can also be seen as stirring the proverbial pot more than once when it comes to what is permissible within a tradition-laden religious/social structure, as is evident in today’s gospel.

In Mark’s Gospel, there is no birth narrative. Instead, the reader is plopped into the midst of Jesus’ adult ministry. And it isn’t long before a conflict spiral becomes evident. The tension between Jesus and the religious authorities, as well as the civic powers, forms the core of Mark’s portrayal of Jesus and his message. In Mark, Jesus is the counterpoint to religious rules and regulations, but he is also more than a moral nonconformist. Jesus’ good news liberates us from the absolutism that keeps so many Christians captive to traditional values and social privilege. Jesus is concerned with not only how a law or practice impacts people, but who the people are that must bear the weight of such expectations.

His followers pick the tops of the grain in a field, and do so on the Sabbath. Jesus has the audacity to enter the local synagogue and, without being asked by the individual whose hand is disfigured, simply heals this person’s ailment with only his words. And the authorities are incensed to the point to plotting to eliminate Jesus. To these individuals, Jesus is a threat to their understanding of God’s law and their way of life. They’re blinded by their own self-importance and privilege, by their zeal for the institution that they fail miserably at understanding what Jesus is bringing to their attention: Sabbath rest honors the sacredness of all creation, its goodness, and that liberating someone from the captivity of suffering and pain honors the

Sabbath rather than dishonors it. After all, the Sabbath was made for humankind and not the other way around.

Jesus' good news posits a serious challenge to those of us who wish to impose and enforce a narrow vision of God's rule and reign upon our faith community and society in general. Whether its reproductive rights or free speech, whatever the passion may be, deeply committed religious people end up doing harm, causing undo suffering, or place unreasonable burdens on others all in the name of God. Too many times have I heard folks say the reason they don't affiliate with a church is because of this narrow vision and utter lack of sensitivity to another's journey, or other's plight. We need less religious zealotry and more religious compassion. We need less absolutism and more comprehension. We need less "it's my way or the highway" and more, much more, understanding. We need to learn to listen to each other's story, not in order to reply, but to hear what God is doing in our lives.

The Pharisees failed to hear what Jesus was saying through his actions and words. They totally focused on rules and regulations, on the way things have always been done. How dare this young upstart come into the community espousing such radical views that seemingly thumbs its nose at sacred tradition and social order. The Pharisees are obsessed with religious authority, traditional observances, and being righteous. They're apparently less concerned with the wellbeing of the faith community and how their ideology plays out on the general population than they are about saving face and exercising authority. In light of this, Jesus is simply asking them – and us – when does religious conviction to principle become idolatrous?

One commentator put it this way: "Christians must constantly reassess the meaning and function of their 'holy' institutions and rites in terms of both their original intent and their continuing service to human need." That is what Jesus is seeking to shed light upon: What and who does tradition serve? It's a vital question which can be applied to many situations, such as reproductive rights and free speech. The Good News isn't limited to the sphere of religious discourse. It's applicable to social and moral discourse too. And yet, the Pharisees continue their assault on Jesus and his message of compassionate liberation and social justice.

Pharisees exist today as they did in Jesus' time. It may not always be about Sabbath rest, but it will be about idolatry to personal preference, especially when it's shrouded in religious

conviction. Modern day Pharisees can be found in our civic communities, our parishes, and our church. We must search our hearts, discern our way as we live out Jesus' Good News of love and acceptance. We mustn't be dissuaded by the naysayers, but have faith that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We must engage the naysayers in an effort to find common ground upon which God's reign may be sown.