

“On Breaking the Law”

In our lectionary text for today from the Gospel of Luke, we witness two scenes that describe Jesus and the disciples breaking Jewish law, participating in actions that were considered irreligious, irreverent, and even illegal by some standards of the day. Now, in light of the history of Christian anti-semitism, we would do well to proceed with some care as we reflect on the meaning of these passages. No doubt, these narratives reflect pressing questions and issues that the early Christians were forced to face. Here was a movement that began on Jewish soil yet had quickly taken root among non-Jewish Gentiles. It is important to keep in mind that the entire New Testament is grappling with this reality and that each text approaches the issues in their own distinctive way addressing their own particular context and audience. And so, you see, to address the relationship between the Jewish law and Jesus was already to enter into hotly contested territory. Luke knows well that this is no abstract problem.

In the first scene, Luke describes Jesus with his disciples on the sabbath simply walking through grainfields. Luke tells us that the disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands and ate them. Now, according to Jewish tradition this act was unlawful, which is why the Pharisees questioned Jesus about it: “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” By way of response, Jesus draws upon another Jewish tradition, answering the Pharisees by posing a question back to them: “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?” Notice how Jesus appeals to another tradition from the Jewish scriptures, a common authority for both parties, to illustrate his point. It is clear that Jesus is *not* saying that the Jewish law and the Jewish tradition no longer apply to his disciples. Yet, it is also clear that Jesus was not afraid to challenge and confront those around him to think more deeply about the *meaning* of sabbath law. And he was even willing to break the law in front of the scribes and the Pharisees in order make the meaning of the sabbath clear. The most important verse it seems to me is verse 5: “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” What it means to follow sabbath law faithfully is connected to *following* Jesus’ own way in the world, the lord of Jewish law, and the lord of the sabbath. Not only does Jesus locate himself in the tradition of king David, which may have been perceived as sacrilegious, but Jesus actually declares himself “lord” of the sabbath.

The second scene begins at verse 6. Again, it is sabbath, and this time Luke describes Jesus entering the synagogue to teach wherein he encounters a man whose right hand was withered. Now the scribes, along with the Pharisees, are standing by watching him to see whether he would, again, break the sabbath. Even though Jesus knew that they were watching him and he knew what they were thinking, he speaks to the man with the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” So the man got up and stood there. Then, as if putting them to the test, Jesus turns to the scribes and Pharisees and says, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or destroy it?” Next, Luke describes Jesus “looking around at all of them.” He, then, says to the man with the withered hand, “Stretch out your hand.” The man did so, and his hand was restored.

Sabbath law was important for Judaism, and remaining faithful to it was critical in the midst of a Roman Empire that made being a faithful Jew incredibly difficult. Sabbath law is not, as such, the problem in this passage. In the history of Israel, sabbath law emerged as a kind of labor law. It was rooted out of a concern for the sustaining of life and the necessity of rest from one's labor. For the people of Israel sabbath law had its basis in the creation stories of Genesis in which God rests from God's creative labor on the last day of creation. To be faithful to sabbath was to affirm God's creative and life-giving power and it was to affirm the necessity of rest from labor; the law was, at least in part, intended to protect those whose labor was most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. And so, in breaking the sabbath law, Jesus embodies what is at the heart of the sabbath: the *extension of* the life-giving and healing power of God to those most vulnerable.

This passage makes two central points: (1) Jesus is lord of Jewish law, specifically in this case, Jesus is lord of the sabbath, and (2) at the heart of sabbath is the life-giving and healing power of God. So, it would seem that for disciples of Jesus to follow God faithfully means, first of all, to follow Jesus and his relation to the law, because he is lord of the law and lord of the sabbath. And to follow sabbath in the way of Jesus is to extend life and healing to others in their time of need.

Okay, while these are perhaps interesting historical points, what does this mean for us nearly two millennia later? We do not face the same questions. Rarely do we find ourselves debating how to follow Jewish law with other Christians. Most of us do not even know the details of Jewish law, much less are we actively preoccupied with questions about their interpretation and application. We may take a rest from our labor on Sundays, but most of us are simply not concerned with keeping to every aspect of Jewish law regarding the sabbath.

I think what is most important about this passage for us today is the way in which Jesus was actively willing to *risk everything* to extend love, life, and healing to the neighbor in need. In acting in the way that he did for those most in need, Jesus embodied the heart of the sabbath, but he was nonetheless perceived as a dangerous threat to the dominant structures in which he lived. And it is not like he did not know this. Jesus is actively *antagonistic* in relation to the scribes and the Pharisees, even *combative* in these scenes. Not only does he seem to place himself above God's law in the tradition of King David, he claims to be the *lord* of the law. In response, the scribes and the Pharisees are described as "filled with fury" at Jesus's actions. Indeed, Luke tells us that they "discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus." We know what this means. We know how the story ends. They were plotting to kill him; yet, despite this, he was unwilling to let his disciples go unfed or to allow a man with a withered hand to go unhealed, even if the people around him interpreted these actions as dangerously unlawful and therefore also unrighteous.

We do not face exactly the same questions today, but in this country right now we do face an administration that has declared an all out war against our most vulnerable neighbors. Friends, we are now faced with our own difficult decisions. Will we follow Jesus in living out of the heart of the sabbath by risking everything to extend love, life, and healing to our neighbor in need? Are we willing to follow Jesus in acting in ways that are perceived by others, particularly those in authority, as breaking the law of the land? Are we willing to risk our own safety and security as a congregation to provide asylum and sanctuary for our neighbors who are facing the imminent threat of deportation because they are viewed as "illegal?" Today is membership Sunday and the day of our Annual Congregational Meeting. As such, it is a good day for us to reflect on our baptismal commitments and what it means for us today to walk in the way of Jesus in relation

to our neighbor in need and in relation to the laws of this country. These are no longer abstract or merely rhetorical questions for us, if they ever were. Just how far are we willing to go to risk our relative security for our neighbors most in need? And so I ask you to prayerfully consider the following question this morning: are we willing to follow Jesus in breaking the law by extending love, life, and healing to our neighbors?