



Leveling the Playing Field + June 2, 2024
Second Sunday after Pentecost (Confirmation Sunday)

Mark 2:23-3:6

Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Don't worry, this will be short because this is a big day and we have much more ahead of us.

But I do want to call your attention to what Jesus is doing in today's gospel reading, as an image of what I know our three confirmands will go on to do in their lives. Not necessarily miraculous healings, but leveling the playing field. Dedicating their lives to justice, so that all God's people have equal access to the blessings of this life. These three young people care deeply about the world that God made, and we are privileged to be joining them at the beginning of their faith journey.

To see this more clearly, let's take a quick look at what happens here in Mark 2.

It is early in Jesus's ministry. He has just gathered his disciples. Remember, they carry nothing with them but their tunics and sandals. They have left everything behind and are dependent for food on people's hospitality and also whatever they can forage. They are likely almost always hungry.

As they are making their way toward the synagogue in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, they pass through a wheat field. Because it's unlikely there was a path, the image we get is that they are trampling stalks of wheat as they are making their way through the field, and then plucking grain to eat from those crushed stalks.

Enter the Pharisees. They are already on high alert about Jesus. They were startled that he had cleansed a leper, then outraged that he had pronounced the paralytic's sins forgiven. Now he has openly violated the strict rule of no routine work on the Sabbath, a law we heard about from Olivia just now. The Pharisees interpret the disciples' action as routine work - harvesting grain. Aha, they are probably saying to one another in glee. Now we've got him -- because what is penalty violating this rule of no work on the sabbath? Death. If you don't believe me, read Numbers 15 -- one of the books of the Torah, or Jewish law -- which describes a man who is stoned to death merely because he gathered wood on the sabbath day.

But much like the Road Runner in Wile. E Coyote, Jesus is always several steps ahead. He plays the Pharisees' own game in referencing Samuel 21, when David entered a temple and demanded bread from the priest; the priest protested that all he had was holy bread, but David ordered the priest to give it to him anyway. The overall message in Samuel as here in Mark is that the hunger of those in need takes precedence over legalistic rules.

You probably didn't hear this passage at first as an expression of civil disobedience, but that is exactly what it is. Jesus is protesting the politics of food in Palestine, over which the Pharisees maintained tight control. They decided what was suitable for consumption according to ritual

purity laws, and what wasn't. This meant that food that could've been used to feed people was withheld from them. So Jesus goes on the offensive, challenging the control of an elite minority over the economy of food distribution. Ritual laws, in other words, should not govern the availability of food to hungry people. All those who are in need should be fed. The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.

We sometimes talk about the advent of God's kingdom as a reversal of the existing order, taking our cue from Mary's magnificent in which she pronounces that the mighty are cast down from their thrones and the poor are lifted up. But this does not mean that those on the bottom are now on the top -- that the former victims of oppression become the oppressors. It simply means that the playing field is leveled.

It is unlikely that, in our lifetimes at least, the terribly unbalanced economy of the modern age will ever return to anything like we saw in the early church, where all people shared things in common and no one had more or less than anyone else. Jesus is calling us here to put God's people first, regardless of political structures or established laws that favor the rich and powerful. Just like in the Bridge of Hope initiative that Cathy Farrell is going to tell us about later in the service, we on the ground have to be creative and resourceful to be witnesses of the gospel to those in need.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is for all who believe. No one is excluded for any reason, not for skin color, gender identity, economic status, whether you live in a mansion or whether you are unhoused, or any other means by which culture and custom have sadly come to divide God's people. Jesus came that ALL may have life and have it abundantly.

Yet, we live in a world where imbalance is the reality. These three young people we are confirming today know that is not God's intention. They hear Jesus calling them to acts of love and service that WILL help level the playing field.

They also care deeply about the role of the church in the justice that God desires. They, and those coming up behind them, are our hope. For Lennon, Elijah and Jayson, today is not an end but a beginning – not the end of confirmation, but the beginning of new life. I cannot wait to see what lies ahead for them -- and for us.