

Sermon Archive 487

Sunday 2 June, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Mark 2:23 - 3:6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day. [Exodus 20: 8-11]

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What's wrong with this picture?

We're walking through a field of corn. The farmer's been - sowing what needs to be sown, planting, watering, tending, keeping. So now we've got a knee deep, hip deep, chest deep waving weft of wheat. It's got to be in the countryside. Wheat's not grown in the suburban courtyard. This is not the stuff of Cathedral Square, Queen Street or the precincts of parliament. Corn's grown in the rural areas, where wi-fi is faint and NZ Post is not delivering. We're walking through a field of corn, so somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

Suddenly, watching us, taking objection to us, is a group of Pharisees. Where did they come from? Why are they there? This is something like a sheet metal rectangle amid a group of apes by Stanley Kubrick. What kind of broken plot development puts an educated group of thinkers into a corn field, waiting for a bunch of disciples to wander through?

I don't know. I don't really believe in a world where people turn up out of context with no obvious reason. I don't really believe in a world where wheat and Pharisees grow together. I don't really believe in a world where people are so agitated by new religious movements that they would hang out in remote places just waiting for opportunity to pounce. That world would be just bizarre.

Having said that, in our world governments do pay for people to spy on others - to hide in wheat fields - and bus stops and public libraries. In our world, people do develop a strange vigilance that's fed by suspicion.

As spies appear in wheat fields, what's wrong with this picture? Well either nothing or everything . . . What's wrong with this picture?

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What's wrong with this picture?

The hiding Pharisees spot us breaking the heads off the stalks of grain. A bit like pinching some plums from the branch of a tree hanging over your neighbour's fence. Is it stealing? I don't know - maybe that depends on whether you know your neighbour and whether maybe already you've given her some scones when she arrived in the neighbourhood. Do you talk to her? Do you care for her? Are you pretty sure that a few plums are no big deal between neighbours and friends? But ah! What's wrong with this picture? The crouching Pharisees in the grain field aren't too worried about whether the heads of grain constitute an act of *theft*. Their focus falls on whether this is an act of **Sabbath breaking**. By pinching the grains, we're doing work. We're breaking the Sabbath.

Focus falls here not on how things are between neighbours (who might help whom), but on what constitutes "work". It's a technical thing. And in being a technical thing, is this an obtuse mis-focussing? Does the focus of the objection reveal a religious scrupulousness, or an improperly calibrated heart? What's wrong with this picture?

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What's wrong with this picture? Mark (who's writing this story for his gospel) reports Jesus responding to the accusations of the grain-field spies who are worried about God. Mark has Jesus referring to what precious King David did when his people filched some bread that didn't belong to them. Like a bunch of disciples on the move, David's soldiers had need of a feed. "Don't you remember" he says "what King David did, when his companions were hungry? They ate from the Priest-only bread in the temple". Abiathar, the high priest said it was OK - so there's precedent for stealing.

Unfortunately, the high priest at that time wasn't Abiathar; it was Ahimelech - so the story's off to an iffy start. Unfortunately also, Jesus' disciples weren't in great need, while David's people were - fleeing from Saul's army, they were "on the run". So it's really a story about extenuating circumstances - stealing bread being forgivable if the people are hungry (is there a difference between stealing for greed and stealing for the children's survival?). An interesting question - but not really about Sabbath breaking. The story Mark puts in Jesus' mouth wildly misses the point.

As even the good side seeks to make its point, but the point doesn't work, is the whole focus wonky? The telling of the old story is mangled. What's wrong with this picture?

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What's wrong with this picture?

We move on now from the grain field to the local synagogue. In the synagogue is a worshipper who has a withered hand. Is that the main thing wrong in the picture? Someone worships God - in whose purposes somehow it's OK for this kind of suffering to happen. O God, I'm not going to get too precious here. Being a believer has nothing at all, I don't think, about expecting that life should be free of burdens. I have a pain in my abdomen and you have tooth ache. I black out and crash my car; you have a withered hand. No one expects to be free of any of this simply because we go to the synagogue. We do not welcome the withered hand (I don't suppose), but in many ways it's just life, the way of this world. Or is it? As we speak of the God who heals and blesses and makes whole, does a withered hand belong in the picture anymore? What's wrong with this picture?

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What's wrong with this picture? The withered hand becomes a thing for the point of tension between the Christ and the weird Pharisees who hide in the grain-field. It's taking a central place. The Pharisees see it as a strategic asset. It's something that Jesus isn't going to be able to ignore - so it's going to force him into working on the Sabbath - here and now where they're ready to witness and pounce.

Now he says to them" is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or kill?" It's a very good question - which now only can be answered in the light of decency and mercy. Just as healing is good, so setting traps is bad. His question reveals what's going on here - what is really wrong with the picture. He puts the question to the Pharisees - and the only option for them, really, is to fall silent. They have nothing to say.

What's wrong with this picture? What's wrong is that some of the people in it would prefer for someone to continue to suffer than for Jesus to be the Lord of the Sabbath, who heals and makes things well. What's wrong? A community's commitment to God has become sufficiently twisted that some of its members would prefer for a hand to remain twisted, than for Jesus to be free to be the Source of blessing that he is.

Jesus observes this preference for twistedness, and we read that it fills him with a combination of anger and sadness. Whatever is wrong with this picture makes him angry and sad. Hardness of heart. Preference for law over love. A misunderstanding of law that shifts it into a corner where all it can do is combat love. What's wrong with this picture?

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What's wrong with this picture? Knowing that the bullet in the gun is this thing about working on the Sabbath, Jesus comes up with a brilliant response. He wants to do good on the Sabbath, rather than a technical but empty nothing on the Sabbath. He wants to heal - while the grain-field spies watch him closely. How do you heal without working? Call the man forward. Simply tell him to stretch out his withered hand, and see him do so. Has he worked? No. Has he healed? Yes. He finds the perfect way of giving his detractors absolutely nothing, while doing the love and freedom he was born to do. Such a clever man. Giving them nothing for their agenda of hate, fear and death - yet enabling the work of the Lord of the Sabbath.

The man with the withered hand gains everything. The grain-field spies gain nothing. So out they go, into some other chapter of the story, activating their networks to the end of destroying him. What's wrong with this picture?

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People of Knox. Indeed, there's much wrong with the picture. But such is the love of God for the small person that the picture includes the stretching out of the hand - a deed of life done on the day of the Sabbath. We wonder whether maybe God smiles. In an unfriendly world of nasty politics and fearful gate-keeping, where spies hang out in fields of grain and places of worship become scenes of ambush, someone (at the call of Christ) stretches out his withered hand, and is restored. The evil are confounded, the healer heals. The Lord of the Sabbath prevails. And we keep a moment of quiet.

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