



The God of the Unexpected

Mark 2:23-3:6

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One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way the disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what isn’t lawful on the Sabbath?”

And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.”

Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a person was there who had a withered hand. They watched to see whether Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

Then Jesus said to the one who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then Jesus said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

But they were silent.

Looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.”

The one with the withered hand stretched it out, and it was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him.

Mark 2:23-3:6

I do not talk about it much, but when I was growing up in Mississippi, my parents, church, and friends called themselves Baptist, but in reality we were—in the ways that mattered to a teenager—Amish Pharisees. We not only did not drink or sleep around, we did not know anyone who did. We knew where the pool hall was—where most of the drinking reportedly took place—but no one in my youth group had ever been through the door.

I know how sheltered this sounds—and I am appropriately embarrassed—but not only had alcohol never passed my lips, I had never seen it pass the lips of anyone I knew. We had heard that there were seventeen-year-olds who not only drank but also slept around—but we did not know any of them—though I tended to

imagine such women, wearing tight-fitting blue jeans. They had long painted fingernails and were looking for young Baptist Amish Pharisee victims to lure into depravity.

Before I went to Baylor University—a Baptist school—a leader in our church who was concerned that I was going someplace more worldly than Liberty University pulled me aside and said, “When you get to college, you will face temptations that you’ve never imagined, hard-drinking, loose-living women. You need to decide right now that you will have nothing to do with them, because if the devil gets hold of you, she doesn’t let go.”

As a freshman I was constantly on the lookout for wild women with drinking problems, but I could not find any. After a while I let my guard down.

While taking Introduction to New Testament I was distracted by a Lutheran minister’s daughter who sat in front of me. Yvonne was attractive enough to frighten me, but she seemed like a nice person.

After a couple of weeks she said, “Hi,” and I said, “Hi.” I was thrilled that we were hitting it off.

After a few weeks of waiting for her to say “Hi” again, I asked, “Would you like to go out to eat and to a PG movie?”

We went to a nice family friendly Mexican restaurant. We talked about our churches and how wonderful it is to be a preacher’s kid, but when our food came, she said—and I will never forget this, though for a long time I tried—“Isn’t it strange to have Mexican food without beer?” I tried to keep breathing but could not.

She might as well have said, “Isn’t it strange to eat enchiladas without cocaine sprinkled on top?”

I realized who she was. She was temptation. The devil had arrived. She was wearing blue jeans. She was a hard-drinking, loose-living woman planning to lure me into the depravity I had been warned about. I spent the rest of the evening terrified, but apparently she recognized my spiritual strength. She made no further attempts to steal my soul.

What I have learned since then is that for rule-following Pharisees, temptation does not usually wear tight-fitting blue jeans. The temptation more likely to steal the soul of most church people is

the temptation to think we have figured it out. Patting ourselves on the back for following the rules we have chosen to follow is its own wickedness. The sin for many of us is to think we have it down. We only need to keep thinking what we have always thought, and doing what we are already doing. We do not need to think anything new, or try anything surprising.

One day after worship, Jesus and the disciples walk past a garden. Simon Peter points toward the wheat. For reasons that are hard to fathom this non-sugared, non-shredded cereal looks appetizing: “It’s been a while since breakfast. Would it be okay if we had a snack?”

Jesus could whisper; “Peter, the Sabbath rules are a big deal to the people watching us. We’ll get something to eat, but let’s don’t make this an issue.”

But instead of doing what is expected, Jesus smiles: “Go ahead.” And the disciples grab a handful of Wheat Thins.

The Pharisees are concerned whenever anything unexpected happens. If impressionable people see Jesus breaking the rules, then they will think it is okay. As anyone who keeps up with the news knows, God’s official spokespersons often have the fewest clues as to what is really going on.

Jesus says; “How petty can you be? Do you remember King David? He did not keep the rules. When Abiathar was high priest, David got hungry and ate bread right off the communion table. Why don’t you lighten up?”

The Pharisees could have replied: “First, if you’ll read the scriptures more carefully you’ll find there was no high priest in David’s time. The office of high priest comes much later. Second, First Samuel gives the name of the priest—who was not the high priest since there wasn’t one, as Ahimelech—not Abiathar. This is just the kind of lax approach to scripture we’re worried about.”

They are thinking about the arguments they can make when Jesus makes it clear that their disagreement is not about the arguments they can make: “The Sabbath is for people, not people for the Sabbath.”

Not long after that, Jesus enters the synagogue and sees a person with a crippled hand. The Pharisees are waiting to see what Jesus will do.

If you or I walked up to a doctor in the sanctuary and said, “I’m having some trouble with my arthritis,” we would expect the doctor to respond, “Why don’t you come by my office in the morning?”

It would have been so easy for Jesus to say, “Come see me tomorrow about 9:00.”

But instead, Jesus does the unexpected—which they are learning to expect. When he sees their reaction, Jesus is sorry for them and angry with them: “What’s wrong with you? You’re driving yourself and everyone else crazy over rules that don’t matter. The Sabbath is about healing and joy.”

The Pharisees begin to work to get rid of Jesus. He is out of step and having way too much fun.

This story does not bother us, because we know whose side we are on. We do not like rules that do not make sense. We know we are for Jesus and against the Pharisees. But “any time we read a passage of scripture and find ourselves on Jesus’ side right away, we’ve probably misread the story.” (*James Sanders*) Most of the time we are not expecting God to show up. We are more often the establishment protecting the status quo.

A mother asks a seven-year-old what he learned in Sunday school: “I learned to love Jesus, sit down and be quiet, sit down and be quiet, sit down and be quiet.”

Most rules are prohibitions. The only thing you have to do to be considered a decent person is nothing. The only requirement for an A in citizenship is staying out of trouble. Society’s expectation is that we mind our own business and stay in line.

Our goals are supposed to be a rewarding career, a healthy self-image, and the acquisition of things. If we do what is expected we will work for our own success and leave almost everyone else alone. God invites us to do the unexpected.

Albert Einstein said, “Great spirits have always encountered opposition from mediocre minds.”

God calls us to join the great spirits who rise above the mediocre. The whole point of the Sabbath is to break away from the ordinary. Some of us have memories of Sundays defined by restrictions. The Sabbath was never meant to be that.

In Deuteronomy the Sabbath began when God delivered the Israelites from slavery. Slaves cannot take a day off. But free people can. Slaves to their culture do not do anything that is unexpected.

When Jesus says, “The Sabbath is for us” he is telling us to celebrate our lives. He is making it clear that the Sabbath, as well as faith itself, is meant to stop our pursuit of success. We can cease earning a living long enough to remember that we have lives.

The ancient Sabbath was singing and storytelling. The noon meal was the best of the week. The Jewish Talmud suggests that the Sabbath is a good day for walking, resting, talking, reading, and is the best day for married couples to be intimate. The Sabbath is an attack on the drudgery of the expected. Jesus invites his followers to break out of the routine.

St. Augustine said, “Love God and do what you want to do.” If we love God, we will think in ways that do not make sense to most people.

Flannery O’Connor paraphrased Jesus, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”

On Wednesday afternoon, he tells his boss, “I’m wondering if I could leave a little early. Our church’s racial justice ministry is meeting at 6:00. We’re working to close Riker’s.”

The boss is confused, “You want to leave work early so you can go work on something harder than what we’re doing here.”

On Saturday, a retired friend calls another senior citizen, “Do you want to go to a matinee of *Book Club* tomorrow? It’s Diane Keaton and Jane Fonda reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Everyone in the theater will be a woman our age.”

“That sounds great, but I can’t go tomorrow. It’s my day to work in the Thrift Store at church. We raise money for anti-trafficking causes. Do you want to come?”

This invitation is met with surprise.

On Tuesday afternoon, during a break in a meeting, the senior partner asks one of the younger lawyers, “Do you want to grab dinner after work?”

“Normally I would love to, but tonight’s our church council meeting.”

The senior partner is thrown by this response.

It is hard to explain why we pack groceries for Brooklyn Delivers, build houses with Habitat for Humanity, push for bail reform, provide shelter for the homeless, and support a school in Cameroon.

It is hard to explain why we are still at church an hour after worship, give tours of Plymouth, eat dinner in each other’s homes, go to the theater together, and share young adult groups, parenting groups, Bible studies, and book studies.

It is hard to explain why we worship, why we sing, why we pray, why we confess, why we pass the peace, why we share our money, and why we give our lives to God.

It is hard to explain that the unexpected may not be dramatic. The out of the ordinary may be ending a quarrel with forgiveness, saying a word that restores hope, listening to an old woman’s story, laughing at a young boy’s joke, inviting a stranger to come in, and caring about wrongs that do not touch our own circumstances, or being the committee member who says, “Let’s try something different.”

You never know what an eight-year-old is going to remember. There was a weekend that Madison will never forget, that will make her live differently. She has a good family, but they are always busy. One Saturday evening Madison is working on her homework. Her brother is watching something. Her parents are talking about their plans for the next day. Madison is listening.

Her mother’s job is getting crazy busy. She says, “I have a big presentation on Monday. I don’t think I can go to church.”

Her father says, “I think you should go. I want the kids to know it’s important to us.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You could go to the office in the afternoon. Your presentation doesn’t have to always be the best. You can be two hours less prepared.”

“I think you don’t want to take care of the kids by yourself.”

They do not exactly argue, but they get really close. Then they argue.

Madison gets anxious when her parents argue. When she goes to sleep she does not know if her mother is going to church or not.

In the morning her mom says, “Rise and shine. Let’s go, my little angels.”

Madison is surprised, “Don’t you need to go to work?”

Her mother laughs, “Your dad’s right. When I get worried about work, we’re better off having fun.”

They sit together in worship. Mom and dad both know, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” Madison loves passing of peace. She would rather shake hands, but some of the old people insist on high fives. Everyone smiles when the baby is carried down the aisle. The children’s sermon is, as always, thoughtful.

During the cookout, Madison keeps looking to see when her mother will make a break for it, but she never does. In fact, she goes home with the family.

Madison asks, “Why didn’t you go to work?”

Her mom says, “Sometimes you have to surprise people—even yourself. Good people do surprising things.”

Madison will remember what she said. Good people do surprising things.

We can spend time with people we love, even when we do not have time. We can give what we have, even though we may need it. We can care for someone who may not care for us. We can speak against injustice when most are silent. We can laugh at the values that surround us.

We can be open to the possibility of God—in this moment—doing something surprising with us.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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