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Mark 2:23-3:6 Pastor Fraser Pearce

In our reading today we hear that Jesus is angry and grieved,
But do you remember: why is he angry? And who is he angry with?
And why is he grieved?

We are disciples, we are students of Jesus the Master
And today we will hear what makes our master angry,
And what grieves him,
And in reflecting on this we will be encouraged in our life of faith,
Because we will receive the Good News
That God gives us his commands *as a loving Father*,
And not as a divine tyrant,
And we will receive the Good News
That Jesus took on the murderous opposition of sinful human beings -
From *us* in our hardness of heart -
To bring us to our spiritual senses
And to the life of love with God and each other.

Let's hear how our reading begins:

One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

This can sound a little unusual to us
Because we are living in the city in modern Australia,
But back in Jesus' time,
In a largely agrarian community without the sorts of shops we have
There was nothing extraordinary
About eating crops from fields as you made your way.
In fact, for Jewish people it was expressly allowed in God's law,
So, we read this in Deuteronomy: **If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain.** Deuteronomy 23:25
The idea is that as long as you don't harvest the crop –
As long as you just take what you need as you travel –
Then it's fine to pluck and to eat.

But there's a controversy: not about *what* Jesus' disciples are doing,
But about *when* they are doing it.

So, we read this: **The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?'**

Now the Pharisees, as you may know, were a group
Within the Jewish community of Jesus' day who received God's word,
And who wanted to set an example of faithful living,

Including what faithful living meant

In terms of keeping the third commandment:

Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.

There is good evidence that the Pharisees knew

That the commandments, including the third commandment,

Needed interpretation, especially regarding exceptions,

So, in the words of one scholar, for the Pharisees: ***The question [is] not only what constitutes a legitimate exception, but also whose interpretation is authoritative.***

So, for the Pharisees, is what the disciples doing legitimate –

Is it a legitimate exception to the third commandment?

And who says so?

That these are the questions is clear from a detail in the narrative

That is easy to overlook: the Pharisees question *Jesus*

About his *disciples'* behaviour:

They want *Jesus* to give the reason for what his disciples are doing.

Now, *Jesus* not disregard the commandments of God,

But he does not distance himself from his disciples' actions either,

Rather he defends his disciples and the heart of God's commandments

By quoting from God's word.

Listen to how the reading goes on: **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 it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.'**

This is from 1 Samuel 21 – from the Scriptures

The same Scriptures that the Pharisees

Along with *Jesus* received as authoritative, as the word of God.

Now, a lot going on in this text regarding both

How God shares his holiness with his people,

And the fact that is *David's Son*, *Jesus*, that is speaking here.

But for today think about how *Jesus* is giving the Pharisees

A Scriptural way of applying the third commandment –

That God gives his commandments

Not as a test of our blind obedience,

And not so that we can make keeping them a badge of honour,

And certainly not so that we can make *our* interpretation of them

The standard by which we can condemn other people,

Rather, he gives his commandments out of love

So that we can be built up together as his people.

Jesus goes to the heart of the matter by giving these words:

Then he 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.'

So, Jesus, the Son of Man, the one who has true authority to interpret God's word,
Is giving his principle for the interpretation of the law,
And that is, that God gives his law, his instruction, *for our good*,
And not simply as a way of exerting his power
By demanding blind obedience,
And not as a way to for us become members of the household of God.

Think about it this way: we become members of a family
Not by keeping any laws of our family,
But by being born or adopted into a family.
As members of a family, we then grow and receive instruction
From our parents about how to live together.

Now, parents have rules in the family not for power's sake
But so that whole family is nourished and cared for,
So that they grow together in love.

The rules in a family, in other words, exist not as ends in themselves,
But as means to the greater end of living life fully and well.

Well, that's how it is with God's law as well,
And it is Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath,
Who has the authority to show us how God's law works.

In case we don't get it, St Mark then gives us
Another account of Jesus' interpretation of the law.
This time it is with Jesus' *own action* on the Sabbath,
And it is not out in the fields, *but in the synagogue*.
So, take note: *Jesus is keeping the third commandment*.

This is how the reading goes on: **Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.**

The stakes are higher this time: there is active intent by the Pharisees:
They are now watching what Jesus will do
So they can have a reason, in their own way of thinking, to accuse him.
Now a question would be: why? Why would they want to accuse Jesus?
We are invited to consider this question.

I think one way to answer this would be in terms of power.
A key question when it comes to the law, after all,
Is: whose interpretation is authoritative?
If they can take Jesus down, then they can show themselves
To be the true interpreters of Scripture.
But Jesus is going to challenge them

By getting them to look inward, to consult themselves
About what is right and what is wrong, about what God's law truly is.

Listen: **And [Jesus] said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?'**

The man in need of healing is standing before them all,
And Jesus' question is not theoretical but practical:
What does God's law mean for this man?
Does God want healing and life for this man, or harm and death?
But they were silent.

Why were they silent? Wasn't the answer obvious to them?
Didn't they know in their hearts what they should say?

It is this failure to speak what they knew to be true,
It is this evident holding on to their own power then letting God work,
That leads to Jesus' response, that leads to his anger and grief: **[Jesus] looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.**
Jesus is angry at their self-justifying silence,
He is grieved at their hardness of heart,
But he shows his divine love and authority in healing then man
On the day that God set aside for the refreshment of human beings.

But, sad to say, this does not lead to repentance,
But to murderous opposition: **The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.**

This is noteworthy also because the Pharisees and the Herodians
Would normally not be allies: what unified them
Was their opposition to Jesus' as an authoritative interpreter of the law,
And so as a threat to their self-justifying power.

Of course, we know that Jesus went to his death
As one who in his very body demonstrated that God is love.
We know that he took upon himself our sin,
So that we can know that God is not a tyrant but a loving Father,
Who has graciously adopted us as his children,
And through his Son gives us his commands,
Not so that we may prove that we belong to God,
But so that we may share in the love of God:
So that we may receive the Spirit-filled word about Jesus
And live as God's dearly loved children. In Jesus' name. Amen.