

Holy Moses, That's a Lot of Rules

[Text - Mark 2:23-3:6]

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The first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures [what we call the Old Testament] are known as the *Torah*. They're also called the "Books of Moses". Within the Torah there are 613 individual commandments! As you can imagine, it's pretty hard to keep track of them all. But that's only the beginning. For example, the one commandment to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest, apparently needed some clarification. So throughout the years Jewish leaders created 39 separate categories of "work" that are prohibited, including Harvesting, Reaping, Threshing, Winnowing, Selecting, Sifting, and Grinding. So, when Jesus' disciples pluck the grain on the Sabbath, God only knows how many infractions they're committing. And as if that wasn't enough, within each of those 39 categories of "work" there are multiple sub-categories and further delineations!

Keeping track of those 613 commandments, and the thousands of additional clarifying commands, could be a full-time job. And unfortunately, in Jesus' day, the majority of religious leaders in Israel took that "job" very seriously! It's not that they were deeply concerned about the welfare of the people around them; their greater concern was making themselves look righteous and holy, by aggressively pointing-out how unrighteous and unholy their neighbors were. For Jesus, however, who does care about the welfare of others, and who takes very seriously the Divine call to love one's neighbor - this kind of picky, petty religious bullying needed to be stopped! In today's New Testament reading, we have two examples of Jesus confronting those mean-spirited religious bullies; so we're going to look at those examples and try to glean, harvest, reap, thresh, winnow, select, sift, and grind-out some grains of insight for ourselves.

On that Sabbath long ago, Jesus uses two basic strategies for challenging the religious hypocrisy that he, and sometimes we, encounter. In the first instance, he defends his disciples by citing an

historical religious precedence. Jesus knows his Hebrew Scriptures backward and forward. [Of course, since Hebrew is read from right to left, that may not sound quite so impressive.] Nevertheless, Jesus has remarkable insight when it comes to understanding the *heart* of those Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore, he can cut-through the picky particulars, and raise-up the compassionate caring of the Holy One - the One those Sacred Scriptures seek to reveal.

“The Sabbath was made for humankind” Jesus declares, “Not humankind for the Sabbath!” Jesus understands that the idea of a Sabbath rest is intended as a Divine *gift* for people, not an additional burden in their lives. And within that commandment itself, there’s an important provision: that the benefit of a day of rest be extended to everyone equally - rich and poor, free and slave, citizen and foreigner. According to Jesus, all of the commandments need to be interpreted and understood in light of two overriding commands: That we love the Holy One, wholeheartedly; and that we love all our neighbors as ourselves. And any commandment that is used to hinder human life, rather than help it, needs to be reexamined challenged, and changed.

Later that Sabbath day, in the synagogue, when Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand, he directly asks his religious critics who are closely watching him “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath; to save life or to kill?” “But they were silent. Jesus looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart....”

In the First Letter of John, chapter 4:20 it says, “those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” In other words, no matter how religiously a person professes his or her love for God, the only practical, down-to-earth way to tangibly show that love, is by showing compassion to the people around us - people created in the Divine image and likeness. Jesus Christ completely gets this! So as the Christ - as the living expression of Divine Wisdom and Grace - Jesus reaches-out with compassion and healing to all those who are hurting and struggling. Rather than using *religion* as an excuse to add to people’s problems

and burdens, Jesus allows his *faith* to inspire him to do everything he can to alleviate human suffering.

Knowing full-well that his hard-hearted religious critics will condemn his action, Jesus nevertheless reaches-out with healing and compassion for that hurting individual standing before him. Jesus isn't going to let religion, or social convention, or even the threat of personal peril prevent him from doing the good and loving thing; and neither should you or I!