

Rev. Julie Belman

Bethel UMC - 5th Sunday combined worship

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He 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." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴Then he 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. ⁵He 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. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Being Comfortably Uncomfortable

While our family was at the beach over Labor Day, Travis and I went over the outlets to buy some new pants for James — because at some point this summer, he hit a growth spurt and will have no pants long enough to fit him once cooler weather arrives.

Once back home, I explained to Travis that some of the stuff we bought was "daycare appropriate," and some of it was specifically for church (because y'all know how much I love to dress up my kids for church). A few days later, Travis told me he could not find a pair of shorts for James to wear to daycare, that the only clothes left in the drawer were the new church clothes. (I mean, I might ALWAYS be a little behind on laundry!)

So I went to look in the basket of clean folded cloths and I found a pair of shorts that could have gone either way – they were khaki, but they had an elastic waist instead of a button and zipper. I came out of James's room and said, "You know what, James, you can wear these to daycare. You shouldn't wear pants with an elastic waist to church anyway, because those are comfy clothes and you should always be a little bit uncomfortable at church."

Of course, I was talking about putting on your Sunday clothes and looking sharp, but at soon as the words came out of my mouth, I knew I was on to something deeper and more profound. First - because ya'll know that as much as I like to dress up my kids, I believe God really could care less about what we wear to church. In fact, I think God would rejoice more at an un-churched teenager showing up in dirty blue jeans than a life-long member in a suit and tie. Second, and more importantly - As much as the church is a safe place where we can all come and worship and connect to God in a way that makes us feel secure and protected, I think it should *also* be a place where, at times, we find ourselves feeling a little bit uncomfortable.

To be clear, I am not talking about being physically unsafe, or harassed in any way, shape or form. But I *am* talking about each and every one of us stretching the dimensions of what we think church is, and what church should be.

Which brings us to the Bible. This morning's scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapters two and three, so we are still fairly early on in Jesus' ministry, but he is already starting to stir up some trouble. In this story, it is the Sabbath and yet, the disciples are plucking up heads of grain. Remember, it is Jewish custom that during that time of Sabbath – from sunset on Friday through Saturday – no work be done. The Pharisees objected to Jesus, saying: *Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*¹

Jesus did not respond to this objection by slapping the disciples' wrists and making them stop. He did not say to the Pharisees, "Oh shoot, you know what, I totally lost track of the days, don't worry, this will never happen again!" Nope. Just the opposite. First of all, Jesus schooled the Pharisees in Hebrew scripture. He said (and I am paraphrasing here), "*Come on, guys, don't you remember what happened to David?*"

You remember David, right? The young shepherd boy who slayed Goliath with his sling shot and one smooth stone? Well early in his leadership, King David entered the temple and asked the priest if he could have some bread for his army. The priest said all he had was the "Bread of the Presence," meaning holy bread, and that the men could only have it if they were considered clean and pure. David said they were, the priest gave him the bread and David went on his way. Now – were the men actually clean and pure? Probably NOT. But they were hungry. And David found them something to eat.

Jesus talked about David because he was trying to point out that sometimes what someone *needs* is more important than holding on to a tradition. That sometimes God is

¹ Mark 2:24, NRSV

calling us to do a new thing — and we should not cling so tightly to our own religious customs that we cannot see what God is doing in our midst - right here, right now.

And this is a good message for us today. We can see how it applies, right? Jesus's words might step on a few of our toes, but hey - we are here today doing a new thing at Bethel, right?! We are celebrating God in our midst! Way to go us! :)

But then Jesus takes it one step further. The disciples had already violated the Sabbath laws when they were picking grain. And *then* - always pushing the envelope - Jesus, himself violates those same laws as he walks into a synagogue and cures a man with a paralyzed hand.

Do you think that made the Pharisees a little bit uncomfortable? I do. And Pharisees don't like to be uncomfortable. This passage ends by saying: *The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against [Jesus], how to destroy him.*²

Yikes. People do not like to be uncomfortable. They like to know what is coming next. They like their traditions to be predictable, and their spaces to look and feel a certain way.

We are certainly guilty of this in the church, right? We worship a certain way, we arrange our flowers a certain way, we set up our sanctuary and our narthex a certain way and we do not want those things to change. We have the same events, year after year. We have traditions that we hold fast to.

I want to share with you something that struck me during my Listening Tour. One of the questions I asked was, "*What is one way you can help Bethel reach new people?*" Now, this question generated some great conversations and I think is inspiring some folks to get more involved. But do you know what the most common response was? Far and away, people initially responded with, 'Well.... we used to do XYZ. This was the old way of doing it, so let's do that again. ' It just struck me that our first response to how to do something NEW was to try something OLD! Why are we afraid of "new" in the church?

Honestly, I think we often do not want to try something new because it is hard to picture something that we have never done before. Many of us are so accustomed to the way we do church here at Bethel, that we cannot imagine doing church any other way. But guess what? Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath!! He broke tradition! He did something that had never been done before, something that made the Pharisees uncomfortable. And in the end, a man was healed. Shouldn't that have been the goal all along?

² Mark 3:6, NRSV

God's grace is kind of a funny thing sometimes.

My point is this: It is okay to be a little bit uncomfortable sometimes. It is okay to try something new. It is okay to do something that has never been done before, even if that means stepping onto a path that has never been traveled. It is okay to walk away, (even if it is just for a moment!) from the rituals and traditions that we cling to so dearly, and see what else God is calling us to do in this moment.

And that *is* what we are doing today. We are trying something new! Something that has never been done before. We are combining two very different styles of worship and coming together as ONE CHURCH! And I'm sure it's a bit uncomfortable for some of us here today. Thank you for being here anyways! As you can tell, there are some people who chose not to attend today - I'd like to think it was just because they had other commitments - but let's be honest, some folks are just plain stubborn about the way church "should" be!

In our September newsletter, I reflected on the opening passage from the book of James, and challenged us to be DO-ers of God's Word, and not hearers only. Well... sometimes *do-ing* church faithfully means being comfortably uncomfortable. It means being willing to compromise, so that everyone feels like their voice has been heard and that their opinion is valued. It means not immediately dismissing something just because it is different, and actively listening to new ideas. It means healing someone on the Sabbath because they are sick and serving someone holy bread because they are hungry. It means listening to God's still speaking voice guiding us along a journey that is filled with a grace and a love that will exceed even our wildest imaginations.

So my friends, let us not be afraid to be comfortably uncomfortable. Let's push our boundaries. Let's stretch beyond our usual way of doing things. Let's try something new! And let us be amazed at God's potential within our community. As a church, we can and will do great things.

And we may find that, along the way, people will be healed, people will be fed and people will be made whole. Thanks be to God! Amen.

LET US PRAY: Almighty God - we thank you for the gift of this new day. We thank you for your mercies that are new every morning. Help us not to be afraid - not to fear the movement of your spirit and the transforming work of your spirit. Make us comfortably uncomfortable here at Bethel - and may our discomfort be a sign of hope - that you are still here, leading us, guiding us, re-making us into your new creation. Amen.