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Making My Goodness God

By the Rev. Salying Wong

I've been part of meetings in which well-meaning people beg the question, "How do we bring both sides across the aisle?" Considering the gospel scripture today, I would answer, "Find a third thing both sides mutually hate and they will get together—to destroy that thing." In the gospel reading today, two unlikely groups walked across the aisle to concoct a plan to "destroy Jesus."

First, there were the Herodians. We're not totally sure who they were. They weren't a religious sect, like the Pharisees or Sadducees. They appeared to people of the persuasion that making nice with Rome would be to their benefit. So, they aligned themselves with King Herod, who was the puppet king set up by the occupiers of Israel. Essentially, they were sell-outs.

The other group were the Pharisees. The Pharisees have suffered for thousands of years under Christian caricaturization. We Christians, in a mixture of anti-semitism and denial, made the Pharisees the repository of our own hypocrisy and pedantry. The reality is that "pharisaism was a lay reform movement within first-century Judaism, dedicated to superlative adherence to Torah in all walks of life." In this way, they rubbed against the sycophantic Herodians who would trade their Jewish identity for power, privilege and security. "According to Josephus, Pharisees were celebrated by their Jewish contemporaries for "practicing the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their discourse" (*Antiquities* 12.15 [circa A.D. 105])."¹ When Jesus said, 'Your righteousness must exceed the Pharisees,' it was not because the Pharisees were bad, but quite the opposite. They were the gold standard of good works, holy practice, and open-minded inquiry.

But, within every human soul, even the best of us, *perhaps especially the best of us*, is the proclivity to make a god of our own goodness. It is most convincing when our way of seeing is only a couple degrees off from true. Over the long run, though, the entrenched

¹ Black, Clifton.

story we tell about our goodness makes the heart grow hard. This is what the Son of Man is unveiling today in his contest with the Pharisees in these two scenes centered around sabbath controversy.

Before we talk more about these scenes, now that we're back in the Gospel of Mark in Ordinary Time, I will often refer to Jesus as "the Son of Man." This is Jesus' favorite name for himself. In the Gospel of Mark, the use of this phrase, "Son of Man" alludes directly to the apocalyptic figure in the Book of Daniel. This figure is the harbinger of the apocalypse. As I said last week, the apocalypse is a longed for re-creation of the world toward justice and righteousness. This is the new world order. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God. The old world order is protected by those who benefit from its distortions, psychologically or materially. When it perishes, those who depend on the old world order will feel like it is the end of the world. For them, the apocalypse is bad news. But to those who long for a world of justice, the apocalypse, the unveiling of God's true desires, is the best news. So, when Jesus calls himself the Son of Man, he is always indicating this new world order, the reign of God.

So, our Son of Man is going about his unveiling work and he is quickly making enemies. One of the big surprises is that he's making enemies with the Pharisees, who ought to be his natural allies. Their thinking is very similar. Only a couple degrees off. It will be shocking how a couple degrees of separation can drop like a chasm, holding fathomless hate.

The scenes of controversy today are about the sabbath. The sabbath was core to Jewish identity and the whole culture was shaped by sabbath practices. There were rules that helped clarify what it meant to rest in God. So, the nature of work had to be defined. Does picking grain to satiate hunger while walking the allowed distance count as a violation? Does healing someone who has a paralyzed hand count as an emergency on the sabbath? Would it be more appropriate to wait till the sabbath is over?

But, the examples given to us today are actually not ultimately about the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law. It is certainly not about doing away with the sabbath or the law. Jesus' teaching on the sabbath were not scandalous. "The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath." Rabbis had been saying this and will be

saying this for a long time. Even some of the Pharisees who were against Jesus would have agreed.

No, the provocation was something else. First, the Son of Man compared himself to King David and thus insinuated that his ministry is messianic. [The title for king is messiah in Hebrew, meaning anointed one.] Next, he said, “The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath.” He was saying he was the master of sabbath practice—their superlative teacher and leader. Who the bleep was this guy! The Pharisees had been studying Torah since Jesus was in diapers and now he’s claiming authority to teach them Torah.

The thing is, he was their superlative teacher and leader. He was taking Torah teaching up a notch. He could perceive the deadly consequences that resulted when righteous people were unwilling to examine themselves. In the scene of the man with a withered hand, the Son of Man unveils how living a couple of degrees from true alignment with God’s purposes eventually hardens the heart. With regard to the man with the withered hand, he asked the question, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” The way the question was phrased made it hard to answer straightforwardly, because once you start to answer, you get tied up in knots with qualifications. But Jesus was using the question to push its hearers to go to the ultimate law of God’s intentions for all of creation—life, mercy, and freedom.

For example, one argument could be, “Since this isn’t an emergency, we can wait till after the sabbath to heal the man.” Why Jesus gets angry is that such a thought betrays a hard-heartedness. They were treating the man as an object of their ideology, rather than God’s beloved in their very midst. When was it time for freedom? It is always now. Why? Because this man was not an object to be fixed; he was a beloved that God wished to give life, freedom, and flourishing. The Pharisees remained silent and were unwilling to give up their moral ground.

Has someone ever told you the truth about yourself and it made you mad enough that you wanted to kill them? The Pharisees knew what Jesus meant and they did not want to see or hear anymore. I can hear their chant beginning, “We are good people. We are good people. How dare you call that into question?! We will destroy you. We will destroy you.”

This is the thing. None of us are immune. In fact, those of us who desire to practice “the Gospel” ought to be most careful about the stories we tell ourselves about our own goodness. Are we willing to question the stories we’ve written, are we willing to examine again and again the motivations of our hearts? Like Pogo Possum, we might say, “We have met the Pharisees and they are us.”

Paul the Apostles in his second letter to the Corinthians offers another way. He writes the second letter because the first letter didn’t take. [In fact, he wrote multiple letters to them.] His community is still caught in the same machinations—arguments of who is the best at being holy. Paul changes the conversation. He instead offers himself as the least—the least in ability and the least in goodness. He compares himself as a fragile ceramic pot. Once the clay was fired by the Holy Spirit, it cannot be remolded. Paul is now fired to fragility to be a vessel of God’s grace. Yes, no matter how much God chooses him and uses him, he knows he can break. He holds this tension all the time. God uses him, but always in his fragility, so that he is reminded that he is not the source of his goodness. In such vulnerability and weakness, he knows the deep truth, God’s grace is sufficient for him. God’s power is made perfect in his weakness.

What if we were to see ourselves this way? Not as heroes, but as fired pots—fragility and vessels—carrying the grace of God, letting our weakness be the first witness of who is God, who is good, and who we are. To rest in this is to know what sabbath really means.